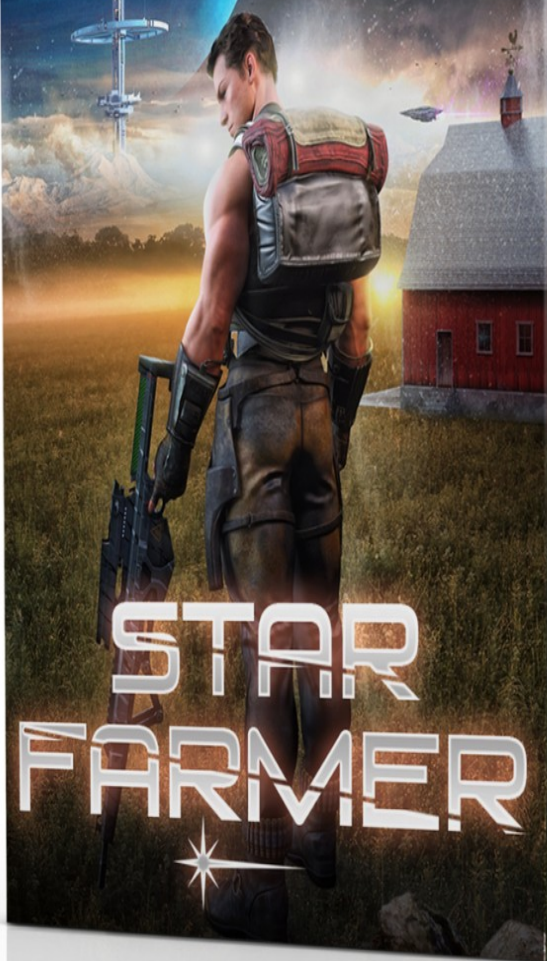


JAXON REED



STAR FARMER

TOM SAVAGE

PARTICLE TWO

FARM HAND

PULSAR'S PERIL

NIGHT SHADOW

FARMER'S WIFE

BAD ALLEGORY

OVERLORD'S FOLLY

EMBARGO'S END

ROUTINE DIPLOMACY

GLOBAL ELECTIONS

SYSTEM ALIGNMENT

STAR FARMER

300

200

100

100

100

100

100

100

100

100

100

100

**STAR FARMER COMPLETE
SERIES: BOOKS 1-12**

JAXON REED

Star Farmer Complete Series Boxset: Books 1-12

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TOM SAVAGE

1.1

The ship settled down on standard drives, blowing dust over a huge concrete tarmac. A human pilot expertly settled her down on four large landing feet, each the size of a giant sequoia. The concrete withstood the sudden added weight without cracking, a sign of adept engineering despite rapid construction.

A cargo door opened and the embarkation ramp jutted out, servos whining as it fell into position. Several people walked down the incline, many looking glad to be alive after a fast and tumultuous trip through the upper atmosphere.

They carried suitcases, double-fisting containers of clothing and other goods. Crates and travel trunks would accompany them later. Right now, they stepped out onto a new world.

So new, many grumbled, that modern technology had yet to catch up in places. No bots greeted the newcomers to help unload luggage. No floating platforms waited to gently ease their heavy loads as they walked out under a hazy sky and intense summer heat.

One young man politely waited at the back of the queue, letting others stream out of the ship first. He stood tall, with a curious shade of dark blond hair, as if his genes really wanted to lean toward the European side of his lineage but the Asian side insisted on making its presence known.

Unlike many of the other fresh arrivals, immigrants to a newly colonized world with all their belongings, this young man carried with him only a backpack.

Granted, it was a large backpack and looked to be loaded down with all kinds of stuff. He moved down the ramp with the confidence of someone knowing he had all he needed. And if not, he could always obtain anything else, if necessary.

A group of immigration officials hurriedly set up folding tables and chairs on the tarmac while others lined up the newcomers in queues. Despite their lack of modern conveniences, the bureaucrats knew what needed to be done, and had obviously gone through these motions before.

The young man waited at the end of the third line, displaying remarkable patience for someone his age. He amused himself by reading a novel on his personal implant, the words floating in front of his eyes.

No implants connected with an AI here, yet. The planet had not yet declared an allegiance with either of the galaxy's primary ruling systems.

That could be a good thing or a bad thing, he thought. Right now, he hoped it would be a good thing. Having little in the way of governmental authority here, for the moment, suited his purposes well.

Slowly, the line moved forward.

At last he stood before a bored immigration officer, most of the other passengers having been processed and moved on.

"Stare into the panel, please."

The young man looked at a rectangular scanner, and felt a bioscan go up and down his face.

"Name?"

"Tom Savage."

The official nodded, pressing a floating button next to the name that appeared in a blank on the holo in front of him.

“What AI are you using?” Tom said, gripped with sudden curiosity.

“Penelope. Portable Electronic Neural Engagement system. We scan for known felons from the three systems, but you’re clear.”

He smiled up at the young man and added, “That’s a nice generic name. Tom Savage. Popular, too, down through the centuries. I can think of some pro-athletes, college professors. Even an author or two.”

Tom nodded and his lips quirked up.

“I like it.”

“Be advised that when we declare an allegiance, all bio records will be compared with the larger systems, including those for PLAIR, StarCen and LuteNet.”

“I’m aware.”

“Very well, then. It’s not illegal to enter under a false name, at this time, but all I’m saying is you can’t keep it forever if it is fake. When we hook up with a larger system, all will be laid bare.”

Tom nodded again, but said nothing else. The customs officer gave him the squint eye once more.

Most immigrants, at this point in the lecture, strongly protested that they had given their proper name. Tom simply stood there, waiting to go through. He smiled politely at the man.

“Alright,” the officer said, looking mildly disappointed at the lack of reaction.

He produced a holographic entry card, which floated up to face Tom.

Tom grabbed it out of the air and pushed it into his implant for storage.

“Welcome to Phaethon.”

1.2

Tom left the rugged spaceport and entered League City, Phaethon's capital. Everything looked and felt new and hastily assembled. The spaceport itself primarily consisted of the large concrete tarmac, a tall concrete barrier wall, and a couple of pillbox buildings that could withstand any explosions or shockwaves resulting from ships landing or taking off.

Or crashing.

Outside the gate, a variety of hotels stood on the street opposite the walled-off spaceport. The tallest towered over the others at three stories. While they all looked clean, none had the polished appearance of ones on more established planets.

Tom glanced at the closest hotel, trying to figure out what made the building look different from more familiar structures back home. He decided the façades were made from natural stone and wood, rather than polyresins or other artificial compounds used on older planets.

Everything here was constructed from local materials.

Raising an eyebrow at his newfound knowledge, he shifted the weight on his backpack, checked a signpost for directions, and started walking toward the local courthouse.

League City was laid out on a grid, and so far did not look very large, so far as cities go. Ten streets crossed ten others, according to the map. The spaceport sat at the south of town. The courthouse occupied a square in the center.

Everything remained nice and tidy, for now. As the population grew, Tom suspected things might get messier. For now, the town stuck to the grid. It remained orderly and well laid out.

A few pedestrians wandered the sidewalks with him. Not a lot of people were here, he thought, especially in comparison to the older and more heavily populated planets like Diego or Clarion or Epsilon. Even Lute, that distant pirate stronghold, had several million residents.

He didn't know Phaethon's current numbers, and he had not asked the customs official. But by the looks of things on the street, he doubted more than 10,000 people called League City home. Granted, they were all squeezed into a ten-by-ten grid, and he had not yet walked into a residential area.

But immigrants were welcomed with open arms and very few questions, he thought. They needed more people here, and they were not too picky.

Happy to stretch his legs, he made good time walking. The sky remained hazy, the yellow sun hidden behind an impenetrable layer of darker yellow dust in the upper atmosphere. The haze shielded the sun's rays somewhat. But the diffused light made it seem hot and dreary rather than hot and sunny.

Tom worked up a mild sweat, but after weeks aboard a cramped spaceship, he felt happy to be able to walk rather than ride.

Soon the courthouse loomed before him, the tallest building on the planet at the moment, five stories high. It looked like a medieval castle made of local stone. The front remained unguarded, although he did see some law enforcement officers on the street corners watching pedestrians, including Tom.

He walked in through a large ornate double door made of local wood and hand-engraved by an immigrant artisan, according to a sign nearby. It

swung open for him and Tom entered a spacious lobby with high ceilings.

He stood near the entrance admiring things for a moment. The interior remained cool, decked out with more locally quarried stone and harvested wood products.

A young woman of Asian descent sat at an information desk, another sign the world was new. Anywhere else, he would have found a receptionist bot waiting for him. Probably none had been imported here yet, he thought. Bots were expensive.

“May I help you?”

Tom smiled at her and approached the desk.

“I’d like to claim a homestead.”

She nodded, not at all surprised by the request, and produced a holosheet. It floated in the air between them.

“Homesteads are one square kilometer. Please indicate your name and the coordinates of your desired spot. In the corner over there,” she pointed deeper inside the lobby, “you’ll find a global map with all available properties open for homesteading. You may only claim one square kilometer as a grant from Phaethon’s provisional government. However, you are always free to buy as much land as you want from others.”

He nodded, and pulled the holosheet closer.

“Do you know the coordinates of the parcel you want?”

He shook his head.

“Well, when you do, fill out that sheet. The processing fee is two hundred credits. You will be obligated to live on the parcel for one year before the deed is fully actualized.”

Two hundred credits for a square kilometer of land was a bargain. Of course, this was a planet out in the middle of nowhere, desperately seeking people to come and help colonize it. They were practically giving land away as an incentive, Tom thought.

“I know what I’m looking for. I’ll just go over to the map and find the coordinates.”

“Good luck!” she said as he walked deeper into the lobby.

Near the center of the open space, a giant holo globe as tall as Tom hovered in place, slightly transparent and slowly rotating. Three continents covered a third of the planet’s surface, with the rest comprised of ocean water and polar icecaps.

He found a faintly pulsing red dot, marked “League City” on the continent of Glagia, a vaguely peanut-shaped landmass that stood out as the largest of the three continents.

Groups of faint green squares glowed on Glagia, showing land available for homesteading, though none near here. Darker green squares indicated verdant landscape, suitable for farming or raising livestock.

Tom waited patiently as the globe slowly turned, showing water on Glagia’s west coast and a vast expanse of ocean. Here a few islands, probably volcanic in origin, spotted the water. Most of the squares available on the islands were already claimed.

Finally, the next continent rotated into view. It vaguely resembled a giant American football, oblong on the ends and thicker in the middle.

This one was marked “Anatolia.”

Tom’s lips quirked at the name.

“There is nothing new under the sun,” he murmured.

A massive desert dominated the landmass, marked in yellow stretching across most of the interior. A thin verdant line ringed the continent at the coasts. One portion, in the south, pressed inward between two sets of mountains, like a green fist punching up into a sea of butter.

Here, in the middle of that defiantly verdant interior, he found a town marked “Little York” on the map. Many green squares nearby indicated a considerable amount of land available for homesteading. Most of the

parcels surrounding the town were already claimed, but others nearby looked to be within easy distance.

Tom placed a hand on the holo, stopping the globe from rotating. He made a stretching motion with his thumb and fingers, and zoomed in on the area around Little York.

Now, magnifying from a bird's eye view, he brought the square kilometers available for homesteading into focus. Plenty of choices remained. He turned his palm sideways and scrolled through the enhanced view.

At last he found something desirable, north of town near the part where green met yellow on the map. A stream bordered the homestead's southern edge. Not a huge river, but enough for water. The stream meandered south, providing water for other sites. And it supplied Little York too, from what he could tell.

The green on the map indicated foliage and suitable conditions for farming, but the square quickly ran into the desert about halfway in. The northern portion looked completely yellow. Beyond that, the surveyors had not bothered opening the land up for any other settlements. No one wanted to farm or live in the desert, it seemed.

Tom nodded to himself and tapped the square on the map. A set of coordinates displayed, and he tapped them again, copying them.

He pulled over the form the lady at the desk gave him and pasted the coordinates in.

"Home," he said with a smile.

1.3

When Tom returned to the receptionist with the holosheet, she took a quick glance at the information and pulled it over to her desk with a finger.

A holo popped up over her desk, showing the square kilometer on a map hovering in the air.

“Are you sure this is the homestead you want to claim? Half of it is uninhabitable.”

He nodded, giving her a confident smile.

She shifted attention from the holo to him, with a serious expression on her face.

“No, it’s *really* uninhabitable. The Skoni Desert has very little life beyond the microscopic level. The macroscopic life it does support is mostly hostile to humans. I mean, I realize you’ve got half a square klick here to grow something, but the rest of it . . .”

“This one suits me. If I need something else, I’ll see about buying it later.”

“But it’s the Wild West out there. Are you sure . . . ?”

She shrugged then, seeing the resolve on his face. Her protests died out.

“Suit yourself. That’ll be 200 credits, please.”

He dug in a pocket and pulled out two tokens, handing them over. She tapped a few times on her virtual keyboard and the holosheet flashed green.

“Signed and sealed. Here’s your copy.”

She pulled on it, and a duplicate appeared, floating in the air beside the original. He took it and pushed it against the side of his neck, his implant accepting the document and storing it.

“Can I do anything else for you today, Mr. Savage?”

“Yes. Tell me how I can get out there.”

“For that, you’ll need to book passage on one of the sky trains headed to the outer settlements. They arrive and depart on the north side of town, opposite where you came in at the spaceport. You can check there for schedules. They vary according to the train.”

“Thank you.”

He smiled, turned and made his way back out the courthouse doors.

“Oh, one more thing. Be careful going over there. The northern neighborhoods can be rough.”

But Tom had already walked out, waving at her.

The receptionist frowned and shook her head.

“He’ll never make it. Either in this city, or out there.”

-+-

The further north Tom walked, the less civilized his surroundings became. Here, buildings visibly degraded in quality. Claptrap housing seemed to pack in the tenants, too. Migrants rushing to escape whatever planet they came from were packed into these tight spaces. Bare wooden planks hosted no fancy facades or locally quarried stone, or anything other than boring expanses of unpainted lumber.

Doors relied on hinges rather than electronics. Simple glass covered the windows. Since most of those were open, Tom suspected air conditioning was not a priority despite the oppressive heat. People looked out the windows, eyeing him like predators. Some stood in the open doorways, watching him pass by on the sidewalk.

It felt unnerving. The backpack made him an obvious outsider, fresh off the ship. He regretted not taking a ground car through this part of the city.

It grew worse the further he walked. Traffic on the street grew sparse. Tom noted two cars passing him earlier, but saw none in the last block or so.

The neighborhoods grew increasingly stark, with more trash on the street. Even the façades on the buildings looked tarnished here, as if absorbing negative attitudes from the populace, emotions turning into grime on the wood.

Since there were no more cars, he decided to move off the sidewalk and out into the middle of the street. It felt safer.

Ahead, on the last block, Tom could see where the city's grid ended and open land stretched into the distance. Out there, a line of landing craft parked on the grass. He could see people loading them and passengers climbing aboard. A smattering of booths served food and offered supplies to passengers and crew.

Tom picked up his pace.

Three men stepped out of doorways on either side of the street, blocking his way to the open field. One carried a baseball bat, casually slung over a shoulder. Another held a short length of chain, dangling from a fist. The third slid something over his fingers that looked like brass knuckles, although Tom doubted they were actually made of brass.

He stopped and stared at the trio. Going forward would require passing them. A quick glance behind him showed half a dozen more men lining the sidewalks. No one had moved to block the way back . . . yet. But they looked ready and willing to intercept any retreat.

Tom turned back to the three waiting for him. He smirked.

Shrugging out of his backpack, he set it down on the pavement. Then he moved into a balanced position, one foot slightly in front, one to the back. He shifted his weight to the balls of his feet and brought his fists up in front of his face.

Waiting.

The trio clearly had expected him to make a run for it. That he removed his pack and assumed a fighter's stance astonished them. But once they recovered from their initial surprise, they chuckled.

"Look at the nerve of this guy."

"Is that a challenge? I think that's a challenge."

"That kid just got off the boat and he's salutin' us? In our neighborhood? Let's get him!"

They rushed forward, swinging a chain, fists and bat.

1.4

Tom expected these thugs to make the classic mistake of attacking individually, and they did. Perhaps it was because they rushed him from one direction in a narrow street.

The man with the bat met him first, swinging hard. Tom ducked and lashed out with his fists, aiming a vicious blow on the guy's elbow. The man yelped as the bat clattered away, his arm suddenly numb from a damaged ulnar nerve.

The chain came next, swinging for him. Tom raised a forearm and slashed down, making the links wrap around him. He grabbed and yanked, pulling the man in close. A quick kick to the groin made his assailant double over in excruciating pain, and Tom yanked the chain free from the other man's weakened grasp.

Brass knuckles came next, leaning in for a strike at Tom's chin. But Tom pulled back and swung his new weapon out, the metal links slapping the side of the third assailant's face.

Mentally, Tom named them according to their weapon of choice.

Knuckles went down screaming just as Bat Man charged again, knocking Tom over this time.

On the street, Tom twisted, easily pulling Bat Man's weight on top of him in a wrestler's move. He wrapped the chain around the thug's neck and pulled.

Bat Man struggled, hitting back with his elbows, a futile gesture especially since Tom had so badly damaged one of them.

Tom held on tight, keeping the pressure on. In seconds, Bat Man blanked out.

He pushed the unconscious thug off and stood up, watching Chains hobble away, groaning in pain. Knuckles came in for another strike, but Tom swung the links out, knocking away his fist.

Knuckles lashed out with his foot, connecting to Tom's groin in a copycat move.

They both heard a loud *Thwack!*

They paused, both looking down at Tom's midsection. Then their eyes met. Tom smiled as the man realized he wore a protective cup.

Tom quickly wrapped several links of the chain around his fist and slammed it into Knuckles's face, knocking him over. The man crawled on the ground, dazed, trying to stand up. Tom walked over and pummeled him three more times until he stopped moving.

Winded, Tom reached down and grabbed the man's hand. He pulled the brass knuckles off and pocketed them.

"Thanks for the souvenir."

Risking a glance behind him, he saw the baseball bat lying in the street. He elected not to take it, since it looked too bulky to carry.

Standing up straight, he made for his backpack, still standing on the pavement where he had left it.

But now, several more men left tenement doorways between his location and the edge of town. He counted as they stepped out onto the pavement.

"Eight . . . ten . . . fourteen . . ."

All were armed with something. Several had what appeared to be broken table legs made of wood. A couple had chains, and he saw a few more baseball bats in the crowd. The rest held knives, gleaming in the hazy light.

Tom sighed in disappointment, giving another look over his shoulder in the direction of the courthouse. Sure enough, more men filed out from doorways back that way, too. Those guys were not armed with clubs or anything else, at first glance. Then Tom noticed the bulges in their waistbands.

“Ah, the real weapons. Prolly gonna wait and see how I do with the JV team first, I bet.”

He turned back to the larger crowd, reached into his pocket and retrieved the brass knuckles, slipping them onto his left hand. With his right, he twirled the chain around in a circle a few times, making a whooshing sound. Then he grabbed the other end and stopped, holding his fists up with the chain between them.

This time, the men facing him did not make the mistake of trying to charge him individually. They ran forward *en masse*, yelling and swinging their weapons.

A spray of blaster bolts knocked down several before they could close the distance. Tom hit the street, shots sailing over his head.

An older man, balding with a flowing white beard and a prominent potbelly, stood at the edge of town with a gunman on either side. He marched down the street, ignoring the fresh bodies.

“Dagnab it, I told you people to leave my passengers alone!”

As if to punctuate his thoughts, the gunmen on the other side of Tom opened up on the trio. They finally pulled out the pistols tucked away in their waistbands, and the battle began in earnest. Streams of bolts flew back and forth over Tom’s head.

Grunting, Tom looked to his right and spotted a manhole cover. He raised an eyebrow and scootched over to it like an inchworm. He stuck a finger in the little access hole and lifted the cover with a surge of adrenaline. He

went down the hole face first, all while trying to keep his body as low to the ground as possible.

Inside the shaft, he managed to twist and turn until he stood upright on the metal ladder. Down below, everything looked dark. Up above, in the circle over his head, green and red bolts continued flying back and forth.

Tom smiled and said, “This looks like as good a place as any.”

He reached into a pocket and pulled out a coin-sized disk, with a hole in the center and a piece of twine threaded through it. Carefully, while holding onto the ladder, he tied it off on the third metal rung to the top.

At last, the shooting stopped. Very carefully, Tom climbed up to the street level and poked his head out. The men behind him were all down. He counted eight dead in the street. The others must have fled.

Turning back toward the edge of town, he saw the old man and his guards still standing there. The fellow smiled under his beard.

He marched up to Tom, who decided the best thing to do would be to stay put for the moment.

The old man looked down with kindly eyes, seemingly amused at Tom’s choice of shelter.

“You *are* one of my passengers, are you not?”

It took a moment before Tom remembered what the man said before the shooting started.

“I am if you’re headed to Little York.”

“Little York? That’s more than 10,000 kilometers from here, Sonny. I am going there, but it’s one of the very last of *Jet Stream*’s stops before I circle back this way.”

Tom blinked, and made a mental deduction that *Jet Stream* must be one of the sky train conveyances the receptionist at the courthouse mentioned.

“That’s where I need to go. Can you take me?”

“Well, now, that depends. Can you pay the fare? None of this lot can afford to get out of town.”

Tom climbed out of the manhole. He reached down and dragged the metal cover back on top and it clanged into place.

He glanced over his shoulder back the way he had come. No one remained out in the street now. No one still alive, anyway.

“How much is the fare?”

“Twelve hundred credits. That’s guaranteed safe passage. We’ll be there in three days.”

Tom raised both eyebrows.

“That’s kinda steep. My homestead only cost me 200 credits.”

The old man laughed at this, showing perfect white teeth, all neatly aligned, gleaming through his gray beard.

“Land is the cheapest thing you’ll find on Phaethon, Sonny. Well, that and your life.”

He nodded at the bodies in the street.

1.5

The old man's name was Isidore Montaigne. He was Captain of *Jet Stream*, a sky train making a continuous circuit to all the planet's settlements.

Tom was not happy about forking over so much money for a ride, but ultimately he decided to pay the fare. Even if someone else could offer lower rates, he did not know when they would show up, and he had little desire to walk back to the other side of town to find a hotel. He certainly did not want to walk through the Northside neighborhoods again right now, if he could avoid it.

Also, Captain Montaigne had shown up at an opportune time. Tom was not ready to say the old man saved his life, but shooting the gang in the street certainly helped his situation.

Montaigne acted like he had, indeed, saved Tom and that the young man owed him. Rather than argue that fact, Tom pulled out twelve more hundred-credit tokens and handed them over to the old man with a sigh.

Montaigne slapped him on the back and guided him down the street after Tom retrieved his backpack.

"You'll enjoy the *Jet Stream*, Sonny. Food and drinks are included in the fare, of course. I don't squeeze my passengers for every decimal like some of these scalawags out here."

Tom said nothing, but inwardly he grimaced. He had not thought to ask about food and water. Three days was a long way to go, and he would be at the man's mercy for sustenance and everything else the entire way.

At last they walked out from the tenements to the open space at the edge of town. Here, a variety of booths were set up close to the buildings. Out in the field, five tubular landing craft rested, connected together end-to-end.

They looked like subway cars, only about three times as big. Four standard drive thrusters, two on either end, were the only protrusions. Each had large cargo doors in the middle, all open. People moved in and out, loading crates and suitcases. Tom picked out a handful of people who appeared to be passengers, like him.

"That's the *Jet Stream*?"

"That's part of it, Sonny. Grab any food or souvenirs you want from the booths. We're taking off in a few minutes."

Montaigne turned to give a few more orders to his men, instructing two of them to keep an eye on the street for any more trouble, and to make sure and help any potential passengers seen walking this way with luggage.

The other two accompanied him, keeping an eye on the crowd and acting as his temporary bodyguards.

Tom sighed and muttered, "Terrestrial teleportation is so much easier."

He idly wandered among the booths. He had eaten not long ago, while still in orbit, so he was not particularly hungry. As for souvenirs, he found nothing that caught his eye. Many items had a graphic of a sun in motion, the unofficial icon representing Phaethon. Or at least, a symbol all the merchants agreed should represent their planet.

One vendor sold t-shirts with a holo of a little orbiting sun and a nice graphic of the planet, with "Phaethon!" printed on the front. But Tom was not fond of textile holos, and he declined the man's pitch, even when the price lowered dramatically as he walked away.

The brass knuckles, Tom decided, were free and would serve as a reminder of his first visit to League City.

At last he made his way toward the line of connected vehicles. Montaigne himself stood at the door of the lead car, directing traffic in and out. Tom realized why the fellow looked tan, even though he presumably spent most of his time flying around the planet. For however long he was down here, Montaigne spent the time mostly outside.

The haze blocked the sunlight, but not all of it.

“There he is! Come on aboard, Sonny. We’ll get you settled when we join the rest of the train. For right now, find a seat and wait for liftoff.”

Tom nodded and stepped up and into the car. Inside, one of Montaigne’s bodyguards acted as crew.

“You can put your backpack in the next car over. Come on, I’ll show you.”

He followed the man past several seats, many already occupied by people. The end of the car had a door and a short connecting tunnel led to the next car. Tom could see all the doors between the cars were open, adding to the impression of a train.

“There’s space in here. Put it anywhere you can find an opening.”

The man left him to it, heading down to the next car in line, one evidently used for cargo if the crates Tom could see were any indication.

Tom found an open bin with a bar across it to prevent luggage from flying around in turbulence, and placed his backpack there. Then he returned to the passenger car.

“Taking off in five minutes!” Montaigne roared from the open door. People rushed for the cars to make last minute placement of items, or to climb aboard.

Soon, everyone and everything was in place. Montaigne saluted a man in uniform on the ground. Tom figured that fellow was an official who managed the open field with its hodgepodge of food booths and space for aircraft landings.

Then the old man stepped inside and hit a big red button above the door. An alarm sounded and all the outer doors closed simultaneously.

Montaigne pressed his palm on a panel to the left of the door and an array of holo buttons appeared, floating in the air. He swiped a finger through several, and the cars responded with a hum, then a soft roar.

Slowly, the cars levitated simultaneously, maintaining a horizontal line. They went up . . . up . . . and Tom's ears popped just before the cabins pressurized.

A giant viewing holo appeared in the front of the car, floating between seats. It showed a window of the world outside. They were very high now, and rising higher. Above and slightly ahead, Tom could see a much longer string of cars, over 20. They floated in the air like a train in the sky.

Montaigne turned and smiled at him.

“Welcome aboard the *Jet Stream*, Sonny.”

1.6

Life aboard the *Jet Stream* proved to be cramped, crowded, and largely uneventful.

The string of aircraft indeed flew between settlements on the planet, but they never all landed at once. Instead, certain cars would break free and drift down, docking as a single unit outside a town. If one broke from the string above, the others reconnected, keeping everything together.

In flight, while clustered and traveling, one could conceivably walk from the first car to the last. In practice, the front four cars were reserved for Montaigne and his crew. Tom counted six people working for the old man, the four gunmen and two more.

One of these fellows seemed to be a combination pilot and navigator. He only came out of the front cars for meals. Tom sat close enough to the Captain's table over lunch one day and listened in on their conversation.

A hurricane brewed out in the Aqua Minor, as one of the smaller, warmer oceans was called. This body of water covered the space between the continents of Glagia and Anatolia. *Jet Stream* would divert around it, the man said, avoiding the lion's share of atmospheric tumult.

The dining car was the fifth one in line, and everyone took their meals there. Montaigne did not see any point, apparently, in separating the crew

from passengers while eating. There was no assigned seating at meals. Everything remained first come, first served.

The sixth person in the Captain's retinue was evidently in charge of food. He prepared all the meals and presented everything cafeteria style in the dining car, with a food island where people could choose what to load up on their plates.

The man they called Cook looked older than Montaigne, a short fellow of Hispanic descent who never seemed to smile. But the food was good and Cook kept the dining car clean as a whistle. The four gunmen helped him wipe the tables down after every meal. Dishes were deposited at a window, where a stationary robot arm loaded them into an automatic washer.

Connected to the dining car were three passenger lounges, with holos always on showing the sky and ground below. A big one in the middle displayed a graphic constantly updating their location, with solid lines where *Jet Stream* had been, and dotted lines indicating where they were going, with an hourly countdown to their next destination.

Tom decided this holo was a nod toward the natural curiosity of travelers, and those with the eternal question, "Are we there yet?"

Behind these, the bunk cars connected. Here, beds and partitions gave at least a modicum of privacy. One could stay in their bunk all day, coming out only for bathroom breaks and eating. Tom had a small room with two beds stacked on top of one another, but no roommate, fortunately. For 1200 credits, he would have felt slighted at having to share the room. But he supposed if they took on enough passengers, he would not be given much choice.

Behind the bunks, the main embarking car trailed. This was the one Tom rode up, and it was the one passengers usually used when going down to a settlement or city. Connected to it were the baggage cars, and after them came a long line of cargo cars.

Tom walked through these once or twice, if only to stretch his legs. Many long lines of crates strapped down back here were labeled as foodstuff. Evidently, not all the settlements could provide enough food for their

populations, so shuttling supplies around the globe was an important role *Jet Stream* helped fulfill.

On the second day, Tom sat in one of the passenger lounges with his feet up, reading a book on his implant. Montaigne stepped into the car, evidently making the rounds of his domain. He stopped when he saw Tom.

“Well, Sonny, what do you think? This is how we do it out here on the frontier planets.”

“It’s a good system, Mr. Montaigne. Everything seems efficient. How did you get into this line of work, if you don’t mind me asking?”

Tom was curious as to where the old man got the seed money to start. A sky train like this had to be expensive. His parents had taught him it was disrespectful to ask people personal monetary questions. He did not query directly, but he hoped Montaigne might reveal something about it without prompting.

“Well, you know . . . I was a LEAF soldier in the war. There, I done went and revealed somethin’. Could be bad for people to know that, could be good. Depends completely on the company I’m with. How do you feel about the League, Sonny?”

Tom answered truthfully.

“I’m only 20, sir. I was born right as the war ended. I don’t fool with politics too much.”

The old man’s eyes lit up.

“Twenty? Ha! You’re just a kid! What are you doin’ out here in the middle of nowhere? This is no place for a youngster.”

Tom shrugged. He did not think of himself as “young,” although he certainly was when compared to Montaigne.

“I heard they were giving away land. Two hundred credits for one square kilometer of prime farmland is hard to pass up. Of course, getting there has proven to be most of the challenge so far.”

Montaigne nodded, and something like admiration sparkled in his eyes.

“Gettin’ there, and keepin’ it once you get there will be the trick. But you are a lot wiser than I was at your age. Yeah, if I had to do it all over again out here, I’d have secured a homestead near League City, then bought out the ones who left early. Today, just two years after they started releasing the plots, I’d have a small fortune in real estate. I’d have several square kilometers I could sell at a huge markup to all the new blood flowing in and wantin’ somethin’ close to civilization. But I’ve got *Jet Stream* instead. It’s not a bad tradeoff, I suppose. She’s kept life interesting for me.”

He sat down and leaned back in the seat next to Tom, patting the armrest as if the sky train were a living thing.

“I got her three years ago when they first opened up Phaethon to round one on immigration. That was before they opened it up a year later for homesteadin’. Weren’t nothin’ here then but four small settlements: League City, Gessner, The Woodlands, and New Galveston. The provisional government needed transportation and procured this here sky train, bringing it in on the very first ship. They put the contract up for biddin’, and I won. Truthfully, I think I was the only one biddin’ on it, at the time. They own it, I manage it and keep the fares, mostly. I deliver official government goods and people for free as part of the deal, and charge a fair rate for the rest. It’s a good retirement. ’Course now there’s some competition. They brought in a couple more sky trains that are flyin’ around, and one came in without government subsidies at all. But that’s okay. It still beats fightin’ Republican Marines, lemme tell ya.”

Tom maintained a straight face, thankful for his father’s advice to never volunteer personal political leanings to new people before he knew them well.

“What about yourself, Sonny? Where ya from? Where’s your family?”

“I’ve been sort of drifting. I’ve been all over, most recently at Petra Roe. That’s where I booked passage on a ship headed here.”

“Petra Roe. Never been there, although I knew they were friendly to us in the war. League-aligned independent, I believe.”

Tom nodded. That was why he mentioned it. Conveniently, everything he told the old man was true, as well.

“I also heard it was somethin’ of a backwater.”

Tom shrugged in reply.

He said, “I wouldn’t know. I haven’t spent much time on the big capital planets myself, like Diego or Clarion.”

“I’m a native of Epsilon. Now, there is a civilized planet, lemme tell ya. Too bad the Republicans and the pirates destroyed it during the war. What a mess.”

He locked eyes with Tom, who stared back, unblinking.

“I’ve never been there, either. Didn’t they rebuild?”

“Yeah, yeah.” Montaigne waved that away. “But they rebuilt as a Republican-aligned planet. It’s not the same place anymore.”

“I thought that the League came in and destroyed it a second time, in an aborted attempt by Jade Thrall to take it back. The LEAF went through with building-buster bombs and leveled the main city.”

Montaigne squinted at him.

“Well, let’s not talk about Jade Thrall. That was all a Republican plot, ya know.”

“It was?”

“Sure. She was a bot made by Verberger. You can’t tell me ol’ Severs wasn’t behind it all. They set up the last Tetrarch to fail. That weren’t no League-built bot. No, sir.”

Tom leaned back and wondered how far he could push this. He was young, and the urge to strangle the old man and yell in his face felt strong.

How could people believe something that was so wrong?

Instead he said, somewhat meekly, “I heard the League stole the bot and programmed her to be the Tetrarch.”

It was Montaigne’s turn to control his emotions. He looked ready to explode.

Then he glanced at the nearest holo showing the landscape sliding by below, a virgin world with thick forests and rolling hills. The anger seeped away.

“Yeah, Sonny. That’s what they say. I guess we’ll never know the whole truth. It’s probably somewhere in the middle, and it don’t benefit either side much, one way or the other.”

He stood then, preparing to continue his rounds to the rear of the train and back.

“We’ll be at Little York in the mornin’ Sonny. Get a good night’s sleep.”

Tom sat back and resumed reading his book.

In the back of his mind, he replayed the conversation, wondering if he said anything wrong.

Ultimately, he decided to steer clear of recent history and politics, especially when speaking with old soldiers from the losing side of the war.

1.7

The next morning, Tom woke up and took a quick shower in the sleeping car's communal bathroom. After dressing for the day, he moved to the dining car for breakfast. Along the way, he passed the holo in a lounge showing their present location. A dot labeled "Little York" flashed near the solid line. They were close, he realized. About half an hour out.

While he wolfed down pancakes and bacon with a side of orange juice, or at least the juice of a fruit that resembled oranges somewhat, Montaigne stepped out of the forward cars and stopped by his table.

"We're almost there, Sonny. You ready to fight for your life?"

The old man chuckled at the startled expression on Tom's face.

"Yeah, it's the Wild West out there, don't know if anybody told ya. Little York has guns, knives, bandits and bad guys. You thought that little shootout in League City was bad? I'm afraid you'll be on your own out there in the wild, Sonny. Don't worry, though. I'll be back in three weeks and check on ya, if you wanna go home."

Tom smiled politely.

"I intend to be farming in three weeks, Mr. Montaigne. You likely won't see me. My homestead is out near the Skoni Desert. It's a ways from Little York."

Montaigne nodded, as if these were merely insignificant details.

“Well, if you’re still alive, and you wanna go back . . . just remember, the fare to League City for a passenger this far out is 1200 credits.”

Tom smiled at the brazenness and lack of concern the old soldier displayed.

“Gee thanks, Mr. Montaigne.”

“Don’t mention it. Happy to take on payin’ customers any time. So long as they pay up front, you understand.”

Montaigne made his way to the lounge cars, leaving the dining car behind.

Tom gulped the last of his juice down, and noted that Cook was nowhere to be seen at the moment. He stood and walked past the kitchen area, then slipped through the door into the forward cars.

Curiosity called him to the restricted area, and he thought this might be a rare opportunity for a look.

The passage narrowed and he could see bunks ahead, a total of eight with four on the left and four on the right. Two men were still in them, holding onto sleep as long as they could.

To his right, he found a door marked “Restroom.”

Deciding this would likely be as far as he would get, he palmed it open, grateful to find it unlocked.

Inside he found a toilet, a sink and a shower along with some cabinets. He searched quickly, looking for a good spot to hide something. Finally, he found a panel on the wall held in place by screws. He pulled out a multi-tool and quickly removed the panel. Inside, water pipes led to the shower, sink and toilet.

He retrieved another small donut disk. Instead of hanging this one by a thread, he simply left it inside the compartment, hoping it would be mistaken for a discarded washer if anyone found it.

Quickly, he replaced the panel and retightened the screws.

Pocketing his multi-tool, he opened the door to the bathroom and almost ran into Cook.

The shorter man gave him a look of surprise, one that quickly turned into anger.

“Oh! Sorry, I . . . I had to go.”

“This is not a passenger area!”

“I’m sorry. I’ll . . . I’ll just be leaving now.”

He squeezed by the man, trying not to touch him in the tight space, and walked out to the dining car again. He felt Cook’s eyes boring into his back, but he dared not look.

A chime sounded and the sky train slowed. Montaigne’s voice came over the intercom.

“Ladies and gentlemen, we are arriving at Little York. All those going down, please assemble in the departure car, and strap in.”

1.8

After three days aboard the *Jet Stream*, Tom looked forward to walking under open skies again. He had not gone down at any of the other stops, and he looked forward to seeing his new hometown for the first time.

He strapped into a seat in the departure car, and noticed he was the only person going down, save for one of the gunmen.

These fellows had kept to themselves, and Tom never had a chance to talk to them or even find out their names. They all looked older, in their mid-40s. He suspected they might be League veterans too, like Montaigne. The bodyguard simply nodded at Tom while strapping in beside him.

A buzzer sounded and the door to the closest bunk car slid shut, red lights flashing above it.

Tom heard a clunking sound as the departure car and the closest luggage car disconnected from the others. He felt them drop several meters below the train. Here, they floated a few seconds until Tom heard another loud bump. He knew that the cargo car with items marked for delivery to Little York would be making the trip down to the surface with them.

A moment later, they dropped a lot more, rapidly descending.

The sensation felt entirely unpleasant, like going down fast on a non-stop elevator. Tom felt his hair, short as it was, lifting as they plummeted. No

holos showed the outside world on the way down, he noted. There were no windows in the car either.

At last they slowed. Finally the sky train car came to a complete stop as they bumped softly into the ground.

A chime sounded and the middle door slid open with a great puff of air, bringing in dust, heat and humidity.

The door to the baggage car chimed. The light turned green and it opened, too.

“Don’t forget your stuff, kid.”

“Thanks.”

The man’s statement was entirely unhelpful, and Tom’s tone indicated that fact. He could not keep a sarcastic edge from seeping through. But if the older man noticed, he gave no reaction.

Tom found his backpack where he left it, and shrugged the straps over his shoulders. He walked out behind the bodyguard, who made his way down to the last of the three cars. Here, an open door revealed crates stacked and strapped down. He reached for one and pulled it out, grunting.

The settlement looked entirely unremarkable as Tom laid eyes on it the first time.

Two lines of shops on the far side of a bigger building connected together, facing each other on a long main street.

No signs indicated street addresses, if any. There were no street signs or street lamps. And certainly, Tom thought, there were no public sensors in place, since the planet did not have an AI yet.

Everything looked basic. Rugged. Tom noted the buildings were all made from wood. He wondered if a construction bot crew set everything up. There seemed to be a slap-dash nature to it all, with little regard for durability and longevity. At the same time, the town seemed to follow a basic pattern.

It had the large building on this end with a landing field out back, two lines of commercial buildings facing a dirt street, and what looked to be stables on the far side of town.

Behind the buildings on the main street, on either side, smaller structures stood. These were houses even more recently assembled, and with an even more slapdash appearance than the commercial buildings.

A back door opened to the big building, and an old woman wearing an apron walked out. She glared at the landing crafts, the two men and the crate as she made her way quickly toward them.

“Bout time you got here,” she said when she neared, scowling at the man while ignoring Tom.

“It’s good to see you, too, Ms. Ferguson.”

“Let me look inside the box. I don’t trust that old flying coot any further than I can throw him.”

The man nodded and unlatched the top of the crate. It was made of polyresin, a meter long and half a meter tall by half a meter wide. She swung it open, impatient and unwilling to wait for him to do it. Inside, the three of them stared down at sacks of fresh potatoes and several canned goods.

“With shipping, it comes to 20 credits, Ms. Ferguson.”

“I know that,” she snapped. “Highway robbery, you ask me.”

“We’re the cheapest for deliveries, Ms. Ferguson. It’s subsidized by the courthouse.”

The look on her face said she clearly disagreed with the cost, subsidized or not. Reaching in her apron, the old woman pulled out two tokens.

“Now get on out of here. You too.”

“I, uh . . . I have a homestead.”

She gave Tom a sharper look, as if seeing him for the first time.

“You look kinda young for homesteading. Where’s your paperwork?”

Tom gave her a smile and produced his holosheet from League City by pulling it out of the implant under his right ear. He made a grasping motion with his thumb and forefinger, retrieving the last item stored there.

The holosheet popped into existence, floating in the air. He pushed it toward her. She squinted and read off the coordinates.

“That’s a trash area out in the desert. You got snookered by whoever sold you that, or convinced you to claim it. Ain’t nobody living out that far for a *reason*.”

Tom opened his mouth to let her know it was only half in the desert. Then he closed it and cut off what he was tempted to say.

Instead, he replied, “Any idea where I can hire some transportation to get out there?”

She snorted.

“You can rent a horse, or buy one if you’ve got the credits. Cajun Cal has them on the other side of town. Or you can walk. But if you stay in my public house, it’s ten credits a night.”

“Well, good luck, kid,” the bodyguard said in an amused tone. “I’m going back upstairs. Like I said, the *Jet Stream* will be back in about three weeks if you get tired of this place.”

Smirking, he walked back inside the departure car. He adjusted the controls, then sat down and strapped himself in as an alarm sounded and the door slid shut.

Ms. Ferguson snapped the lid on the crate. Tom reached down to help her carry it, but she batted his hands away.

He noticed the bracers on her forearms, then. They hummed as she picked up the box, lifting it with enhanced strength. Without looking back at either him or the levitating sky cars, she marched back to the pub.

Tom picked up his backpack and followed, wearing a bemused expression on his face.

1.9

The sign above the door painted in thick black letters read, “Ferguson’s Freehold.”

Inside, the light dimmed considerably. Outside, with the ever-present haze, sunlight remained ambient. But the pub’s interior had only two windows facing the street and a few LEDs near the bar.

Two men at different tables looked up and stared at Tom as he followed the little old woman in. She ignored them and marched straight to a door in the back of the place, setting down her crate to open it.

“Eddie! Get out here! We got a shipment of food in.”

A man appeared, also short of stature and in his late 70s. He looked down at the crate and started pulling items out without a word.

Ms. Ferguson seemed content to leave it with him. She walked back to where Tom stood, and looked him up and down.

“Rooms are ten credits a night. The high price keeps out the riffraff. Comes with three meals. No alcohol.”

“I’m looking for a ride out to my place.”

“Ah yeah. Well, Cajun Cal won’t be up before noon. You may as well sit here for a spell. Breakfast is two credits. Lunch and dinner are three.

Alcohol is extra.”

“Thanks. I’m good for now. I might get hungry closer to lunch.”

“Suit yourself. You’re welcome to stow your stuff, I won’t charge you for that. Most of the good homesteads are already taken in these parts. We don’t see many newcomers out here.”

Tom nodded, glancing around the place. She turned and left him standing there.

“I can tell,” he said softly.

While Eddie continued sorting the food, Tom made his way to a table near the rear. He set the pack down on the floor and climbed into a chair, keeping his back to the wall. From this perch, he had a clear view of all the empty tables, the other two patrons and the front door.

To his right, Eddie came out and grabbed the last bag of potatoes and disappeared back into the kitchen.

Tom debated if he should trust the old woman’s word. It would be nice to wander the village without lugging his backpack around. On the other hand, he literally just got off the boat, so to speak. If someone was intent on setting him up, he would make the perfect mark.

Sitting in a new place with his back to the wall was another piece of advice his father had given him. So far, everything his old man told him made a lot of sense. He supposed it would be unwise to leave the backpack unguarded in a strange place.

The sky train baggage car was different, obviously. Nobody was going to steal it in the air.

Unbidden, Eddie came out of the kitchen again, this time carrying a glass of water. He placed it down at the table in front of Tom and smiled.

“Water’s always on the house.”

“Thanks.”

When the old man returned through the kitchen door, carrying the empty shipping crate with him this time, Tom looked at the glass with a critical eye.

I didn't see him pour it. Could it be drugged? Or is that paranoia?

He wondered what his Dad would say at this moment. Then he thought back on other people who helped raise him.

Shrugging, he thought, *There's such a thing as being too paranoid.*

He took a tiny sip of the water and waited to see if he felt dizzy or anything.

Several minutes passed.

Tom investigated the restroom, off the side through another door. He found a working toilet and sink, meaning the settlement had running water and some kind of septic system.

He was also happy to see the holding tank for the ancient design remained high up on the wall, European style, instead of right behind the seat. Reaching up, he slipped one of his little donut disks into the water under the lid.

When he came out, one of the other customers put some tokens down, then stood up and left, going out through the front door.

Tom sat down and decided to take another little sip of his water. The door slammed open before he put the glass back down.

A young woman walked in, with straight blond hair down to her shoulders. Her eyes looked cold, a dark shade of blue that cut through the dim light of the pub. She glanced at the other fellow, then looked at Tom and caught his gaze.

He felt a rush, staring at her. His attractiveness meter shot off the scale.

Her eyes passed him by, though. If she felt the same, she gave no outward indication.

“Oma! Oma Ferguson! Where are you?”

The little old lady came out of the kitchen, a frown on her face.

“Quit your yelling. What is it, child?”

“The Dalmont brothers are coming!”

“Well, what do you expect me to do about it? I told you that you should have married that boy. The wilderness out here is no place for a girl like you.”

“What century are you in?”

The girl frowned at the old woman, then walked deeper into the pub.

The last patron’s head came up, his face a mask of alarm.

“The Dalmont boys are comin’?”

He pulled out some tokens, probably too many, Tom thought, and slammed them down on the table. They scattered, several dropping to the floor. The man rushed out the door, heedless of the cost.

The girl came to the back wall, near where Tom sat. She turned and tipped over a table. It slammed to the floor on its side and she crouched behind it.

“Gwen! What are you doing?”

“I told you, Oma. I’m not going with him. He thinks I belong to him? He’s got another thing coming!”

Tom raised his eyebrows at this. Now convinced the water had no drugs in it, he took another sip and watched.

Gwen looked over her shoulder and locked eyes with him again while Oma returned to the kitchen.

“You might want to leave before that scumbag gets here.”

The pub’s door burst open, shaking the frame and slamming back against the wall with a small explosion.

“GWEN! GWEEENNNN!”

The girl frowned and turned back to the front.

She said, “Too late.”

1.10

A huge man stormed through the pub's front door.

Tom was tall, but this man stood well over two meters.

His arms bulged out of a sleeveless shirt, thick as small tree trunks. His chest was so wide, it could cover the front of an autocab.

Tom's eyebrows raised, impressed. He suspected this fellow weighed twice what he did.

"GWEN! There you are."

"Go away, Malcolm!"

"Now, Gwen. I'm gonna tell ya one more time. You and me, we're gonna homestead my family's place. Together. You're mine, Gwen! That's the way it's gonna be!"

He moved further inside, making the wooden floor tremble with each step. Tom glanced down at his water and watched it shake in the glass along with the man's steps.

Gwen shouted, "Get back!"

Tom looked at the man's midsection. He wasn't fat, necessarily . . . but he sported a lot of extra kilos in the middle. The guy carried an enormous

amount of body weight around with him.

When he cleared the door, three more men came in behind him. They stood almost as tall, but were not nearly as heavy. They were obviously brothers, each with the same widow's peak and the same intense, beady eyes.

"I'm not takin' 'no' for an answer, Gwen. It's you and me, and a family. I've got my brothers to back me up. You're goin' home with *me*."

"Absolutely not. And if you come any closer, you're going to regret it."

Gwen pulled out a gun and aimed it at the Goliath from her place behind the overturned table.

Tom's eyebrows shot up again. He took another quick sip of water. This was starting to get good.

The men focused on the weapon, eyes glued to it. Tom noticed they each carried sidearms, too. But no one on that side of the room pulled anything out of a holster, yet.

"Gwen . . ."

The kitchen door burst open and Oma Ferguson rushed out, looking angrier than ever.

"You boys! Out! I said earlier you can't come in here and make a ruckus! Shoo! Shoo!"

One of the brothers moved to intercept the old woman.

He said, "Now, Ms. Ferguson . . . why don't you go back in the kitchen with Mr. Ferguson, and y'all make us all some lunch?"

"I'll punch you, Britt. Get out of my pub!"

Oma raised her fists up near her chin. Even across the room, Tom could hear the telltale sound of her bracers charging up.

The man she called Britt turned and looked back at his brothers.

"I told you, Mal. You're going about it the wrong way. Gwen's a strong-willed one. This ain't how you get a woman like that to do what you want."

Britt turned back to Oma and pulled out his gun, aiming it for her head while remaining safely away from her power bracers.

“Now, Gwen. This is the way it’s going to be. You’re going home with us. You’re going to be my brother’s mate, and the two of you are going to raise a nice little family and make our parents back home on Juventas proud. And you’re going to do that *today*. Or else Ms. Ferguson here . . . gets a blast to the head.”

Gwen shot him a look, and Tom noted it was filled with pain. Horror. Disbelief.

Softly, Tom cleared his throat. All eyes in the pub turned toward him.

“If I may, I think I might have something that would resolve this situation.”

He pushed back his chair and approached his backpack, unzipping it from the top.

“Hold on. Just hold on . . . Don’t anybody shoot yet. It’s in here somewhere.”

“What are you doing?” Gwen whispered, still aiming her gun at Malcolm.

He ignored her.

“Aha! Here we go.”

He pulled out a round black disk. Unlike the little donuts, this one was the size of a clay pigeon. He pressed a thumb on top to activate it. The disk levitated out of his hand, slowly floating to the middle of the room with a little nudge from Tom.

“What is *that*?” Malcolm demanded.

His eyes nearly crossed as the device stopped, floating midair in front of the brothers.

Tom moved to Gwen and put a hand over her face while shielding his own.

A huge flash of light lit up the entire pub. Everyone else threw up their hands too late.

“That’s, uh . . . a little blinding light thing,” Tom said, with his eyes still closed. “Some friends of mine gave it to me. It doesn’t have a trade name yet. It’s not really on the market. Or, at least not the civilian market. But they call it a ‘bopper.’”

Malcolm screamed in pain and rage, hands on his eyes. His brothers weren’t doing much better. The two on his right stumbled forward, arms flailing as they tried to find their balance. Oma held her face and cursed loudly.

Britt said, “That’s it! I’ve had enough!”

He squeezed the trigger, still aiming in the general direction of Oma and the kitchen.

Click.

Click. Click. Click.

“Oh yeah, one more thing,” Tom said. “It’s a localized EMP, too. None of your guns will work. Can’t see, can’t shoot. I guess you all got bopped.”

1.11

While the men stumbled around, Tom picked up his backpack.

Gwen gave him a look of confusion mixed with respect. Silently, he pointed toward the door. They sidestepped the Dalmont brothers, still screaming in pain and profanity.

At the door, thankfully still open, they stepped out into the hazy sunlight and walked down the street in silence, the screams fading behind them.

“I’ve got a homestead a few clicks from here. I’d like some transportation instead of trying to walk out there. Ms. Ferguson suggested I get a horse.”

“Why did you white knight me back there? I don’t need anybody to save me.”

Tom processed her statement and picked up on several things at once.

First, she was exceptionally attractive. Second, she seemed ticked off now that they were out of the pub and out on the street. Finally, he thought about her words and came up with what he hoped was an appropriate response for the situation.

“I, uh, need a horse. I was hoping you could show me where to get one.”

She looked at him with skepticism written all over her face. But he returned her stare with a level one of his own.

Gwen came to some sort of internal conclusion, too.

“It’s cheaper to buy one than renting. Don’t let Cal rip you off. He’s usually willing to go down some on the price.”

She led him along the wooden sidewalks now. At this time of the day, the settlement seemed mostly deserted. A stray dog came around the corner of a building and saw them. His ears perked up, then he turned and ran back the way he came.

“Where is everybody?”

“Farming, mostly. Or some other kind of work. All the good homesteads around here are taken. Or bought up by the Dalmont brothers. Some people live here in Little York and work their land nearby. There’s some comfort in groups, I guess. It’s not like there’s any monsters out there, looking to prey on people. Well, except for the big lizards in the desert. But, nobody goes out there. And the giant owls that come out at night. But they leave people alone. Mostly.”

Tom raised an eyebrow at all this new information.

“I was told there are very few higher life forms in the desert.”

“That’s true for the most part. But the sand dragons like to eat anything that comes out there. Including people. There’s stories about the first settlers here exploring the desert and never being seen again. Everybody pretty much avoids it now. Just stay on the green parts of the map and you’ll be fine.”

Soon they came to the edge of town. Here, at the end of the street, a series of stables stood along with a corral, several watering troughs, and horses.

Lots of horses.

They stopped at the gate to the corral.

“Cal? Cal, get out here!”

The door to a small house next to the stables opened, and a man walked into the corral wearing overalls and no shirt.

His beard looked overgrown and scraggly, as if he never trimmed it. He let it grow all down his neck as well, apparently eschewing a razor altogether.

“Whaddaya want, Gwen? I’m busy.”

“You have a customer. This man wants to buy a horse.”

Cal stepped closer, going through a gate in the corral to join them outside the fence. He eyed Tom’s backpack and clothes.

“A settler? Ain’t seen one of you in a while. You’re kinda young, ain’tcha?”

“Why do they call you Cajun Cal?”

Deflecting unwanted questions with another question was a verbal sparring trick. It worked on Cal, even though he looked twice as old as Tom.

Cal stood up a little straighter, and smiled. His belly bulged through the overalls. If others worked in the fields, he obviously was not one for heavy labor. Although the tan on his torso indicated he must spend a lot of time outside, Tom thought. The ever-present haze did not block out all the sun’s rays.

“I’m a direct descendant of Cajuns, on both sides. Calvin Broussard, atcher service.”

“Tom Savage.”

Cal extended a hand and Tom shook it. Both had firm grips.

“Wherever mankind extends his footprint,” Cal said, “a horse’s hoof is soon to follow. A horse can cover 150 kilometers in a day. There’s plenty of naturally growin’ food for them around here. Water, too. You can hook one up to a plow if there’s no bots to farm with. It can carry a wagon loaded down with stuff. It’s just about the most useful thing for colonists ever, if you ask me. They’ll do until the bots get here. Then folks can buy those instead. Until then, I sell ’em and rent ’em.”

“How much do you want for one?”

“Rentin’s cheapest. Like I say, who knows when the mechanized stuff will get here? If somethin’ comes down on the next sky train, well, you can just

turn your horse back in to me. No skin off my back, and you come out ahead.”

Gwen, by this time, had moved over to the corral fence. A couple of horses walked up to meet her, hoping for sugar cubes or some other kind of treat. She rubbed their noses, then turned and locked eyes with Tom behind Cal’s back, shaking her head.

“I think I’ll go ahead and buy one. Like you said, who knows when modern technology will make it out here? Could be a while. I’ll take my chances.”

Cal looked slightly disappointed, but he pivoted in his approach.

“Got a good one over here I’ll let you have for 150 credits.”

Gwen rolled her eyes at Tom, still petting the horses.

“Well you know, I can almost get a homestead for that price.”

“Ha! Okay, one twenty-five. It’s your own horse, though. No rental fees. All the tack comes with it.”

Gwen shook her thumb upside down.

“What’s the best you can do? I’m sure I’ll be using your services more in the future. Maybe buying more horses. I hope to be here for a good long while.”

“One hundred credits.”

Gwen held all ten fingers up, then lowered one.

“I’ll give you 90.”

Cal’s shoulders slumped.

“Fine. That’s the goin’ rate, anyway. It’ll be a gelding, though. Can’t have you making your own, y’know. Not at that price.”

“A gelding’s fine,” Tom said.

He did not, in fact, know exactly what a gelding was. But he took a guess, based on what Cal said about reproduction.

“Bring Bessie, too, Cal,” Gwen called out as the man wandered back to the stables.

He waved at her, acknowledging the request.

“And hurry! I’m avoiding Mal Dalmont again.”

At this, Cal broke into a jog, much to Tom’s amusement.

“I guess nobody really cares much for ol’ Mal.”

“That’s the truth. What are the coordinates for your place? I’ll guide you out there.”

He pulled out the holosheet and twirled it around so she could see it.

“That’s right up against the desert, you know.”

“I know.”

“It’s probably the worst plot you could find to farm. Half of it’s no good.”

He shrugged and smiled at her.

She gave him a sharp look. Understanding blossomed in her eyes.

“You’re not going to actually farm out there, are you?”

“Let’s just say I may try and harvest some other things besides plants.”

She stared at him, as if trying to read his mind, or at least figure him out.

Cal walked up, leading two brown and white American quarter horses by the reins. He handed one off to Gwen and one to Tom before opening the gate.

“You ever ridden a horse before, Mr. Savage?”

“Nope.”

Cal chuckled and pointed at one of the stirrups.

“Always mount on the horse’s left. That’s a rule that can never, ever be broken. No matter what.”

Gwen rolled her eyes again as she climbed up on Bessie. But Tom noticed she indeed mounted on Bessie's left.

He stuck his right foot in the stirrup.

"No, use your other leg."

Tom pulled it out and placed his left foot in the stirrup. Pushing up, he swung his right leg over the saddle and settled down in it.

Gwen headed out.

She called over her shoulder, "Follow me."

Tom sat in the saddle, watching her walk away on Bessie.

"You, ah, squeeze with your heels to make him go."

"Oh, okay. What's his name?"

"Lucas. He's pretty gentle. Hey, Gwen! Teach your friend how to ride!"

She waved, already leaving him behind.

"Let's go, Lucas."

Tom squeezed the sides of the horse with his ankles, and they started out.

Cajun Cal watched them go, smiling.

"That boy is as green as a Granny Smith apple."

Chuckling, he made his way back inside the house.

1.12

A couple kilometers outside of town, Gwen turned to look at Tom. She had not spoken since they left. Lucas took it upon himself to catch up with her and Bessie, deciding it would be better to walk beside the other horse. Tom didn't know what he was doing, so he did not complain and let Lucas do what he wanted.

Gwen raised an eyebrow, watching him. He held both reins in one hand, the other hand on a hip. He still wore the backpack, stretching down to the horse's back.

"You need to go with the flow. Firm your legs up and let your butt go up and down along with his pace."

"That's sounds kind of risqué."

"Shut up. Your legs should hug the horse lightly, but not too tight. You want to flow with the motions or else you are really going to be saddle sore in the morning. Your place is about 20 klicks out, so we've got a ways to go."

"So, uh, how long will that take to get there?"

"If we let the horses walk the whole way? About three hours. Maybe less."

"I see. Already I'm regretting the lack of technology out here. Or at least, transportation."

“We can trot for a few clicks before the road runs out. I don’t recommend trotting over open ground, though. But we can go a little a faster here. Are you ready?”

“Um . . . I guess?”

She smiled and squeezed her heels. Bessie broke into a trot, pulling ahead.

Tom did not have to signal Lucas to start trotting. The gelding decided to keep up with the mare on his own.

Tom felt his center of gravity shift with the increase in speed, and he fought to recover it.

The saddle slammed into his butt repeatedly. He quickly shifted weight to his feet in the stirrups, and sat up straighter, trying to match the motion of Lucas’s stride. When they caught up, Lucas slowed down, trotting to the right and slightly behind Bessie and Gwen.

She looked over her shoulder and smiled at him, hair blowing back in the wind like blonde flames.

“You’re doing great!”

He smiled back, but he did not feel comfortable at all.

They saw more people now, out in the fields. The first group included an entire family. A man, his wife and three children were out picking some kind of plant growing in rows. They all carried baskets. Another horse waited on the side of the road by the field, hooked up to a flat wagon with several more baskets already loaded up.

Gwen waved at them. The children waved back enthusiastically, the adults less so.

Tom was afraid to let go of the reins. He gripped both in two hands, knuckles white. They passed the field quickly before he could figure out what crop the family harvested.

Farmlands dominated the landscape for the next half hour. Tom saw what he took to be wheat, or some equivalent. Other plots had pictures of what

was planted on little signs near the road. Potatoes looked to be a common crop. He remembered Ms. Ferguson bought several kilos of potatoes.

Farther out of town, they came across an orchard. He could not tell if they were apple trees, pecan trees, or something else. But obviously they produced something edible. The settlement grew sustenance crops only, he decided. Not cash crops. Not yet.

The road grew steadily less traveled, and eventually morphed into more of a path. Tom figured the number of wagons and carts using it were greatly reduced this far out. Finally, the path narrowed to a simple trail.

Gwen pulled gently back on her reins, slowing Bessie to a walk. Lucas followed suit without any directions from Tom.

“From here on out, we’re going to have to go more carefully.”

She reached into a back pocket and pulled out a thin sliver of plastic. A map of the area popped up in a holo hovering over her hand.

“Eventually there will be no path at all, especially when we get to all those unclaimed sites where yours is. But the surveyors left space for a road. So, we’ll try not to trespass anywhere, even on the open lots.”

“Don’t you have an implant?”

She looked up from the map, frowning.

“Why? There’s no AI here. Well, other than the provisional one the government uses for record keeping. But nothing like PLAIR or StarCen. Where are you from, anyway?”

He shrugged and looked away.

“I’ve been all over.”

She snorted, suppressing laughter.

“Yeah, that’s not gonna fly. If you’re going to lie, you just need to come out with it. ‘Don’t hesitate when you prevaricate.’ That’s one of the first rules cops learn when interrogating suspects.”

“That’s cute,” he said, looking back at her. “Did you just make that up?”

“Quit dodging the question.”

“Where do *you* come from?”

“I’m a Republican. Born and raised on Diego. And I don’t care if you’re from the League. That was not my war, okay? That was my parents’ war.”

“What are your parents like? Did they actually fight in the war?”

“Hey . . .” She snapped her fingers at him, making the ears on both horses twitch. “We’re talking about you, here.”

He sighed and decided to level with her. His mother had warned him against putting his trust in strangers too quickly. But he could at least tell Gwen part of the truth.

“I wasn’t involved in the war either, of course. Born right at the end of it. I’m from Lute, originally. I’m a citizen of the Planetary Alliance, although I came here from Petra Roe.”

“Oh. So you’re a pirate?”

He grimaced.

“No. Not everybody in the Planetary Alliance is a pirate.”

“Yeah, but you’re from Lute. I thought everybody from Lute was a pirate.”

“That’s a stereotype. That’s painting with way too broad of a brush.”

“No, seriously. Your whole economy is based on piracy, although granted there’s not as much nowadays as there was during the war.”

He sighed, fighting down a wave of irritation.

“Look, during the war Lutian ships operated under privateering papers. Not piracy. All the ships taken, all the goods plundered from the League, were done so legally under the rules of engagement.”

She shrugged, an unyielding glint flashing in her eyes.

“That sounds like something a pirate would say.”

Tom decided to drop it. First, he did not want to ruin this budding friendship. She was the only person he really knew on the whole planet besides Montaigne.

Second, he couldn't help but feel she was enjoying this. There was a challenge in the expression on her face. If he reacted negatively, she would probably enjoy it even more. The best thing to do would be to keep his mouth shut.

Five years ago, he thought . . . heck, one or two years ago, he might have exploded and got into a long drawn out argument with her, dang the consequences. But he had worked long and hard on controlling his temper and his tongue since then.

He turned his eyes back to the path ahead, and sealed his lips.

1.13

Hours later, they crested a slight rise. There before them, the land swept away in a scenic vista. A stream ran across a verdant field. The green rolled down like a carpet, slowly giving way to browner soil. In the distance, half a klick away, the brown took over. The horizon looked dirty yellow, darker than the ever-present haze in the sky above.

Gwen consulted her map then waved a hand at the scenery.

“There. That’s the homestead you claimed. Half of it’s useless. For crops, anyway. Want to tell me what you’re really here for, now?”

He looked at her and smiled, recalling the pirate argument. Or rather, her attempt to start one.

“Nope. Thank you for showing the way and leading me here. I’m sure you can get back to the village before nightfall. I appreciate it, very much.”

Her eyes narrowed, and that challenging look came back over her face.

“What are you going to do out here? There’s nowhere to stay. You can’t live out in the open.”

He smiled at her, not saying a word. Her eyes drifted to the backpack, and realization dawned on her face.

“You’ve got a tent, don’t you? Are you seriously going to pitch a tent and try to live out here? This isn’t some campground in a park somewhere, Tom. We’ll likely be the first humans to ever set foot on that land after we cross the stream.”

““We?”” he said, smiling.

“I’m not leaving you out here by yourself. You’ll get killed. No, I’ll stick around a few days. Maybe you’ll make it, if someone is with you who knows what she’s doing.”

Tom turned to admire the landscape again. Then he gave her the side eye.

Malcolm Dalmont is back there, too. That would be another good reason to stay away from Little York for now.

“Alright. You can help me set things up.”

As the horses slowly picked their way down the slope to the stream below, he thought back to his mother’s advice about not trusting people too quickly.

And by “people,” she meant women. His mother thought Tom would be vulnerable to the wiles of women, and had warned him to be cautious.

But at some point, he figured he would need to trust Gwen. He had not expected to have an audience when he first set things up on his homestead, though.

Soon they came to the little river, and Gwen urged Bessie to cross it after the horses drank their fill. This part of the stream was about five or six meters wide. The water came up to Bessie’s belly out in the middle.

After a moment’s pause, Lucas crossed over as well, following the females. Tom lifted his feet out of the stirrups to keep them from getting wet.

On the other side, Gwen dismounted. She pulled the bit out of Bessie’s mouth, dropping the halter and reins on the ground. Then she loosened the smart straps holding the saddle on, and the blanket beneath it.

When Tom dismounted, she repeated the procedure, showing him how to do it. The two horses munched on the lush green grass while she rubbed them

down with a large brush retrieved from her saddlebag.

They wandered off, grazing.

“What do we do when we need them to come back?”

“Bessie comes when I whistle.”

“Like a dog?”

“Sort of. She’s trained. I’m sure Lucas will follow her. Now, let’s see you put up your tent. Whatcha got?”

Tom shrugged out of the backpack, glad to finally shed the weight.

“Is this a good place? What happens when the river floods?”

“That’s a mountain stream, mostly snow melt from those mountains over there.”

She pointed at the higher elevations off to their left, to the west. Gwen pulled out her pocket map again.

“According to the surveys, this is about as wide as it gets. It’ll get faster in the spring with snow melt, but not flood, at least not around here. I wouldn’t get too far away, as this will be our only source of water until you dig a well. Plus it’ll be good to throw garbage and sewage in.”

“Our? Our only source of water?”

“Don’t get any ideas, Malcolm. I’m just helping you get settled.”

“Ouch. Don’t call me Malcolm. That really is an insult.”

“I know, right? Let’s go. Get that tent out.”

Tom began unzipping the backpack and rummaging around inside.

“I don’t actually have a tent on me.”

“*What?* Are you crazy? What are you going to do, build a log cabin? You can’t just sleep out in the open. It’s not safe. For one thing, sand dragons have been known to roam on the green patches, especially this close to the desert. And you do not want to tackle with a marked owl, either.”

Tom pulled out a small transceiver and set it up on the ground, a gray sphere about the size of a softball. He made sure the power pack remained intact, then he tugged on a telescopic antenna. It sprouted up and out like a metal flower.

“What is that?”

“This . . . allows me to send a signal up in orbit.”

He turned the unit on, flicking a manual switch. When a green LED lit up, he pressed a button on the sphere.

Gwen looked up in the sky with an expression of extreme skepticism.

“What’s in orbit?”

“Oh . . . a little something waiting for my signal. Call it a tent, of sorts.”

He pointed up and to the right, into the eastern sky. She turned and watched alongside him. A sudden burst of light sliced through the dirty yellow haze, growing brighter by the second.

1.14

The light in the sky grew brighter, finally bursting through the haze. As it streaked closer to their position, a dark point in front of the light appeared.

Moments later, a roar hit them as sound finally caught up with the light. The orbiter decelerated rapidly, and in the last hundred meters revealed its true nature: a capsule the size of a bus, with one small standard drive at the rear sticking out like a cone.

It slowed to a virtual crawl as it approached the field. The horses cantered off, deciding to vacate the premises altogether.

Ten meters from the transmitter, the capsule stopped. Four short legs popped out, and it settled down on the ground, landing smoothly.

“What . . . is that?”

“My supplies. Well, most of them.”

“You left your supplies in orbit?”

She gave him a wide-eyed look.

“Yeah. I couldn’t carry this much around. It was easier to leave it until I needed it, you know? There’s nothing up there to disturb it.”

“Who *are* you?”

He grinned at her, pleased he had finally cracked her shell.

“I’m Tom.”

An iris door on the side of the capsule dilated when he approached.

He stepped inside, saying, “I’ve got everything I need in here.”

Tom popped his head out and looked at her.

“At least, everything I thought I’d need. I can get more stuff sent this way if I have to.”

“But how . . . This must have cost a fortune.”

“Yeah it wasn’t cheap. I’ve got some backers . . . uh, family. You know. Anyway, they provided some seed money for my . . . farming operation.”

She crossed her arms and narrowed her eyes. Tom gave her a grin again and disappeared inside the capsule.

He came back out dragging a crate, grunting.

“I didn’t pack this well,” he said when he pulled it onto the grass. “I should have put the bot up front.”

“The bot? Nobody has a bot out here. How much money did your family front you?”

He chuckled.

“Oh, it’s a used one. It’s older than I am.”

The look on her face revealed that she thought even used bots were extraordinarily expensive, especially for someone so young.

He reappeared in the doorway, waving at something inside.

“Come on out and introduce yourself.”

Metallic footsteps sounded, and a huge gunmetal gray bot hunched down to crawl through the circular opening. Its feet sunk into the ground when it

straightened up outside the door.

Gwen gaped at the thing. Its “face” was a tall blank rectangle, the angles rounded to help prevent damage from explosions.

“That . . . is a Republican battle bot!”

“Yup.” He grinned at it proudly. “He’s an old one. Wartime surplus. I think he actually fought in the war. His name is Timmy.”

“Timmy?”

She gave Tom a deadpan stare that spoke volumes.

“That is a machine of death and destruction. You call him Timmy?”

“Yeah. See, here’s the thing. I was Tommy when I was little, when I first got him. He’s Timmy. Like I-Tommy. He was my robotic counterpart. And playmate.”

“You had a killer robot as a playmate.”

“He’s never killed anybody with me. Well, except for a couple of guys who tried to . . . Okay, he’s only killed bad people. Let’s put it that way.”

Gwen shook her head, quickly reassessing him on the fly.

“What else do you have in there?”

Tom held up a finger, smiling.

“A tent . . . of sorts.”

He went into the capsule again, and this time he came out with a one-third cubic meter box. Placing it on the ground, he opened the lid.

A series of small metallic forms merged together, rising from the box. They formed an open square facing him, perched atop a pedestal.

“What is that?”

“Its commercial name is MicaBot. ‘Micro Construction and Assembly.’ Inside this box, and others in the orbiter capsule, there are thousands of

microbots that will construct . . . almost anything. Including a house, which is what I need right now.”

“How much did *that* cost?”

The astounded look, Tom noticed, had returned to her face.

“I, uh . . . I don’t know. I’m sort of field testing the final prototype in real world conditions.”

He cleared his throat, ignoring her incredulous stare. He turned back to the box.

“MicaBot, you have a house plan previously uploaded in your memory. Build it using local resources. Put it right about . . . there.”

He pointed to a nice, flat open space close to the stream, but not too close. The box made shuffling noises as the microbots repositioned themselves inside.

A checkmark appeared in the square. Then it dissolved and dark black dots flowed out of the box like water, marching away like a stream of ants.

They split into separate groups of hundreds, thousands of tiny bots. One cluster immediately sank into the ground near where Tom pointed. Soil churned up, and work on the house’s foundation trench began immediately.

Other clusters separated and sped away, crawling very quickly over the ground. The groups of little bots paused occasionally to form something resembling a periscope. These popped up, looked around at the environment for a moment, then dissolved back into the mass before they continued moving.

They flowed over the ground like living water, black spots moving with a purpose.

One cluster headed north, straight for the desert. Another approached the stream and plopped into the water, quickly crossing over. On the other side, they reformed and sped toward some trees in the distance.

A third cluster fanned out, then the bots burrowed down into the ground and remained there, leaving no trace.

In the silence that followed, save for the sound of churning soil nearby, Gwen glanced at Tom again.

“So . . . that thing . . . those things, are just going to build you a house?”

“Yeah. It’ll probably take a while,” Tom said, scratching his head. “I think this is the first time they’ve been used for a big project. I know it’s the first time they’ve been used on a virgin planet before. So, uh, I don’t know exactly how long it will take. But, no worries. I do have a real tent, in case I needed it.”

He went back inside and came out a rolled-up bundle of waterproof cloth.

“Well, at least you can truly rough it, if only for a little bit.”

He sensed a note of satisfaction in her voice.

“Yeah. Hey, Timmy? Put this tent up for me, please. Over there, out of the way of the house.”

The robot came over and took the bundle, then went to work.

Tom stood back, his arms crossed as he watched the microbots and the battle bot working. He sneaked another glance at Gwen.

He could not quite figure out why she seemed so upset.

1.15

As the sun set in the west, both Tom and Gwen grew weary. They sat on portable chairs Tom had retrieved from the orbiter, at a folding table also from the capsule. The X99 battle bot stood silently nearby, facing the stream.

“It’s about time to eat,” Gwen said. “We don’t need to start a fire. I’ve got plenty of jerky for both of us. Asa’s Farm makes the best, and you can just eat it wherever. It’s great for long rides and camping out. Old Man Asa says it’s based on his grandparents’ recipe.”

She stood up, ready to go over to her saddlebags and retrieve some jerky before Tom stopped her.

“No worries. I’ve got supper covered.”

Tom walked back inside the capsule and came out with two containers the size of thick rectangular dinner plates. He held them out to Gwen.

“You want pot roast? Or poshbird?”

“You have poshbird? I haven’t had that in forever! We don’t get it out here.”

“Take it. I grew up on the stuff.”

“Oh, that’s right. You’re from Lute.”

She took the container from him, a little too quickly, and ripped the top off. It instantly heated, showing a partitioned plate with meat, mashed potatoes, peas and carrots, all in different sections. She pried out the included polyresin fork and knife, sat down at the table and dug in.

“Mmm, poshbird! This is awesome,” she said between bites. “You could sell these for a small fortune back at League City. Or even around here. I bet you could have traded a crate of these for that horse with Cal.”

Tom smiled and shrugged, ripping the top off of his tray. He sat down at the table to join her.

“On the other hand, I’ve got plenty to eat before I need to worry about food. That’s worth something.”

Gwen muttered inaudibly, her mouth full of poshbird. Her eyes were closed and she had a look of pure bliss on her face.

Tom watched her eat, partly in amusement and partly because he enjoyed looking at her. Even without makeup, and despite being outside all day, she looked incredibly attractive.

Soon the sun went down behind the mountains, and the sky quickly grew dark. The stars came out, but could not pierce the haze. Light from one of two small moons glowed dimly in the night sky, their only source of nocturnal illumination.

Tom finished the last bit of food on his plate and shoved it back.

“Well, I’m gonna turn in. There’s a cot in the capsule you can use. Just push the button above the door to open or close it. There’s a portable toilet in there, too.”

“There’s a cot in the capsule? What’s that, three places to live in for you?”

He shrugged and said, “The tent was always an ‘if needed’ thing. And the house isn’t built yet.”

They both glanced over at the site the MicaBots had prepared for the house. They left a square hole in the ground, but nothing else had happened lately.

“What are they waiting on?”

Tom shrugged again.

“Foundation materials, if I had to guess. I’ve never used them before. Like I said, they’re kind of new.”

Gwen glanced back at him and her eyes narrowed in the dim light.

“Who sent you? Why are you here?”

“Me? I came by myself. I’m just a farmer, looking to start a homestead.”

She held his gaze for a long moment before finally guffawing.

“Yeah, right. You’re, what? Nineteen? Twenty?”

“How old are you?”

“Eighteen. And quit answering questions with a question. It’s annoying.”

He smiled and headed for the tent.

“Good night, Gwen. Timmy, stand guard. Don’t let anything get close.”

The battle bot silently saluted him.

Gwen stayed at the table a while longer, looking up at the hazy light of the moon. She shivered a bit in the cool air and moved to the capsule. Sure enough, a physical button just smaller than her palm opened the circular door when she pressed it.

Lights came on inside, and she found a little bed in the far corner behind several more crates. One small room was walled off from the rest of the space, with the letters “WC” painted on the door.

“He has everything. Literally everything. The sheets even smell fresh.”

She sat down on the bed, thinking, when a light flashed on outside. The bot’s voice shouted out, cutting through the night.

“HALT! DO NOT MOVE OR I WILL SHOOT!”

Alarmed, Gwen reached for her own gun, pulling it out of the holster on her hip. She hurried out the door.

Timmy stood several steps away, a bright light shining from the top of his “face.”

Somehow, he had a rifle in his hands. Gwen wondered where it came from, but she had no time to think as Tom came out of the tent without a shirt on, also carrying a pistol.

In the light, a young red-haired woman wearing jodhpurs held her hands up, face filled with terror as she tried to shield her eyes with her fingers.

“Haley? What are you doing here?”

“Do you know this girl?”

“Yes, this is my friend, Haley Stonecipher.”

“Okay. Timmy, turn the light off. She’s a friend.”

The bot’s illumination clicked off, casting the entire area in darkness once more. It seemed worse to the three young people, especially with no starlight.

“Maybe turn one on that’s not so bright, Timmy? And not in anyone’s face.”

The light clicked back on, on top of Timmy’s head, but far less intense. The bot angled it down at the ground.

The young red-haired woman breathed a sigh of relief and let out a long string of profanity.

“What is that thing? What’s going on, Gwen?”

“Haley, it’s fine. What are you doing here?”

“What are *you* doing here? And who is he?”

Gwen took in Tom for the first time. Her eyes bulged at the sight of his muscular bare chest. He obviously spent time working out.

“It’s not like that! We’re sleeping in separate places. He’s in the tent and I’m over there.”

She swung back to point at the capsule. But Haley did not look in that direction.

“What is *that*?”

Haley pointed. In the darkness, moving steadily toward the light, a series of large cubes seemed to slide along the ground.

Tom said, “Oh, hey! Looks like they found a source of stone to quarry out in the desert. That’s a lot closer than the mountains.”

He left the girls, intent on checking out the MicaBots’ work. Haley stared at Gwen, her mouth wide open.

“He’s uh . . . he’s building a house.”

“*What?*”

“Yeah. This is his homestead. He claimed it. And, uh . . . he’s putting up a house here. Right over there.”

“Gwen Wilder . . . what have you gotten yourself into?”

1.16

The two girls argued as they walked through the dark toward the construction site.

Gwen stopped suddenly.

“I’m fine! And I can’t see anything. Timmy! Bring the light over here!”

The battle bot stayed in the same location, motionless.

Tom’s voice called out in the darkness.

“Yeah, Timmy. Come over here and keep the light shining for us.”

The bot stomped by, wordlessly passing the two girls, and stopped near the homesite, flooding the area with light.

“What is he doing with a Republican battle bot?” Haley said in a loud whisper.

“How do you know it’s a Republican battle bot? You don’t know that. It could be a League battle bot.”

“I’ve seen the documentaries! I know what Republican bots look like! They’re better than the League ones. And what are you doing out here in the middle of nowhere with a complete stranger?”

“He’s not a . . . this is his homestead!”

“He’s just a boy! He can’t homestead anything!”

“He’s older than we are!”

“Hey, Gwen!”

Both girls stopped arguing, turning toward the light. Tom stood in front of the construction trench, his arms crossed against the chill in the air.

“Come take a look at this!”

The girls glanced at one another, then walked over to stand by Tom.

Cubes of stone moved along the ground, coming in from the desert, carried by clusters of the little black bots.

“They’re like . . . ants,” Gwen said, her argument with the other girl temporarily forgotten.

They watched as one of the stones seemed to lower itself down into the ditch. Another quickly followed, settling in beside it. More came in a steady stream from the desert, filling in the trench.

Haley said, “What . . . what is that? What are they doing?”

“Those are foundation stones,” Tom said. “The bots found a source to quarry in the desert. They cut the stone down to the desired size and brought them here. I suspect it’s mostly sand and loamy soil in this area, so they wanted something solid to build on.”

“Build?”

Gwen said, “Haley, how did you find me? You didn’t follow me and wait until nightfall, did you?”

“What? No . . . I put a tracker in your saddlebag.”

“You *what*?”

Tom took a closer look at Haley, now that things had settled down.

He said, “Your, uh, ears look funny.”

“They’ve been enhanced. I’m a ranger.”

Gwen snorted and looked away, rolling her eyes.

“I am! All the Fae are.”

“Wait, ‘Fae?’” Tom said. “Oh, I get it. Phaethon. Duh.”

“There, Gwen. You see?”

“Ignore him. He literally got off the spaceship a few days ago and arrived in Little York this morning.”

“But he gets it.”

Haley turned to Tom.

“Gwen was one of us, too. Until she left.”

Tom looked at Gwen again.

“Your ears look normal. They’re not pointy like hers.”

“I had them changed back. I hate enhanced hearing, and I don’t belong with the Fae anymore, okay Haley? Just drop it.”

Haley grabbed her arm.

“I don’t believe that, Gwen.”

Tom looked down at the way she held Gwen, and noted Haley’s body language.

He said, “Oh, is it some kind of sapphic group or something?”

Haley tilted her head at him and said, “I don’t know what that means.”

“I told you to ignore him. Let me go, Haley. I am not going back with you. I’m not going back to the Fae, and I’m not going back to Little York right now. Malcolm Dalmont is looking for a wife, and it’s not going to be me. You of all people should understand that. ‘Down with the patriarchy’ and all that stuff you always preach.”

“I’m not saying you have to go back to him! But you think you can just hide out here forever? You’re going to have to return to civilization eventually, Gwendolyn. Even if you don’t come back to the Fae. But if you

do come back, you can just stay out in the field with us. There's freedom out there. There are no Malcolm Dalmonts looking for wives. We can do what we want."

"You can sleep in a tent and eat beef jerky."

"Exactly! That's what I'm talking about, Gwen. Freedom!"

The sound of another thousand-kilo cubic stone thudding into the ground made everyone look over at the growing foundation.

"Alright, ladies. It's been fun, but I'm going to sleep now. If you don't mind . . . please keep it down."

"Goodnight, Tom."

"Yeah. Goodnight, Tom."

The girls watched him as he walked back to the tent, his arms crossed to ward off the cool night air. His muscles rippled as he pulled open the flap and stepped inside.

"Who is that, Gwen? What's he doing out here? This is a terrible place to homestead. It's right next to the desert."

"I don't know, Haley. But I know I'm not going anywhere right now."

They heard a loud *thump* as another stone fell into place.

"I'm staying right here."

1.17

Morning light brightened the fields, and birds tweeted merrily from trees and bushes.

Tom stepped out of the tent and stretched, wearing a fresh set of clothes. To his surprise, Gwen was already awake. She sat at the folding table eating breakfast.

“Oh, this is great,” she said as he approached to sit down with her. “I found these in a crate marked ‘Food.’ Look, poshbird eggs, poshbird sausages, and your choice of orange juice or apple juice. This would be five credits back in the city, easily.”

Tom smiled and ripped the top off the other plate she left out for him.

“You weren’t kidding about being saddle sore. I can feel it this morning. Your friend leave?”

“Yeah. The Fae are good friends to have. She promised they’d try and keep an eye on the Dalmonts, and maybe let us know if they hear anything about Malcolm heading out here to look for me.”

“Twenty clicks isn’t very far away, is it?”

She shook her head, and offered the two juice boxes to him, one in either hand.

He read, “Apple Juice Equivalent. Product of Juventas,” on one, and, “Orange Juice Equivalent. Product of Pearl,” on the other. He chose the apple juice.

They ate in silence. When they finished, Tom slid the plates into a garbage bag.

“What are you going to do with your trash?”

“I’ll incinerate it after a while.”

She nodded, no longer surprised at his resourcefulness.

“The house is coming along well.”

His eyes lit up and he smiled. Together they stood up and walked to the homesite. Tom felt eager to see the overnight progress.

Where the evening before a square trench waited, now the framework for a house had been erected. They watched as planks of wood floated along the ground, each carried by hundreds of tiny bots. One board made its way inside the rising structure and rose into place as they watched. A nail crawled up its side and hovered for a moment before a black mass of bots pressed it into the wood.

“That’s remarkable,” Gwen said. “Where did they get the lumber? And the nails?”

“This is really advanced technology,” Tom said with a note of pride creeping into his voice. “The bots set up little production centers for whatever is needed in different parts of the house. So, the stonecutters found a source of stone somewhere, and quarried it into shape. The woodcutters found appropriate trees, chopped them down and dried them out. In a kiln, maybe? Then they sawmilled them into standard lumber and transported them here. They all work together, but in separate groups at the same time. Like you said, it’s like they’re ants, kind of. An army of electronic ants that work together to build things.”

“It’s got to be new, because I’ve never heard of this before. And how much did that cost? Never mind, you said you don’t know.”

“I don’t know. MicaBots have not been put on the market yet. But whatever they go for, it’s worth every credit. It’s very handy to have on a virgin world full of resources. You couldn’t do this as easily on an older planet. At least, not somewhere that’s settled. All the land and resources have been claimed on older planets.”

“You could use it there to tear down houses, maybe. Urban renewal projects.”

Tom raised an eyebrow.

“You know, that’s actually a good idea. I’m going to have to tell the team about that. I could also see this being used in times of war, if there’s another one. You could send a bunch of MicaBots to take down an enemy’s fortifications or something.”

“Wait. You have a team? Tell me about this team.”

He smiled, caught off guard.

“Tell me about the Fae. How many are there? Are they all women?”

“You can’t deflect all my questions like that.”

“But seriously. Do you all just go camping out in the wilderness or something?”

“It’s more than that. The Fae are unofficial law enforcement officers who keep track of things outside the settlements. People get lost. Sand dragons roam in places they aren’t supposed to. Sometimes outlaws make a run for it out here, and the Fae help bring them back.”

“So, they’re like guardians.”

“More like park rangers and game wardens, all rolled into one. For the whole planet. There are other ranger groups on the other two continents. Most are on Glagia. That one has the most people.”

She smiled, showing teeth.

“Now it’s your turn. Tell me all about your team.”

He smiled back.

“First, I want to explore my land. Let’s call the horses in, we can talk while we ride.”

Gwen grumbled about “deflections and distractions,” but she stood on her chair and whistled a low note, then a high one, similar to a boatswain’s call in ancient times.

Moments later the rumble of hooves rolled in as both horses raced for home.

She pulled out a brush from her saddlebags and quickly rubbed Bessie down, then repeated the procedure on Lucas. Tom helped her throw the blankets and saddles on, then tighten everything down with smart straps.

He mounted, and grimaced.

“You weren’t kidding about the ride yesterday.”

“Quit complaining. You’ll get used to it.”

After ordering Timmy to guard the construction site, they set out on horseback, heading north. Half a kilometer later, they abruptly entered the desert.

A thin line of brownish yellow on the horizon revealed the awesome size and bleak majesty of the Skoni Desert.

1.18

The land gradually turned less green and more brown the further north they rode. At the half-kilometer mark through his property, Tom could tell where the desert truly started. A few more meters in, and all the grass disappeared, leaving nothing but light brown sand and dark brown rocks.

“What is that?” Gwen said, pointing to their right.

A hole big enough to drive a truck through slanted down into the ground, with high mounds of dirt piled on three sides. In front of the hole, a dark gray box about the size of a coffin stood off to the left. A small smokestack on one end puffed out foul clouds of fumes. Tiny slivers of metal marched out from a little door on the other end, seeming to float along the ground as they headed back toward the encampment.

Tom said, “Aha! I think we found the MicaBots’ mine. Or maybe it’s the quarry. Or both. Anyway, it looks like they’re extracting metal ore at the moment. That’s a miniature smelter they’ve set up. They’re using it to make nails for the house. See? It only takes one of them to carry a nail back.”

“You would get in trouble for air pollution on an inner planet with that smelter. You can tell your team that.”

He nodded, agreeing.

“Fortunately, planetary atmospheres are very robust. They can take multiple volcanic eruptions and forest fires and easily recycle the air. This little bit of smoke is literally like a drop in the ocean.”

They watched the steady march of nails for a while.

Gwen took a deep breath.

“So. You gonna tell me what this is all about, or what?”

He nodded, observing the landscape. The desert stretched north as far as the eye could see, all the way to the horizon. Already the morning sun shined bright through the yellow haze, warming the air. Before long, temperatures would become uncomfortably hot.

“I’m, uh . . . out here to do experiments. Ones that are kinda dangerous to perform back home, or anywhere else there’s civilization.”

Her eyes narrowed.

“How dangerous?”

“Well, not that dangerous. I mean, it won’t kill anybody if things go wrong. If, that is, I take the proper precautions. And if the experiments take place away from settlements. Can’t kill anybody if there are no people around.”

“You mean, like out here in the desert?”

He nodded.

“The Skoni is perfect in a lot of ways. There’s very little in the way of ecology to disrupt if something goes boom.”

“What kind of experiments are we talking about? And what kind of experiments might go boom?”

He looked into her dark blue eyes then, trying to judge how much he should reveal.

Tom scratched the back of his neck, thinking for a moment.

“Well, you’re going to find out soon enough anyway, if you stick around. I am going to try and harvest tiny chunks of Phaethon’s sun.”

He pointed at the bright spot in the haze rising higher in the morning sky.

Her eyes narrowed again, then grew wide.

“*What?* Are you crazy? What are you doing, porting in solar torpedoes or something? That’s how you destroy *ships*, and you want to bring them down here?”

He put up a hand and made downward gestures.

“I’m not pulling in anywhere near the size of a solar torpedo chunk. Not at first, anyway. I’m going to start off by pulling in a thimble size or smaller.”

“Thimble size?”

“Yeah. Smaller, actually. Maybe a thumbtack. A teeny-tiny chunk. It will be contained. But . . . if it gets out of hand, it might leave a small crater in the desert. Obviously, I don’t plan to be nearby if and when that happens. I’ll monitor things from a distance.”

She stared at him for a moment, then looked away.

“Okay. You are crazy. This proves it. Now, tell me about this team you said you had. The one supporting your harebrained idea.”

“It’s not crazy. Think about what we could do if we can harness parts of the sun. They could be an energy source. They could be used for all kinds of experiments. They could provide a cheap source of extreme heat that’s useful in a variety of circumstances.”

“They’ll just explode the second you port them down here. Solar matter is compressed by enormous gravity. That’s why they expand when a solar torpedo ports a chunk of them next to a spaceship. They blow up, taking everything out along with it. You’re just going to make a bunch of little bombs explode out here in the desert.”

He chuckled.

“I see somebody’s a skeptic.”

“Who’s on your team? Who is financing this . . . this foolishness?”

He took a deep breath and debated about revealing additional information. Her skepticism did not generate much confidence in him to encourage telling her more.

On the other hand . . .

In for a penny, in for a pound, he thought.

“My parents are footing the bill for most of it.”

“Your *parents*? Are they rich or something?”

“Yeah, you could say that. They outfitted me with everything. They paid my passage to Phaethon, and bought all this equipment. They set up the orbital transfer. Others on the team are part of a company they’re invested in. But I’m the one out here doing all the work. Dad thought it would be good to strike out on my own and make something of myself. But I do have a lot of support back home. So, that’s my team.”

They watched as a little door opened on the back of the mini-smelter again, and another stream of nails seemed to crawl away, carried off by tiny bots.

“I’m also field-testing a bunch of new equipment for our companies. I have to submit reports back home, detailing how everything works.”

“Oh, wow. Reports. Your life is so hard.”

He raised an eyebrow at her.

“You seem upset. I noticed that last night, too.”

“Upset? No, not at all. Some rich kid comes in and builds a house in a day. Real immigrants come out here and have to work for years to make it. They still haven’t made it. Look how many are stuck in tenements back in League City. You just set up shop and *voila*. ‘I have a house. I have money. I’m here to experiment.’”

He shifted in his saddle, uncomfortable now.

“The house isn’t finished yet,” he said softly.

“What was that?”

“Look, maybe it was a mistake to reveal so much to you. I’m not normally that open with people. I don’t like to talk about myself much.”

She glanced at him again, and her expression softened.

“No, I did ask. And I was pestering you. I’m sorry. I’m just jealous, that’s all. I made it out here on my own. My parents didn’t give me much of anything, just a hug goodbye, some money and a couple items to take with me. I’m trying to find myself on the galaxy’s newest colonized planet, and as soon as I got here, every single man is either trying to marry me or get me in bed.”

She glanced at him again, and he gave her a sympathetic look.

She continued.

“It’s like, people revert to their base nature out here. We’ve regressed to the 19th century or something, and all because it’s a fresh planet with little in the way of infrastructure. But technology doesn’t make you civilized. At least, that’s what I used to think. Now I’m not so sure. And then *you* come along . . . and you’re having a far easier time of it. You just show up and make yourself at home like it’s no big deal. You’ve got a robot to do things for you. You’ve got . . . little robots to build houses and stuff.”

“Well, hey. You’re welcome to stick around as long as you like. It’ll be a three-bedroom house when it’s finished. I picked out the floor plan myself, before I left. There’s plenty of room for you. Nobody going’s to try to harass you. I’ll be good. Promise.”

“Thanks.”

They watched the nails march away for a while longer, leaving a trail in the sand. Soon, other little bots brought a chunk of ore up out of the mineshaft the size of a pillow. A lid swung open on top of the mini-smelter. The tiny bots worked together and lifted the rock up and over the side. It fell in and the lid closed.

They heard a roar in the box, and a thick black cloud of noxious gas billowed out of the smokestack. A crowd of tiny black dots on the ground gathered around as they waited for more nails to be produced.

Tom and Gwen left the mini-smelter, wandering deeper into the desert to find the northern border of his homestead.

Soon, nothing but sand surrounded them. The wind blew here, lifting very fine particles up in the air, making the horizon hazy. Eventually, Tom knew, some of them would drift up high in the atmosphere, contributing to the near-permanent haze on this planet.

“This is it,” Gwen said.

She pulled Bessie to a stop, and held her map out, looking at the holo.

“Beyond this point, there are no more homesteading sites. They only made sections with green space available for settlement. You have one of the least desirable squares. Good choice, I guess, considering what you plan on doing.”

“If there’s nobody next to me out here, no neighbors, that’s all for the better.”

“There’s nobody out here. Except for sand dragons.”

As if hearing her, 30 meters away the ground shifted suddenly.

Something dark and brown rose up from the desert floor, obscured by billowing clouds of fine brown dust.

It roared.

1.19

The sand dragon stood at its full three-meter height on thick back legs, spreading out what looked like giant manta ray wings, blocking the hazy light.

Front legs reached up and out, with claws like black curved knives reaching for its prey.

Dark brown, its hide looked thick and tough. The creature's head seemed like a cross between a Tyrannosaurus rex and an alligator.

A long mouth snarled open, filled with rows of white pointy teeth and a narrow pointy tongue. Yellow lizard eyes glared at the two intruders in its domain.

Without warning it darted for Tom, moving remarkably fast for such a large creature. Lucas reared up in fright on his hind legs, throwing the young man from the saddle.

Tom twisted and landed on his arm, rolling with the fall. Lucas turned and galloped away as the monster bore down on them.

Tom felt a dark shadow blocking the dim sunlight. Huge brown wings billowed up as the creature prepared to pounce.

Thoop! Thoop!

Gwen drew her sidearm and shot the thing point blank, pulling the reins tight as Bessie shuffled backward, trying to put more distance between them and the lizard.

Gwen tried to hold her still and shot again.

Tom saw the thick hide absorb the bolt. It must have hurt, because the lizard swung its head toward Gwen and snarled. But the gun didn't seem to affect the giant beast very much.

It dropped back down on all fours with a solid *thump*, folding its wings in and seeming to shrink in size.

The lizard let out a low, guttural growl, and stalked toward the horse and rider. Death glared from its eyes.

Gwen shot twice more, striking its back with two more hits. But the thick brown hide over the beast's "wings" proved even more resistant to energy bolts.

It kept growling, moving closer, legs crouched and ready to spring.

Bessie had enough. The horse pivoted and bolted away in terror.

Gwen turned and caught Tom's eye, a look of horror and regret on her face.

He stood up and pulled out his own gun just as the creature turned back his way. Now Tom looked like much smaller prey without a horse, and the sand dragon wasted no time coming at him.

When the monster charged, Tom held his gun with both hands and aimed carefully. The sand dragon came at him in a straight line, not trying to dodge anything. Tom waited a second as it drew closer. He thumbed the switch over to full auto before pulling the trigger.

A flurry of bolts slammed into the lizard's face, making it stumble and fall. Its front legs collapsed, head plowing into the ground. It left a furrow in the sand as its momentum suddenly stopped.

Tom ceased firing as Gwen regained control of her horse. She tried to guide Bessie back to him, but the animal was having none of it, refusing to move any closer to the giant lizard.

He kept the gun trained on the sand dragon's neck, wondering if it was dead or not.

In answer to his unspoken question, the beast's head pulled up out of the ground, rivulets of powdered soil sliding off.

Black marks scored its face, and one eye looked burned out. But the lizard let out a snort, puffing dust from its nostrils like some smoke-breathing legend of old.

The other eye shifted around wildly, looking dazed and confused.

It turned and stumbled away, heading back out into the desert. In minutes, it disappeared in the hazy brown distance, the mottled brown hide providing perfect camouflage.

Tom held his gun out a while longer, on high alert. But he heard nothing, saw nothing. The desert stretched out as before, growing featureless in the distance. Nothing moved other than the shifting sand.

After another moment of watching, he holstered his gun and walked back toward Bessie and Gwen. The mare still looked spooked, rolling her eyes, ears twitching in all directions as if trying to detect the sound of any more threats.

She pranced backward at Tom's approach. Gwen made soothing noises and patted the side of Bessie's neck, trying to calm the animal down.

"The heck was that thing? Even a full blast to the face didn't kill it. I gave it everything I had."

"That is a Skoni sand dragon," Gwen said. "They suck. They're another reason nobody goes near the desert. What's really bad is when they get hungry and wander into the green spaces looking for food. No one will raise livestock within kilometers around here, because those things will just feast on them. But there's not much that roams deep into the desert for them to eat, other than some rats and a few snakes, so they come out here every now and then looking for a meal."

"Great. Just what I need. Blaster-proof monsters."

“The Fae have a few heavy rifles that will take them down. That’s one of the things we . . . they patrol for. Now do you see why I’m telling you it’s crazy to stay out here and try to homestead this close to the desert?”

He gave her a lopsided smile.

“Hey, if those things help keep people away, all the better.”

She rolled her eyes and said, “Come on. Climb up here and we’ll go find Lucas. I don’t think he’s gone very far.”

Gwen took her foot out of the stirrup so he could use it, and extended her hand. Awkwardly, he climbed on, sitting bareback behind her saddle.

“Hold on tight. But no groping, or you can walk home.”

He chuckled, and placed his hands over her hips. Gently, she encouraged Bessie to turn back south, where green things grew.

The horse seemed very happy to head in the opposite direction of the desert and its scary monsters.

They rode in silence for a while until Tom broke it.

“I think I’ll call it ‘Big Ugly.’ Because it was big. And ugly.”

“You’d better hope you don’t see it again,” Gwen said. “I’ve heard sand dragons can hold grudges. They’re kind of intelligent. And they have long memories. It’s one of the things that makes them dangerous.”

“Great.”

1.20

Tom and Gwen retrieved Lucas and headed for home. The house looked fully framed, and the little bots were busily tacking up interior walls. They dismounted and stopped to watch.

Huge rolls of paper moved out of the capsule seemingly by themselves, if one did not look too closely and see all the little machines manipulating things. The rolls seemed to spread themselves out on the floor of what was to become the living room. A steady stream of black dots added some sort of white cream mixture on top, patting it down flat and symmetrical.

“What’s with the paper?” Gwen said.

“That’s a time-saving measure. Technically, the bots could make their own paper, but this will be faster for interior drywalls. All they have to do is mix up plaster from local sources and paste it over the paper. That’s for the walls. I’ve also got windows for the house, an HVAC system, and the interior and exterior doors all packed away in the capsule, so they don’t have to make any of those things. They will have to fashion countertops, crown molding, and stuff like that. Wiring and pipes will take the longest to source or make, but I didn’t have unlimited space. I’ll make do with flashlights for now. And I can live without running water and AC for a while.”

Gwen watched, fascinated, as the tiny bots diligently worked. The paper rolls were spread out and held flat while the plaster was spread out on top. The resulting drywall boards were rectangular and large, and left to dry. The first ones already looked ready to go.

“What are they making the plaster out of?”

“Gypsum, mostly. There are some other additives mixed in. But they obviously found a good local source for gypsum. I doubt it was in that mine we saw, they probably dug another one. They’re very good at surveying a substrate for minerals and metals. Or, so I’ve been told.”

Two lines of bots stood on top of one another, lifting a panel vertically. Working in tandem with others on the floor, they moved it into position against bare studs. Others crawled up the panel with nails and quickly shoved them into place using force. The procedure repeated with the next panel.

Before their eyes, the interior walls quickly took shape.

“Wow. How will they cut pieces to fit? There’s got to be some odd spots somewhere along the wall.”

Tom shook his head and said, “I don’t think they’ll cut much. If a piece needs to be smaller, they’ll just make a smaller piece. The programming on these things is pretty awesome. LuteNet helped design the system.”

Gwen continued to watch the little mechanical ants work while Tom went into the capsule in search of food. He retrieved a container marked “Poshbird” for her, while grabbing one labeled “Pork Chops” for himself.

He brought them out to the folding table.

“Lunch is ready!”

The X99 stood in the same position he had left it, staring toward the stream with its tall, flat sensor face.

“Hi, Timmy. Anything happen while we were gone?”

“Negative.”

“Good. Listen, there’s some local fauna to be aware of. In particular, there’s something called a ‘sand dragon’ we encountered. It’s about the size of an elephant when it’s all spread out. Maybe a short horse when its folded up. You won’t see it in the sand easily if it’s not moving. The hide is the same colors as the desert. It’s very tough to kill. Shoot it in the face with a heavy rifle if it threatens us, okay? They’re a direct threat to humans and livestock.”

“Understood.”

Gwen walked up.

“You telling Timmy about the sand dragons?”

“Yeah. I think we’ll take him on our next trip out to the desert after lunch, just in case. Although, I kinda hate to leave this place unguarded.”

Gwen shrugged.

“I can stay here if you want. I’m a big girl, I can take care of myself. And your stuff.”

“Okay, that might work. Sure you don’t want to watch the experiments?”

“And see you go boom? No, I’m good. I stayed up late talking with Haley, anyway. I think an afternoon nap is in my future.”

“How can you guard the place while taking a nap?”

“I’m a light sleeper.”

He smiled but did not belabor the point.

After they ate, Tom dug through the armory onboard the capsule, which consisted of three crates packed with weapons. He pulled out a heavy rifle and handed it over to the battle bot, swapping out his standard one for it.

“Now, remember, Timmy. Don’t hesitate to blow the mean sand dragon’s head off if it rushes me.”

“Affirmative.”

“That’s a lot of weapons.”

Gwen poked her head inside the capsule and admired the open crates full of guns.

“Don’t get any ideas about running off and selling those, then starting a new life with Malcolm or anything.”

She laughed.

He kept a straight face and said, “And don’t think about running off with your girlfriends, either.”

She stopped laughing and looked him in the eyes to see if he was serious.

“Do you really think I’m that way?”

He smiled back at her.

“Nah. But, I don’t know you very well. Yet.”

“I’ll stick around,” she said, leaning back out the doorway and crossing her arms. “But meanwhile don’t go getting yourself killed or something.”

He smiled again, and went to the back of the capsule, on the opposite side of the bed and WC. Here, he pulled out a very heavy crate, dragging it to the door.

“Timmy, sling the gun and carry this thing for me.”

The bot followed orders, hanging the rifle over a shoulder by its strap. Then it reached into the doorway and effortlessly picked up the heavy crate with two hands.

They said their goodbyes after that. Gwen went back to watching the house construction. Tom retrieved Lucas and mounted. He squeezed his heels and urged the horse back north.

The bot followed, heavy metal footsteps clunking on the ground.

Lucas did not like the bot trailing them. He flattened his ears and snorted.

Tom sighed, and asked Timmy to follow from a distance. The bot obeyed and Lucas stopped acting so nervous.

They passed the mine, the mini-smelter still belching smoke. When they reached the point where grass started giving way to sand, Lucas balked. He only went forward after considerable encouragement by Tom.

At last they returned to the northernmost portion of Tom's land. He dismounted and had to grab the reins as the horse tried to bolt again.

"Just hold on, Lucas. Nothing's going to happen. And if Big Ugly shows up again, we have a battle bot with us this time."

He secured the reins to a large rock and patted the horse's neck for a while, speaking soft words of encouragement like Gwen had taught him. Eventually, Lucas settled down and seemed resigned to his fate.

Horse faces were not very expressive, but Tom sensed a look of sullenness on Lucas's.

He sighed again and turned to the bot, standing motionless near the heavy crate.

"Alright, Timmy. Let's bring it over here, away from Lucas, and set things up. It's time to start harvesting star chunks."

1.21

Tom had Timmy lift a heavy contraption out of the crate, a thick metal black box the size of an armchair. He found a nice flat spot with a solid five square meters of smooth stone. Nothing surrounded the rock top but sand, and it made for a natural platform.

“This is the perfect place, Timmy. It’s like a big table or something. Set it down in the middle.”

The bot placed the unit in the center, then stepped back and out of the way.

Tom dug in his backpack and pulled out another coin-sized donut disk. He looked around the landscape for a good place to stash it. Finally, he walked back to the rock he had tethered Lucas to, a narrow thing standing about half a meter high, like an open air stalagmite.

He pushed on it, but it didn’t budge.

“Timmy, get over here.”

The bot approached, making Lucas nervous. He pranced back, tugging on his reins.

“Aw, heck. I guess this wasn’t a good idea.”

Tom comforted the horse again.

When Lucas calmed down, he said, “Push this stone up a bit so I can put something underneath it, Timmy.”

With one hand, the bot tilted the stone Lucas’s reins were tied to. The horse did not like it, but with Tom rubbing his neck and softly encouraging him, he tolerated it.

Tom smiled and bent down, tossing the little disk under the rock.

“You can set it back, now. Gently.”

Timmy pulled back his arm and the stone resumed its previous position.

“That should do it. Now let’s put a power pack in that thing and get it going.”

Tom returned to the backpack and pulled out a relatively large power cube, about the size of his head. He grunted with the weight, taking it over to the machine. Setting it down, he searched the sides of the large box until he found a door marked “Power.”

Opening it, he found a cavity the perfect size for the power pack. He grunted again, lifting, and slid it inside. Two cables snicked into place on top of the power pack, and the cube started humming. LEDs on top flickered to life.

“Alright! Now we’re cooking with gas, Timmy.”

He smiled at the bot.

“You know, I have no idea what that expression means. It’s something my Dad would say every now and then. I guess it’s something they used to do back in the day on Old Earth or something.”

Turning back to the big black cube, he checked the lights on top.

“Okay. Time to activate Lisa.”

Tom turned inward, focusing on his implant. He swiped through various documents in his memory space until he found the one he wanted.

“Oh, yeah. Here we go.”

He followed instructions, activating a mental switch through his implant, then opening another panel on the side of the cube and flicking three manual toggles to the “on” position.

Back at camp, inside the space capsule, another crate started humming as something electronic inside came to life.

Gwen, dozing on the bunk bed, never noticed.

One half astronomical unit away, four equally spaced modules, orbiting the sun and carrying advanced sensors, also came alive. The only indicators were green LEDs lighting up inside them. No ships in the area were aware of the modules, each about the size of a large yacht and crammed full of electronics. They were fully cloaked in stealth technology, and unlikely to be discovered anytime soon.

Invisible lines of communication linked the four modules in orbit with the smaller one in the capsule. More lines spread out, and the black box on the stone table linked up with this new network.

All the orbiting sensors checked in with one another, performing a series of tests. Then they checked back with the terrestrial units and performed more tests.

Finally, they all turned their electronic attention to Phaethon’s sun. The sensors began scanning the giant fiery orb.

Tom heard a voice in his inner ear over the implant, coming from the box back in the capsule.

“Hello, Thomas. Are we ready to harvest solar particles?”

“Hi, Lootie! Yes, we are.”

“As you are aware, I am not LuteNet. I am Lisa, ‘Lutian-initiated Solar Array.’ I am a self-contained portable Multi-faceted Comprehension Model artificial intelligence system. My capabilities are far less robust than LuteNet’s. I primarily exist for the purpose of harvesting solar matter in this system.”

“Yeah. I’m aware. Sorry, Lisa. It’s just that you have the same voice as LuteNet.”

Tom stood, making sure all the doors on the black box were shut. He smiled, looking up at the bright spot in the haze above, marking the sun’s place in the sky.

“Are we ready to harvest solar particles, Thomas?” Lisa asked again.

Tom drew a breath, about to respond, when the sound of snarling several meters out in the desert interrupted his thoughts.

He squinted through the grit in the air.

Four shapes surged up from the sand, sending powdery dust billowing up and obscuring everything.

When the clouds drifted away, four sand dragons stared at him with front claws bared, their angry yellow eyes glowing across the distance.

“Aw, man! Not yet, Lisa. Not yet.”

The sand dragons folded their wings in and dropped back down to all fours.

They charged at Tom, rushing as one.

1.22

The X99 battle bot known as “Timmy” was technically obsolete. Three newer generations came after the X99, although their enhanced wartime capability was not truly needed these days.

After the “Gold War” as some historians were now calling it, the Republic maintained a healthy military budget, even if their Navy was never quite so large as it had been during those war years.

Even if the League remained a shell of its former self. Even if the current League leadership spent considerable effort at maintaining strong diplomatic relations with the Republic, offering copious assurances that war was not a remote option for resolving any potential disagreements between their governments in the future.

Even so . . . Republican military planners liked the X99 and its successors. Parliament quietly funded the Verberger Bots and Automatons Corporation with a healthy R&D budget, and the Republican Navy happily supplemented their Marine Corps with thousands of highly advanced battle bots.

The newest production model was the X102. It and its predecessors, as well as its successor which was not yet off the drawing board, were all designed on the original chassis of the X99. They were essentially upgrades of this model, fine-tuned and enhanced over time.

But, just as countries purchasing the F-51 Mustang fighter aircraft after World War II from the Americans discovered in the 1950s, 60s and 70s . . . older military equipment still proved useful.

The X99s remained just as lethal as they were during the war.

Timmy unstrapped the heavy rifle off his shoulder, and in one smooth motion aimed at the head of the closest sand dragon.

A heavy bolt pulverized the creature's skull, despite the thick shell-like skin. It stumbled and went down, plowing a furrow in the sand.

The X99 aimed for the second lizard and blew its head off, too. Then the third's.

But by this time, the fourth one made a giant leap and reached out for the rock table with both sets of front claws, its mouth wide open and ready to tear into the human crouched there.

Tom had just enough time to jump backward. But the claws stretched out and nicked his shirt, slicing into his chest and splattering blood.

Tom landed on his back and slid off the rock. In that split second looking up, he realized the sand dragon attacking him only had one good eye and a blackened, scorched face.

“Big Ugly!”

The beast rose up on its powerful rear legs and raised its front claws again, spreading its “wings” wide . . . and Timmy no longer had a clear shot of its face.

So the bot shot into the creature's side instead.

Three heavy bolts slammed into Big Ugly's right wing. It roared in agony, taking its eye off Tom, looking for the source of pain.

Tom scrambled backward, trying to put space between himself and the sand dragon.

Big Ugly's one good eye whipped back like a snake. The lizard jumped again, claws extended.

He landed on Tom's chest and swiped down on his exposed neck.

Timmy switched to full auto and let loose on the lizard, firing nonstop as he ran forward, his aim unswerving.

ThuppaThuppaThuppa!

Blast after blast slammed into the lizard's thick hide. It stumbled over, shielding itself with a wing. But the bot would not stop shooting.

In frustration, Big Ugly tried to roar.

It came out as a squawk.

The lizard turned and raced back out into the safety of the desert, limping and angry.

Timmy ran up to Tom, lying on his back spread-eagled. Blood soaked into the sand.

The bot reached down and ripped Tom's shirt off in one quick swipe. He wrapped it around the neck wounds.

Gently, Timmy picked Tom up. The bot's sensor face twisted, homing in on the encampment a kilometer away. Then it pivoted to Lucas. The horse stared back at the bot with wide eyes and snorted.

Timmy stood and carried Tom to the horse, which tried to shy away from him. He gently placed Tom over the saddle, then took out some smart straps from the saddlebags and lashed him into place.

Finally, Timmy untied the reins off the rock. Lucas immediately tried to bolt, but Timmy held the reins tight. Then he took off running for the camp.

The horse trotted behind him, unable to escape the bot's grip. Timmy steadily picked up speed.

They galloped for home.

1.23

Gwen woke up to the sound of pounding hoofbeats. She stuck her head out the entrance of the capsule as Timmy raced in leading Lucas. Then she noticed Tom strapped down over the saddle.

Then she saw the blood.

“Omigosh! Tom!”

She ran out, but before she could reach him Timmy unstrapped Tom and carried him into the capsule. The bot laid him down on the bed, then located a crate nearby with a large red cross on the lid.

Gwen rushed back to the door. She saw Tom breathing. Timmy moved about the narrow space, crowding the area, so she decided not to enter.

The battle bot returned to the bed with a handful of fast patches and a pneumatic syringe. Timmy ripped open the packages and placed dressings on all the wounds. Then he injected Tom with nanobots.

“What happened?”

The bot ignored her. She was not in Timmy’s programmed area of concern, nor would she be unless she attacked Tom or he told the bot to take orders from her. Since neither of those things had occurred, Timmy simply stepped around her and went to find Lucas to remove the saddle.

The horse bolted as he approached, but in a burst of speed the bot zipped ahead and grabbed the reins, pulling Lucas to a reluctant halt. Then Timmy removed the tack, quickly and efficiently.

Lucas snorted and wandered off while Timmy brought the saddle and other items back into camp.

Gwen ducked back inside the capsule. She stared down at Tom, concern in her eyes. Gently, she wiped off a fleck of blood from his face.

His eyes fluttered open.

“Hey.”

“Tom! What happened out there? Your robot won’t tell me anything.”

“Big Ugly and three of his friends found me.”

“Who? What?”

“Big Ugly, that sand dragon that attacked us. It came out there with three others. It was waiting for me, I think. Ambush . . . its friends are dead, but Big Ugly’s still out there.”

Gwen grimaced.

She said, “They’re like that. I mean, we don’t know a whole lot about them, but they show signs of higher intelligence than typical wildlife. They’re not sentient, but they’re like very smart dogs or something.”

“Sons of bitches.”

Tom laughed, then coughed in pain.

“Take it easy. The nanobots need time to work.”

“These are . . . these are high quality. Military grade. Should work . . . faster . . .”

He slipped back into sleep.

Gwen straightened, and decided to leave him be. She walked out of the capsule.

“HALT!”

She hurried toward the river. Timmy held his heavy rifle up, pointing it at Haley. The ranger held her hands up, frowning at the robot.

“No! Stop, Timmy. Haley is a friend.”

But the bot kept his gun on the red-haired woman.

“He’s not programmed to accept my commands, Haley. Come on, let’s get out of the campsite. Walk with me back to the river.”

The two turned and walked off. Timmy kept aiming his rifle at Haley as she risked a glance backward.

“Thanks for saving me from the tin man. How did that house get there? Did I miss it in the dark? I’m pretty sure it wasn’t there last night. Just the foundation . . . ?”

“Oh, the construction bots are super fast.”

“Really? But where’d he get the other material? Did he fit all the lumber into that cargo pod?”

Gwen stopped and looked back at the house, ignoring the battle bot still aiming his gun at Haley. By this time, the MicaBots had a stone façade half finished, covering the front of the home.

“Um, that’s all procured from existing resources, somehow. The stones for the outside are like the foundation stones. They’re quarried out in the desert, I think.”

“And the mortar?”

Gwen shrugged and said, “I don’t know how they’re making it. But yeah, it’s all sourced locally.”

The two women stared at the house a while longer.

As they watched, a thin-cut length of rock seemed to levitate itself up the outer wall and slide into place.

Haley gaped.

“The ant bots are doing that?”

“They’re maybe three times the size of an ant? A big ant. And they’re all coordinated so they multi-task really well. I’d bring you over to watch, but I’m pretty sure Timmy isn’t going to let you get any closer.”

“Seriously? Who names a killer robot ‘Timmy?’”

Gwen sighed and said, “He did. Apparently Timmy is a childhood friend.”

“Who buys their kid a battle bot? Who can afford one of those thing? They aren’t cheap.”

Gwen shrugged and waved at the house. They watched another stone move into place. From a distance, it looked like magic.

“The same people who can afford this, I guess. Anyway, some sand dragons attacked him a while ago. He’s in the capsule recovering.”

“Sand dragons? As in, plural?”

“Yes. One attacked us earlier. He shot it and scared it away. Apparently, it came back with some friends. He said Timmy killed three of them but this one mauled him.”

“So, are the corpses still out there? League City is paying a bounty on sand dragons. This could set the Fae up for months!”

Gwen hummed and said, “On the one hand, they’re rightfully his, and they’re on his land. On the other hand, now that you know about it, I can’t really stop you if you want to go get them. You’re going to have a hard time dragging the wagon across the river, though.”

Haley tapped her chin for a moment.

“We could float the corpses across the river, and then load them onto the wagon. How far away did you say they are?”

“We were at the other side of his place, so about one kilometer from here.”

“Okay. Do you think he’ll mind?”

Gwen shrugged and said, “It’s easier to ask forgiveness than permission.”

1.24

Late in the afternoon, Tom woke up. His eyes fluttered, adjusting to the light, then he sat up in the bunk.

He placed a hand on his bare chest, then his neck, feeling faint ghost scratches. But when he looked down and peeled off the fast patches, he found no trace of the attack.

“Mil-spec quality. No scars, nothing. Worth every credit.”

Smiling, he crawled out of bed, then opened a suitcase and pulled out another shirt. He grabbed a meal marked “Ham, Cheese, and Pasta,” and headed out the door.

Ripping off the top, he looked around for Gwen and did not find her. But he could see the horses grazing nearby, so he figured she was close.

Glancing at the house, he saw the stone façade was complete. He heard a noise behind him, and moved out of the way as a box marked “Lights” marched out of the capsule, carried by an army of small bots. It headed for the front door.

“Great. Maybe we can spend the night in there.”

Tom looked around for his battle bot. He walked a ways from the capsule and finally located Timmy on the other side of the house, holding the heavy

rifle diagonally across his chest.

“What’s going on, big guy? Thanks for saving me. Again. How many times does that make, now?”

He slapped the bot’s shoulder and looked out into the field to see what Timmy stared at.

There, four horses struggled with the dead body of a sand dragon, dragging it across the grass. They were well outside Timmy’s area of concern, but his sensor face tracked them anyway.

“Looks like a bunch of cowgirls are stealing one of my dead lizards.”

Gwen stepped out the back door of the house.

“Oh, that’s the Fae, my old group. You were, uh, out of it, so I kinda gave them permission to take the sand dragons. I hope that’s okay! I mean, there’s a bounty on them from the courthouse, and they should get enough credits to feed everyone in the group for the rest of the year.”

His eyebrows furrowed in thought, but he did not immediately object. Gwen watched him closely, a hint of anxiety on her face.

He said, “How much is the bounty?”

“Five hundred credits each. So yeah, they’ll get 1,500 credits for those three. Even after dragging them out of the desert all this way.”

“What do they do with the bodies? The officials in League City, I mean.”

“Nothing. They don’t even come out here to retrieve them. The girls will show the pictures over the Ferguson’s comlink to the courthouse in League City, and officials there will wire the money into our account. Their account.”

He raised an eyebrow at her.

She blushed and said, “Sorry. I rode with the Fae for a long time. They are one of the few groups a young woman can be safe in while exploring this world. I still think of them as family.”

One of the horse and riders not pulling the dead lizard broke away from the others and rode up to them.

The X99 aimed his rifle.

“Put it down, Timmy. She’s not a threat unless she does something threatening.”

The bot pulled the gun back to his chest, holding it diagonally as Haley drew up on the horse.

“Hey! You all better?”

Tom nodded.

“Did Gwen tell you about the lizards? I hope you don’t mind if we take them.”

Tom felt something bump against his foot. He looked and saw a gold coin tapping his boot. Reaching down, he picked it up and stuck it in a pocket. The tiny ant-like bot that had been carrying it saluted him, then turned and headed back north toward the desert.

“No, that’s fine. Gwen told me how much they’re worth, and the bounty you’ll get for them.”

Haley shifted her eyes to Gwen’s for a second, then back to his.

“Yeah, they’re worth a lot. We *really* thank you for this. We’re all so grateful. It’ll basically feed us for the rest of the year. We can buy food in bulk from the farms around here. So, thanks again.”

Tom waved it off.

He said, “I do have one question, though. What are you going to do with the bodies?”

“Oh. Well, there’s a type of carrion. We call it a buzzard-roc. It’s a big black-feathered carcass eater. We’ll drop these off in a field near Little York . . . we’ll need to be near the public house to use the comlink with League City. Then we’ll just leave them out there and a bunch of buzzard-rocs will pick them clean.”

“I take it they won’t eat the hide? It’s extremely tough, I noticed.”

“No. Usually the hide just stays out there, and I don’t know . . . rots or something, eventually.”

“Will they be left somewhere I can retrieve the hides later, if I want to bring them back here?”

“Sure,” Haley said, frowning with confusion and curiosity. “We’ll leave them on public land. Nobody cares. But why would you want them?”

“I just want to study them. I’m new here. Just checking things out.”

“Well, sure. Give it a couple days for the meat to be picked off, and you can retrieve them. Gwen knows the spot we’ll use.”

Gwen nodded. All three watched as the horses splashed into the stream, still dragging the carcass. They climbed out on the other side and tugged it free from the water.

Waiting for them, more women on horseback surrounded a large flatbed wagon. Two carcasses were already strapped down. As they watched, all but two of the horses were disconnected from the third body. The women still riding urged their steeds up the wagon’s ramp.

The animals strained, pulling the dead lizard up the incline. The other girls pushed it from behind, on foot. Soon, smart straps bound the third one onto the wagon along with the first two.

“Well, I’d better be going.”

Haley glanced back at the house.

“Nice place. You two have fun homesteading together.”

Gwen blushed again, a much deeper shade of red this time.

“I’m just staying here to avoid homesteading with Mal Dalmont. There’s nothing going on.”

“Sure, sure.”

Haley's laughter drifted back to them as she trotted away. At the crossing, she urged her horse into the water. It splashed over to the other side where she joined the others.

Gwen wiped away a stray hair from her face, and tried to control her blush. She sneaked a peek up at Tom, who watched the women as they hitched more horses to the wagon.

Six steeds strained and pulled before finally moving the heavily laden flatbed. Women who had loaned their horses to the team sat up on the trailer while the others surrounded it, riding beside and behind it.

Slowly, they trundled back toward the path that eventually led to Little York. Tom counted 23 horses and riders in all.

"Thanks for letting them have the carcasses," Gwen said. "I figured you didn't need them . . ."

"Yeah, I'm obviously rich, because I've got all this stuff."

"I wasn't going to say that. What did you pick up? Did the ants find a coin or something?"

He pulled it out of his pocket and handed the flat, featureless disk to her, smiling.

"That is one troy ounce of pure gold."

"*What?*"

"Evidently the MicaBots hit a vein of gold somewhere. I guess the smelter has switched over to making these now that nails aren't needed anymore. If I remember right, it's supposed to continue making useful stuff until it's shut down. I'd say this is pretty useful."

"How much . . . how much is this worth?"

"Currently? About 50 credits. My old man insists that the official exchange rate is kept artificially low by both the League and the Republic. He says it should be more like 160 credits per ounce. Mom, on the other hand, says if they reset the rate that high, there'd be massive inflation. Chaos. General

unrest. The whole purpose of staying on the gold standard is to avoid big spikes in inflation.”

He smiled at her.

“So goes family conversations in my house. Yeah, we’re a lot of fun.”

Gwen stared at the blank coin in her hand, feeling its heft.

“How many of these will it make? Your smelter?”

Tom shrugged.

“I dunno. Depends on how much ore is fed into it. I guess we’ll find out overnight. Anyway, yeah. Let them claim the bounty on those three sand dragons. But if I ever get my hands on Big Ugly, they can’t have that carcass.”

She looked at him, genuinely curious, the coin temporarily forgotten.

“Why not?”

“I’m going to mount that one on the wall in my new living room.”

1.25

Tom and Gwen stepped in the front door and stood in a brand new house as haze-filtered light from a setting sun signaled an approaching dusk.

The front door faced south, toward the stream. They walked into a spacious living room, complete with scenic windows and a large fireplace made from the same dark gray stone sheathing the exterior.

Wood beams lined the ceiling high above, and a curving staircase spiraled up to the lofty second level behind the chimney. The floor consisted of smooth planks covering the stone foundation.

“Oh, wow. Those little bots did all this?”

“Yeah. It looks mostly finished, I guess.”

From the kitchen area, behind the living room, a single ant bot carried an old-fashioned metal key. The key seemed to glide along the floor until it bumped into Tom’s boot. He reached down and picked it up.

The little bot saluted, pivoted, and headed back to the kitchen.

“Thank you. I’m sure I’ll be upgrading the locks soon to something electronic.”

He glanced at Gwen and added, “This is the indication the house is finished. All but the plumbing and wiring. I’ll need to wait until I can get appropriate

pipes for a well, or figure out how to transfer water from the river or something. Running water and electricity are the last things on the list.”

“Even so, this is amazing!” Gwen said, taking it all in. “Give me a tour!”

They walked toward the back of the house and found the kitchen, pantry, washroom, a downstairs bedroom, bathroom, and a dining nook.

“Can they make furniture?”

“Sure. But again, that’ll take time. We’ll just have Timmy move the folding table and chairs in here for now.”

Upstairs, they found two more bedrooms and a shared bathroom. Faucets and nozzles had been installed, but no pipes.

“Maybe you could hire a plumber from League City to come out here and finish things up. Maybe an electrician, too.”

“Yeah. I wonder how much they’d charge for a three-day sky train trip, lugging in all their tools and supplies. Heck, I paid 1200 credits for a one-way ticket. Get a plumber, an electrician, their helpers, ferry them here and back . . . Pretty soon, we’re talking serious money.”

She laughed as they circled back downstairs.

“Yeah, that’s going to be rough on you, I’m sure.”

“All we need is terrestrial teleportation.”

She laughed even harder.

He just smiled.

A gold coin seemed to crawl through the open front door. It headed straight for them, and Gwen stopped laughing.

Tom reached down and plucked the blank circlet from the little robot.

“Thank you.”

It seemed to wave at him with one of its “arms.” Then it turned and marched back out the door.

“You’re getting free money. I don’t think it’ll be a problem, no matter how much someone charges you to come out here.”

“It’s not really free. The MicaBot system is still experimental, and this is its first big field test. But it cost hundreds of thousands of credits to develop. It would take years of digging up gold to pay for itself.”

Gwen smiled at him, but the expression in her eyes indicated she did not think it would take that long.

They went back outside and had Timmy bring in the chairs and table. Then Tom had the bot move in most of the stuff stored in the capsule.

He said, “Which bedroom do you want?”

“I’ll take the bigger one, of course.”

“Of course. Timmy, put the bed from the capsule in there.”

“Maybe you could get a furniture store in League City to deliver out here. That shouldn’t be too expensive.”

“You are very willing to spend a lot of money, aren’t you?”

“It’s easy. Especially when it’s someone else’s money.”

When Timmy finished, it was time for supper. The sky grew dimmer and the air started to cool.

Gwen opened the pantry where Timmy stored the food trays. She picked out one marked “Ham, Pasta & Pineapple.” Tom chose one marked “Salisbury Steak, Squash Casserole & Peaches.” They sat down and ate while Timmy went back outside to keep an eye on things.

When they finished, Gwen said, “So, I take it you did not get to the sun harvest thing with the sand dragons attacking you.”

Tom frowned and said, “Yeah. I’m still a little sore about that.”

“You mean upset, or . . .?”

“Physically sore. Maybe it’s ghost pains, but I can still feel where Big Ugly slashed me.”

He rubbed his neck and the top of his collarbone with a grimace.

“Oof. I don’t envy you that. Want me to go back with you tomorrow? I can be an extra set of eyes if a wandering horde of sand dragons tries to jump you again.”

“If you want to. I’m glad we can joke about it. Those things have an amazing pain tolerance. The only way Timmy could take them down was by a shot to the head.”

“Told you. Sand dragons are no fun.”

Tom finished the contents of a plain white carton marked “UHT Milk.”

He set it down on the table and said, “You want to watch the sunset on the back porch?”

“Sure! That sounds like a real homesteady kind of thing to do.”

They made their way out the back door to a small but comfortable covered wooden deck.

“I’ll have to program in some lawn furniture. We need a couple of Adirondack chairs and another table out here.”

They both sat down on the porch, taking opposite sides of the door. To the north, a thin hazy yellow-brown line marked where the desert dominated the horizon.

To their left the sun set, a glowing orb obscured by dust particles in the upper atmosphere, sinking below the mountains. At this point in the day, the western sky displayed a variety of colors. Red and orange streaks punctuated the yellow, like water paint on a dusty canvas.

“It’s beautiful,” he said, watching the hazy glow slowly fade. The colors shifted the lower it set, growing darker, richer, fuller.

“So you like it here? Even with all the sand dragons?”

“I’ve got a couple ideas about how to deal with the sand dragons.”

“Oh? Do tell.”

“Ride out with me in the morning,” Tom said with a smile, “and you’ll see.”

1.26

The next morning after breakfast, Tom walked outside to find Timmy standing guard facing the river.

In a pile at Timmy's feet, he found several blank gold coins.

"Oh, nice. It must be a little vein of gold, though. If it was a big one, surely the smelter would be producing bricks or something."

He counted seven total, then tried to remember the time yesterday when the last gold coin had been delivered.

He walked back in the house and found Gwen in the kitchen nook ripping the tops off packets of bacon and eggs.

She said, "Breakfast is served. Whatcha got there?"

"Money. The smelter is producing gold coins at the rate of about one every two hours."

"So, 25 credits an hour. That's pretty good for passive income."

"Yeah. In ten thousand hours, it will have paid a quarter million credits, and still have a long way to go to break even. But hey, it's passive income."

"That's a little over a year if they can produce it nonstop. But don't worry. I bet your little worker bees run out of gold ore long before then."

“Probably. I was just thinking it would be making gold bars if there was a lot of it.”

“How many troy ounces are in a gold bar?”

“Four hundred, in a standard-sized one.”

She gave him a funny look.

“How do you know that?”

He smiled and said, “I know all kinds of interesting facts. Stick with me and you’ll learn lots of useless trivia.”

After they ate, they went back outside and Gwen whistled the horses in. She brushed them down and saddled them up while Tom went to the capsule and found the MicaBot controller, one of the last things still stored there.

She found him waving his hand, going through plans for different structures on the holo floating above the unit.

“Are you going to make something else?”

“Yeah, I thought some stables would be nice. Maybe a corral like Cajun Cal has, with a barn. And also, a bridge over the water would be very useful. That way your friends could cross over with their wagon, if they needed to. And we wouldn’t have to get wet while going to town.”

He made his blueprint selections, and the mass of tiny black bots gathered outside the capsule scattered in different directions. Then he joined Gwen in mounting up.

As they rode off, Tom said, “Follow us, Timmy!”

The bot turned and trailed at a distance as they trotted to the other side of the homestead.

Gwen said, “You feel okay leaving the house unguarded? That’s a change.”

Tom nodded and said, “I think you were right. There’s nobody around, except maybe your girlfriends. I’ll chance it no one rides all the way out here, crosses the river, and noses around the place. Besides, we’ll be back for lunch.”

Soon they came to the smelter and watched as little rocks came up out of the mine and were dumped inside it by the bots.

Tom said, “You’re right about this, too. It must not be a very big vein. But there’s enough gold in there, when it’s melted down, to make some coins.”

“I like hearing you say that.”

“What? Talking about gold coins?”

“No, the part where you keep saying I was right.”

He smiled, but wisely kept his mouth shut as they rode away.

They crossed deeper into the desert and approached the stone table again. The big black cube remained in place, undisturbed.

“So what’s your plan for dealing with sand dragons?” Gwen said.

“Watch this. Hey, Timmy! Run around and scare off Big Ugly and any of his friends!”

The bot zipped around the horses, startling them, blurring out into the desert. A roar went up as three shapes burst out of the sand, wings spread wide. Timmy stopped and began shooting. They shrank back down, using their wings now as shields from the gun. All three retreated, racing off to the north.

“There we go,” Tom said, smiling.

Then he touched his implant and said, “Stay there for now, Timmy. Keep an eye out for Big Ugly and any of his friends.”

Gwen frowned at him.

“You have a comlink with Timmy?”

“Yeah, through Lisa.”

“That must be nice. Not all of us have a portable AI.”

Tom could not think of a good reply for that, so he kept silent as they approached the black box.

“Okay, so what is this thing?”

“This is an SCU. Solar containment unit.”

“The sun just what, pops right in there?”

“Right. A chunk of its core is ported inside.”

“And Lisa has the power to do that?”

“Lisa has four advanced sensors in orbit around the sun, and one back in the module at camp. I mean, home. And of course, there’s one in the SCU.”

“Wow. So you and your company just put those things up there in orbit around the sun, and you didn’t ask anybody’s permission?”

He gave her a lopsided grin.

“Who would we ask?”

“The provisional government, of course. You know, the people in the courthouse back in League City?”

“They don’t have any regulations in place. We checked. We could ask them, but how would something like that be drawn up? There’s no AI here. There’s no alignment with a standard system of government such as the Republic, the League, or even the Lutian Alliance.”

She looked at him.

He looked back at her, still smiling.

Gwen said, “I wish I could say I was surprised. But I’m not sure you can surprise me anymore.”

“Well okay, then. Let’s see if this works.”

He stepped up onto the flat rock and approached the black cube.

Lisa spoke through his implant.

“Are we ready to harvest solar particles, Thomas?”

Tom opened a panel cover on top of the box and flicked a few switches.

The unit began to hum.

“We are ready.”

“What size particle will we start with as our first?”

“Let’s go with a two-cubic-centimeter piece of this sun’s deepest core, Lisa.”

“Very well. I will teleport a two-cubic-centimeter portion of solar material from near the sun’s center to inside this SCU’s containment field. I highly recommend you evacuate the area for safety, especially since we will be starting with the maximum capacity for which this containment unit is designed.”

He looked at Gwen and said, “Lisa says we should back away for safety.”

She nodded and remained mounted on Bessie. Tom left the rock and took Lucas’s reins. They walked about 30 meters away.

“I recommend you go even farther, Thomas. I calculate a 65 percent chance of failure, and you are not outside the safety zone.”

“Sixty-five?”

“What’s that?”

“Lisa thinks there’s a really good possibility something could go wrong.”

“Oh. Well, okay. Let’s back away some more, then.”

Tom nodded and mounted Lucas this time. Together they rode out even farther from the cube.

“Is this far enough, Lisa?”

“Yes. You should be well out of the range of any potential mishap.”

“Good.”

They both turned their horses around to face the black box, now looking much smaller in the distance. Out in the dusty desert, they could not even see Timmy anymore.

“Whenever you’re ready, Lisa.”

“I am teleporting solar matter in three . . . two . . . one . . .”

A sudden flash of bright yellow light blinded them, followed by a huge **BOOM!**

They covered their faces with their arms as the force of the blast swept in, pelting them with dust. The horses whinnied and pranced, turning away from the onslaught.

Somewhere out in the desert, Big Ugly screamed in rage.

When the blast wave finally blew over, they both calmed the animals down, patting their necks. They turned back around, only to see a small mushroom cloud billowing up over where the rock table had been. In its place, a huge crater had formed.

Gwen guffawed at the sight.

“I’d say your containment unit failed.”

1.27

“**S**on! If your AI tells you there’s a 65 percent chance of failure . . . it’s probably going to fail!”

“Yeah, but I didn’t know that by ‘failure,’ she meant the entire thing would blow up.”

“What do you think solar chunks *do*? They’re highly compressed in the sun’s core. When you suddenly take them outside of the core’s gravity, they expand rapidly. Of course they’re going to blow up. Why didn’t you start with the minimum? Something like one gram would have been fine. Then you could work your way up until failure, and you’d have your baseline with a whole lot of experiments before losing the SCU. But no, you had to blow everything up first!”

“Oh, don’t be so hard on him, dear. You’ve never made a mistake?”

It was night time, and Lisa had managed to piggyback on the quantum communications server of an Alliance freighter in orbit, letting Tom call home. He sat on a crate in the module, speaking with life-size holos of his parents back on Lute.

Tom’s father looked irritated, but he made a visible effort to bite his tongue, as if realizing that berating his son would accomplish nothing.

His mother changed the subject.

“Have you made any progress with anything else, dear?”

“The MicaBots work great. They finished the house. Everything is set up except for running water and electricity. I’m not sure how I’ll get that, but I can live without it for now. They were smelting down a few gold coins overnight from a little vein they found in the mine. But today they were busy making a barn, stables and a corral for the horses. They’re taking a while longer making a bridge over the river nearby, but that’s because they decided to quarry out more blocks for both sides. I think they had some trouble getting the foundation stones over to the other side of the water. But, yeah. Things are going good.”

“How much gold did you get?” his father said, his irritation seemingly lost with the discussion of money.

“Did you say horses?” his mother said. “As in, more than one?”

“I’ve got a total of nine troy ounces. And yes, uh, two horses.”

“Oh. So, do you have a roommate or something?”

Tom frowned.

“Yes, Mom. This woman was being bullied back in town, and she’s staying with me for a while until things settle down.”

Both holos of his parents stared at him for a long moment, saying nothing.

Finally, his mother said, “Is she on birth control?”

“Mom!”

“Well, I’m just saying. I’m too young to be a grandmother. And you’re too young to be a father.”

“You really should get married first, Son.”

“You guys! We are not . . . You know what? Never mind. Just send another SCU as soon as you can, okay? And the other stuff we talked about. I will do some more experiments, and I will be more careful this time. I’ll start at the minimum and work my way up. I promise.”

His father said, “Is he trying to get away from us or something? It sounds like he’s strongly hinting he wants to hang up.”

“Yes, dear. He’s avoiding us. Perhaps he wants to get back to *somebody else*.”

His mother turned back to him.

“We’d really like to hear more about your new girlfriend, dear. Maybe we could meet her?”

“I think this connection is going out. It must be bad or something.”

His father laughed.

“Ha! That’s a good one. It would have worked a couple hundred years ago, maybe. But not in the age of quantum communications.”

“No, really. I gotta go, bye. Lisa, cut connection.”

The holos winked out and Tom leaned back against the capsule’s wall, sighing. He ran a hand through his short hair.

“Hi!”

He jumped.

“Gwen! You scared me.”

“Sorry.”

She came in and sat on another crate opposite him. He settled back down, fighting the adrenaline in his system.

“Did you, ah, hear any of that?”

“What, that? Your conversation there? No, no.”

He leaned back against the wall again, sighing in relief.

“I am on birth control, though. Reversible ligation, just so you know. Not that I want to do anything before marriage.”

He cringed, covering his eyes while his face turned dark red.

“I am so sorry. They can be . . . annoying at times.”

She laughed.

“Don’t worry about it. Believe me, if my parents knew I was living out here on a homestead with some guy I just met, in the house he just built? Kilometers from anywhere? They would go ballistic. I’d say that yours handled it pretty well, all things considered.”

“I didn’t even *say* anything about you.”

“No, your mother figured it out with that two horses thing. Women are like that. Intuition.”

They sat together in silence a moment. In the distance, the stream gurgled. Night birds called. Somewhere in the trees, they heard a marked owl hooting.

“So, when’s your new SCU coming in?”

“I dunno. Whenever they get around to sending it. Hopefully it’ll come on a Machro-drive ship.”

“Expensive. Well, if you don’t have anything to do tomorrow, maybe we could head back into town. Hopefully we can avoid Malcolm. I’d like to check my mail at the pub, and we could see how those sand dragon corpses are decomposing, if you’d still like to try and salvage the hides.”

Tom brightened up.

“Okay. That’d be good. I was thinking about buying some seeds and planting a garden. You know, in case we get tired of eating boxed food.”

“You got more poshbird?”

“You’re sitting on a crate of it.”

“Then I won’t get tired of boxed food anytime soon. But sure, buying seeds is a good idea.”

1.28

On the way into town the next morning, they crossed over a new bridge. It spanned the little stream, wide and sturdy. Gwen stopped Bessie right in the middle, at the top of its arc, and admired the view.

“This is nice! We could buy a wagon in town and drive it back here. I don’t think Bessie and Lucas will mind being hitched together.”

Tom waved that off.

“I can build any wagon we want. Well, the MicaBots can.”

“Can they build a hovercar?” Gwen asked, suddenly very interested.

“Maybe? Given enough time and resources, and a proper set of blueprints, they should be able to make most things. Anything made of metal takes longer, of course. I’m not sure it’s really set up to shape large amounts of metal. You saw the smelter. It’s kinda small. Nails are one thing. Sheetmetal? Probably not, at the moment. They would need to make a bigger smelter and forge.”

“Hmm.”

They crossed over and headed in the general direction of the path leading back to town. Timmy followed a ways, his metal feet stomping across the bridge’s planks. Tom decided the bot should stay behind, since he did not

know how long they would be in town. He asked Timmy to expand his patrol perimeter to the other side of the river now that they had an easy way to cross it.

As the pair rode away, the bot stopped and watched them go. Tom turned in the saddle and waved goodbye to him.

They passed by trees to their right as the path progressed, and found the sawmill at last. Here stood a rectangular hut the size of a truck. Next to it, a long building made of clay radiated warmth.

“That’s the kiln,” Tom said. “Dries out the wood faster. The sawmill will take a tree trunk and turn it into planks. Notice all the sawdust around it.”

A thick carpet of yellow-brown particles surrounded the hut, far more vibrant than the sands of the desert or the constant haze in the sky.

“How were they getting the boards across the river? I mean, the bridge is brand new, but . . . they built the house with lumber from this side of the water, right? You don’t have many trees on your place.”

“I’m not sure,” Tom said, pausing to think. “Maybe they floated the boards across.”

As they rode down the path, Tom occasionally tossed a disk to the ground. These were the kind with a hole in the middle. He put one down on the other side of the bridge, another at the sawmill, and continued dropping them at various intervals all the way back to the beginning of the road.

They picked up the pace as the path widened. It turned into a trail, then became a proper road. A few kilometers later, off in a field they saw a farmer riding a plow hitched to a horse. He waved at them, and they both waved back.

Gwen looked over her shoulder but Timmy had long since stopped following.

“Is he okay back there?”

Tom shrugged. Then he touched his implant.

“What’s your status, Timmy? Everything okay?”

He listened for a moment, and nodded.

“Timmy says everything’s fine. Nothing’s going on.”

“Okay.”

She smiled then, and added, “I’ll try not to worry about him.”

“Yeah, there’s nothing to worry about with Timmy.”

“It’s not him, it’s the reaction we’ll get when people find out about him. Nobody around here, and by ‘here’ I mean this entire planet, has a million-credit robot as a sidekick.”

Tom snorted.

“He didn’t cost a million credits.”

She raised her eyebrows, smiling, waiting for him to continue. When he glanced at her and saw the expression on her face, he sighed.

“He was a birthday gift when I turned three. I have no idea how much he cost. But I’m sure it wasn’t a million credits.”

“He was a *birthday gift*? And you were a child? Just how rich is your family?”

“I don’t want to talk about it. Let’s just ride.”

A couple hours later, they approached the first few houses outside Little York. Children ran out to greet them, laughing and running in the road, dogs barking among them. Tom noticed some adults, too, including one man who ran off, disappearing behind the buildings.

They arrived at Cajun Cal’s stables, and Cal came out to greet them with a smile.

“How’s Lucas been treatin’ ya?”

“Lucas is a good horse. I couldn’t have asked for a better one.”

Cal swelled up in pride at this. He opened the gate to the corral and led both horses in.

“I’ll rub ’em down and feed ’em. It’s one credit per day, per horse. I do prefer payment up front.”

Tom put a hand in his pocket and he could feel the heavy gold blanks. For a moment he thought about bargaining with Cal, but then decided against it. Fifty credits would buy a lot of boarding time, but who knew how long it would take them to use it all up?

Besides, he wasn’t sure he trusted Cal to keep perfect books. Even if the man were inherently honest about such things, he’d have to be scrupulous to make sure and deduct the proper amounts over time. And with no planetary AI to keep him honest . . .

Tom dug out a five-credit token and handed it over instead. Cal grinned and the token disappeared.

Saying goodbye to their steeds, Tom and Gwen headed for Ferguson’s Freehold. But as they neared the pub at the other end of town, an unwelcome sight greeted them. Four men walked around the far corner of the building, blocking the door.

“GWENDOLYNNNN!”

Malcolm Dalmont stood there waiting for her. Eager and panting, he practically undressed her with his eyes.

His three brothers, though, all focused on Tom.

Slowly, their hands moved to the guns strapped on their belts.

1.29

After his last forays into “civilization” on this planet, Tom had wised up. He too wore a pistol in a belt holster. Everyone did around here, it seemed.

However, eyeing Mal’s brothers, he doubted he could draw his weapon as fast as they could. It was not a skill he had practiced in his short time planetside.

Tense seconds stretched out, and Tom debated if hitting the ground would be a better move than trying to draw his gun first.

Mal stared at Gwen like he’d been in the desert for days and she was a cool glass of water.

Gwen glared back at him, arms crossed.

Townsfolk stopped to watch, a few looking out from the windows of the pub. Others stood in the street, seeking cover behind the corners of buildings or posts, but still watching.

More folks seemed to be out and about at this time of day, Tom thought.

“That’s enough, Mal!”

Everyone’s attentions shifted as Haley walked around a corner behind Gwen and Tom. She held two pistols, aimed from the waist at the Dalmont

brothers.

“How many times does she have to tell you? She. Is. Not. Interested.”

“Hey look, it’s Big Sister.”

Her eyes shifted to one of Mal’s brothers.

“Shut up, Britt. You know she’s a Fae. And no one gets to mess with the Fae.”

“I heard she quit.”

This came from another brother, on Mal’s left.

“Once a Fae, always a Fae, Emmitt.”

Emmitt snorted in derision.

“Like you been around long enough to have any traditions. The whole planet hasn’t even been colonized for two years yet.”

“Doesn’t matter,” Haley said, shaking her head. “She is not going with you. I and the rest of the Fae Phalanx will back her up on that. Now, stand down!”

Mal finally took his eyes off Gwen and shifted to look at Haley.

“You forgot one thing.”

She lifted a skeptical eyebrow at him, her pistols remaining steady.

“We’ve got more guns’n you.”

Mal whipped out his sidearm in one smooth motion and fired, grazing Haley’s shoulder. She grunted in pain and opened up on full auto with both guns. Bolts pattered against the pub. One burst through a window, making everyone inside duck.

Tom pulled out his pistol. He was slower, but no one saw him. He ducked down below a water trough for horses, took careful aim, and squeezed off a shot at Britt, hitting him in the chest. The man screamed and went down, sending a flurry of bolts back. But they all flew over Tom’s head.

Gwen shot at Mal, going for his head. She had perfect aim, but her bolts kept fizzing out before they connected.

He gave her a hurt look, but refused to shoot back. She alone stood up straight, firing at him down the street, one bolt after another.

When it became apparent he had some kind of shield active, she shifted her aim and sent three shots at Emmitt. One exploded near a porch post in front of the pub, sending splinters into his face. He screamed and went down, covering his head.

He came right back up, though, trying to aim at her, half blind. His bolts sent her scrambling for cover.

“Don’t shoot Gwen!” Mal yelled.

Tom and Haley both fired at him now. Mal’s body seemed to flicker as an electronic shield protected him. Haley let loose on full auto again. Dozens of bolts hit Mal’s barrier. More scorched the walls of the pub behind him. The shield flickered again and again, approaching its limits.

“Awright, stop! Just hold your fire!”

Mal looked angry. He held both hands up, his gun pointing to the sky.

Two of his brothers lay on the ground, groaning. The third, the youngest, avoided getting shot by running away when the gunfire started. Nervously, he peeked around the corner of the pub.

“Get out here, Newt!”

Slowly, the youngest of the four brothers tiptoed back to his position at Mal’s left. He still held a gun, but pointed it down. He looked wild-eyed and scared, eyes darting from his brothers to the people across the street and back.

Both sides stared at each other, uneasy, as Britt and Emmitt stood up, bleeding.

“Let’s just talk about this!”

“There’s nothing to talk about, Mal. I’m not going anywhere with you. You and I are not homesteading together. We’re not getting married. Nothing. Nada. There is no ‘us’ here . . . or anywhere.”

Mal glanced toward Tom and his eyes narrowed, despite Tom still aiming his gun at Mal’s face.

“Is it because of *him*? Where have you have been the last couple days, Gwen?”

“Back off, Mal! Or you and your brothers will regret it!”

All four cowboys stared at Haley, who now had guns aimed at two different brothers, Britt and Emmitt.

“Neither one has a shield like you do, Mal. And I’m aiming for their heads.”

“You can’t make that shot,” Britt snorted, still holding his shoulder. Blood seeped out around his hand.

“Don’t test me, Britt.”

Tom sneaked a quick glance at Haley. Her hands looked rock steady.

“Well, well, well. It looks like we have us a standoff,” Mal said, forcing a calm tone into his voice.

“That’s right,” Haley said. “Walk away or I blow their faces off!”

No one said a word for several tense seconds. Newt looked anxiously at everyone, his head jerking back and forth as if watching a ballgame. He stood shorter than the others by a few centimeters, and looked considerably younger. Tom decided he had to be about 16.

The sound of something falling, with wind whistling around it, came from outside town. Tom, Gwen and Haley, facing the pub, watched a single sky train car drop down from the hazy sky.

Standard engines flared, slowing its descent before it could plummet into the ground.

Mal glanced over his shoulder and caught a glimpse of the car before it disappeared from his sight line behind the pub.

He swore under his breath and said, “Now what?”

1.30

Tense silence filled the air a moment longer.

Haley shouted, “Ms. Ferguson? You got a scheduled shipment or something? A sky train’s coming down!”

Oma Ferguson walked out the pub’s front door, scowling at all the people pointing guns at one another, and especially at those pointing them toward the pub.

She looked no happier, Tom thought, than when he first met her.

Maybe she’s a perpetual grump, he thought. Although I’d be upset too if people were shooting at my pub, so that’s probably not a fair assessment.

“I ain’t ordered nothin’ for delivery. The *Jet Stream* ain’t scheduled to return for two and a half more weeks. The only other transportation anywhere near us would be the *Sky Slip*. I reckon whoever that is, or whatever it is, came over on the *Slip*.”

“Well, now. I guess we’ll all just have to wait and see who or what this might be,” Mal said with a nervous chuckle. “Come on, y’all. Put your guns down. Let’s be civil with one another.”

“So long as you don’t try anything!”

“Haley, we’ve known each other for a long time. You know all I want is for Gwen to come home with me. That’s it. I don’t hold no ill will against nobody here.” He locked eyes with Tom as he said that. “I just want Gwen.”

Haley gave him a skeptical look. Gwen glared at him in disgust. But they lowered their weapons as a man started walking into town from the landing field behind the pub.

The sky car levitated, drawing all eyes as it ascended back into the yellow haze.

An old man walked around the corner of the pub and stopped in the street with fists on his hips. He looked at everybody standing there, including the four men facing two women and one man, all their guns, the blast marks and the blood.

He wore a wide-brimmed dark brown hat and a light brown leather jacket over bluejeans. Two pistols slung holstered on either side of his belt, and a rifle stretched diagonally across his back.

A very large travel trunk accompanied him, floating behind on a hover platform. It stood as tall as he did, like a giant rectangular coffin following him.

Everyone focused on the old man. He drew every eye in the street. Several more people came running, to see what the sky train had delivered.

This guy has to be in his mid-60s, Tom decided.

So, not that old. But on a planet of young immigrants, he definitely stuck out as the oldest man around.

Oma Ferguson might match him in age. And Eddie.

“Who the heck are you?” Mal said, staring at the old guy along with everyone else. He said out loud the question on everybody’s mind.

In a loud, rich voice, the man spoke up. His words filled the street and echoed off the surrounding buildings.

He spoke as someone used to wielding authority.

“My name is Marshal Miller Metger! And I’m looking for one Malcolm Dalmont. Anybody who can tell me where he is will share in a 30,000 credit reward for his capture and return to Juventas.”

Haley grinned.

She pointed at Mal and said, “There’s your man, Marshal!”

Several other people on the street stepped out of hiding and pointed, too. Patrons in the pub opened a window and pointed at Mal.

Mal looked at the marshal with a wide-eyed, deer-in-the-spotlight look . . . and everything seemed to freeze for a second.

Metger stared at him.

Everybody pointed at him.

Newt, the youngest Dalmont, tried to look at everybody at once.

Then Mal bolted, racing down the street.

Metger drew his sidearm lightning fast and squeezed off a round at Mal’s back. But the shield still held and it flickered one more time as Mal rounded a corner and ran out of sight.

The marshal bit off a curse and raced after him.

“I need to help law enforcement,” Haley said. “You okay, Gwen?”

“Go.”

Haley nodded and holstered her weapons. She took off running after Metger.

Tom and Gwen were left staring at Mal’s brothers.

The older ones looked resentful. Newt, though, stopped bobbing his head back and forth, and focused on Gwen.

“He . . . he really do adore you, Gwendolyn. You should at least h-h-hear him out.”

Tom realized Newt had a stutter. Not a bad one, but tense situations like this probably made it worse.

Gwen said, “He’s a fugitive, Newt! You heard the marshal. What did he do to get that big of a bounty placed on his head?”

Newt glanced down at the ground, embarrassed.

“What did he do?” Gwen pressed. “Are you a fugitive, too? Are all of you fugitives?”

Newt would not meet her eyes. Instead, he turned and walked away.

She sighed and looked at the other two.

“Go get patched up before you bleed all over Meri’s porch.”

They did not look at her, either. Britt and Emmitt turned and walked into Ferguson’s Freehold. They seemed embarrassed to have been shot.

As the door opened, Tom heard Oma say, “Nanobot pneumatics are ten credits each. That stuff is precious out here. Line up over there.”

Then the door shut, blocking out the sounds from inside.

“Do you think Haley will need any help?” Tom said, holstering his gun.

He looked down the street in the direction Mal escaped.

“It probably wouldn’t hurt to check.”

But at that moment Metger came back, walking fast and frowning, looking down. Haley trailed right behind him.

“Lost him,” the old man said. “He has the home turf advantage. And I have no AI on this Godforsaken backwater to tell me where he is.”

“He won’t have gone far, Marshal,” Haley said. “He and his brothers own the largest ranch around here. If he goes anywhere, it’ll be out there.”

Gwen said, “Yeah, he’ll probably try to wait you out, knowing him.”

“He doesn’t know the Marshal Service, then,” Tom said with a chuckle.

When everybody looked at him, he said, “What? Marshal Metger here is famous. I mean, it’s amazing that you’re out here, sir. Well, I guess, if this is where your man goes, you’ve got to go after him, right? So maybe it’s not so surprising. Still, it’s great to finally meet you in person.”

Metger eyed Tom expressionlessly, the compliments rolling off his back like water.

“What’d you say your name was again?”

“Tom Savage. Glad to meet you, sir. I’m a big fan.”

He stuck his hand out. Metger slowly shook it in a crushing grip, giving Tom a piercing stare.

The marshal said, “Well, come on. I haven’t eaten, and chasing outlaws makes me work up an appetite. If you three are interested in a share of the reward on Dalmont, let’s go inside and talk more about this ranch of his. I’d like to meet his brothers, too.”

He turned and headed for the pub.

Tom smiled at the women and pointed at the marshal.

“He’s famous.”

Then he hurried to catch up.

Gwen and Haley exchanged a glance, and followed Tom into the pub.

1.31

Britt Dalmont and his brother Emmitt left shortly after Oma Ferguson patched them up.

The marshal watched them go, and considered trying to follow. But he seemed reassured that everyone in town knew where the boys' ranch was, so he did not try to stop them or follow.

Oma brought out food for everybody at the marshal's request. He paid her with a token, saying something about his operating budget could be used with informants.

This statement made Gwen and Haley smile.

Gwen elbowed Tom and said, "We're informants."

But Tom ignored her. He was still smitten by the fact they sat with a "living legend," as he called it.

The plates were covered with roasted red potatoes, topped by small chunks of pork in some kind of gravy. Metger glanced down at his dish with a mild look of trepidation.

Gwen and Haley, though, used the table's saltshaker liberally, and dug in. Tom ate, too. Reluctantly, the lawman tried a bite. He raised his eyebrows and seemed to decide the food was at least edible.

Metger quizzed them during the meal. When he found out Tom just got here, he mostly ignored the young man. But both Gwen and Haley had come over on one of the first passenger ships bound for Phaethon.

“The idea was for there to be only one section per family,” Gwen explained. “But Mal and his brothers each claimed one next to each other. So, whereas Tom’s place is one square kilometer, the Dalmonts have four squares. Two clicks wide and two clicks long.”

Metger grunted and said, “Still legal.”

“Yes, but it goes against the spirit of the law, you know? Anyway, they’ve been browbeating the landowners to either side of them, trying to get them to sell. That would put them at eight, if they can swing it.”

“Anything illegal in their persuasion attempts? Extortion? Intimidation?”

Haley shrugged and picked up where Gwen left off.

“I’m sure they’re intimidating. Whether that would rise to the level of illegality . . . And we’re not aligned with a system yet, either. So, there really are no laws like that out here.”

Metger nodded, a grave expression on his face.

“New planets always bring in outlaws, scofflaws and anarchists,” he said. “And all for that primary reason. For a little while, at least, there’s nothing out here to codify much of anything. It’s disgraceful, if you ask me.”

The two women gave him blank looks, refusing to support his statement.

Tom’s face brightened with a smile.

“It’s also a great place for fugitives, right Marshal?”

Metger shifted his attention back to Tom for a moment.

“Yeah. Also for other people who want to get away and escape society for a while, for whatever reason. You can become somebody else out here if you want, away from all the AIs and red tape.”

He gave Tom a steady, piercing gaze. But Tom’s smile did not falter.

Several people approached their table as they finished eating. Word had spread, and it seemed everyone in town wanted a shot at the reward money for Mal.

Someone offered the marshal a paper map, complete with their name on it and contact information, showing how to get to the Dalmont place.

Others offered to lead the marshal out there, provided he procured a horse.

Another fellow wanted to know if the marshal would form a posse. If so, would any actions the posse took, like taking everything the Dalmonts owned, be considered legal?

When Metger realized the Dalmont place was a half hour ride from town, but far longer to walk, he decided to rent a horse from Cajun Cal. He chose one fellow who seemed to know what he was talking about to guide him to the stables on the other side of town.

He got up to leave, but Haley asked him one more question.

“Marshal, what did Mal do to get such a hefty reward put on him?”

The man’s eyes glinted, registering just a spark of emotion under his calm exterior.

“A number of things. Grand larceny. Sexual assault. And bigamy.”

“Bigamy?”

Metger nodded.

“He married a rich widow for her money, without divorcing two other wives, one in the League, the other on an unaligned space station out on the way to Clarion. Somehow there was a glitch in communications between StarCen and PLAIR. PLAIR allowed the marriage to go ahead in Juventas, and registered it despite the previous marriage. He raided the old woman’s accounts and left her. She’s the one putting up the reward money, to bring him back to stand trial.”

“That’s terrible!”

Both women looked appalled.

Metger nodded.

“I hope to stop him and bring him back before he does more harm. He can get ‘married’ again out here on the frontier, where no AI is set up. By the time this planet gets its act together, he could be settled in for years, looking to trap some other unsuspecting woman.”

Gwen and Haley shared a look.

“I’m glad your instincts were right,” Haley said.

“I never cared for that man. He’s a snake.”

Metger stood, nodding. He seemed pleased the women had an appropriate reaction toward someone who lived outside the law. He gathered his weapons and nodded to the fellow willing to lead him to the stables.

“I’m going to head out there tomorrow and stake out their place.”

“What if he never goes home?” Gwen said. “How will you catch him?”

Metger gave her a tight smile.

“Well, ma’am . . . the marshals *always* get their man.”

1.32

Haley asked if Gwen and Tom would like to see what was left of the sand dragon carcasses, since Tom had expressed interest in them earlier.

They agreed and everybody went back to the stables to check out their horses. A short ride later, in a field outside town, they found what was left of Big Ugly's friends.

"Thanks again for letting us take these, Tom. We were able to get holographic proof transmitted to League City. They deposited the funds into our account and now we're set for months. The Fae have plenty of money for food and horses. We can even afford to take on new recruits. Or let some old ones rejoin us, if they want."

Haley smiled pointedly at Gwen, who ignored the obvious hint.

Tom said, "I thought they'd smell more."

"Scavengers stripped the bodies of flesh, so you're only left with bones and the outer skin. It's like a shell almost. Kind of reminds you of an armadillo, if you've ever seen one of those."

"Yeah, but this is more flexible," Tom said, dismounting from Lucas and examining the remains up close. "It's like a hide. A very thick, very tough hide. They're blaster-proof, at least for small arms fire."

He marveled at the thick skins, running a hand along one. They felt smooth to the touch, and retained their mottled brown desert camouflage look.

Haley shrugged, not nearly as impressed.

Tom said, “I wonder if we could use this for anything. Are there any leatherworkers who have tried messing with this stuff? Has anybody run any experiments?”

“Not that I’m aware of. There’s Mr. Chan in town, who’s a leatherworker. He makes saddle tack and belts, and even some clothes. He repairs things for people when they break, like harnesses for farm equipment.”

At Tom’s insistence, the trio rode back into Little York to visit the craftsman. They hitched their horses near a shop on Main Street with a painted sign above it reading, “Chan’s Leatherworks.”

When Tom opened the door for the ladies to walk in, a bell strung around the handle jangled.

“I’ll be with you in a minute!” came a shout from the back.

Inside, the rich smell of leather assaulted their senses. New saddles hung from ropes tied to the shop’s rafters. Reins and straps were arranged on racks along one wall. Harnesses for plows and wagons lined another, the wood and leather expertly joined together in utilitarian poetry.

Near the counter, new belts of all sizes lined up on display, along with holsters and shiny silver buckles. Many of the buckles featured a star in motion, the unofficial symbol of Phaethon.

A man stepped out from the workshop door behind the counter and smiled politely at them. In his early 40s, he had brown skin, eyes and hair. He looked to be of Asian ancestry.

“Haley, Gwen. Good to see you both.”

He turned to Tom and said, “I don’t know you. Hi, I’m Ingo Chan. What can I do for you?”

Tom shook his hand and said, “Have you ever worked with a sand dragon’s pelt before?”

Chan instantly grew intrigued with the idea.

An hour later, Tom, Gwen and Haley dragged the carcasses into town with their horses, dropping them off behind Chan's shop.

The craftsman, who explained to Tom that leatherworking was his passion, had quit his job as a municipal engineer for the city of Stockton on Clarion several months ago. He hitched a ride out to this new world to try and make a living from his hobby.

Unfortunately, he came too late to make it in the big city. Nine other leatherworkers had already set up shop in the capital by the time he arrived. So, he rode out on the *Jet Stream* until he found a settlement without one. Little York was the sky train's last stop, the farthest one from League City at the time. And here is where Chan disembarked.

Since then, two more settlements had sprung up further away, but so far they were much smaller. And most recently, the first settlement on the continent of Iliou had been established. But Chan thrived in Little York, with brisk business and a loyal clientele. He had no plans on leaving for potentially greener pastures.

"So that's how I got here," he concluded the story with a twinkle in his eye. "It's been almost six months. Little York needed someone who knows their way around leather, and I'm the man for it. It saves shipments to League City for repairs, and I can make new things from almost any dead animal. I have the latest equipment that I brought with me when striking out on my own, including a full suite of laser cutters and holographic measuring devices, all imported from Italia. Now, let's take a look at those lizards."

He walked outside and hummed for a while, inspecting the hides.

"They're a lot bigger than I thought they'd be. What were you planning on making with them?"

"How about something that covers the horses? Do you have enough for that?"

"For two? For sure. Almost certainly three, by the looks of those wings. Why do want to cover them in lizard hide?"

“Well, for one thing, they’re blaster proof.”

Chan stopped and looked at him. Tom thought he could see the wheels turning in his head.

“Oh, really?”

“Yeah. So, if you covered the horses, they’d be like in armor, you know? We could ride them into a gun battle, and they’d stand a better chance of making it out alive.”

“Okay. I can see that. If you use the wings for that, you should still have plenty of material left over, even after covering three horses. What else would you like to make out of the material?”

“Jackets.” Tom glanced at Gwen. “At least two. Maybe three if there’s enough. I don’t suppose pants would be too much to ask?”

“Maybe, maybe not. Let me get your measurements. I already have Gwen’s and Haley’s. But you’re new in town, so . . .”

He made Tom stand up straight and hold his arms out to the side while he scanned him with a small pocket instrument. A thin red line projected out, running up and down his body, head to toe, twice. Then he repeated the procedure on Tom’s backside.

Chan looked at the readout and made some calculations. Then he went over and scanned the horses. Lucas whickered softly, but Chan and his device seemed a lot less scary than Timmy.

Next, Chan scanned all three hides. Then he walked back to the others, making more calculations.

“Okay. Yes, we have enough here for everything you want. I will get right on this.”

“How long do you think it will take?”

“With my laser cutters? Assuming the hides aren’t *too* difficult to work with, since they’re tough and blaster-proof and all . . . Everything should be ready by tomorrow sometime.”

“Wow. That’s fast.”

Chan shrugged and smiled.

“Like I said, I have the latest leatherworking equipment from Italia. I cashed in my retirement to pay for it all.”

“Okay. How much do you want, to process all three sand dragons and make everything?”

Chan paused to rub his chin thoughtfully.

“I think 50 credits per hide is reasonable.”

Tom’s eyes lit up. He reached in his pocket and pulled out three gold coins.

“Will these do?”

He handed one to Chan who peered at it closely, holding it up to the light.

“What is this?”

“Pure gold. That’s one troy ounce, 24 karat.”

“We use the metric system out here.”

“Troy ounces are different. Everybody uses troy ounces when dealing with gold.”

Chan frowned, looking unconvinced.

“How do I know this is really gold?”

“Uh . . . it’s gold. I’m sure there’s something somebody can use to test it. One troy ounce is worth 50 credits. I’ll give you three of those for working the hides.”

Chan played with the blank coin some more, rubbing it with his fingers and bringing it close to his eyes, squinting. He handed it back to Tom.

“Look, that’s all well and good. But I’d prefer you pay me in standard credit tokens, please.”

“But . . . this is worth 50 credits.”

“To who? I’d have to trade this with somebody for real money. Maybe there are people back in League City who would take it. But who would accept it out here? Oma Ferguson sure isn’t going to take this. And she’s got the biggest business in town. It’s just a yellow circle.”

Frustrated, Tom put the gold coins back in his pocket. He reached in another and pulled out two hundred-credit tokens.

“You got any change?”

Chan’s eyes lit up and he nodded.

“Come back inside. I’ll fill out a work order that will serve as your receipt.”

1.33

By this time it started to get late, and Tom broached the idea of heading home as they rode away from Chan's Leatherworks.

"It'll be dark by the time we get there," Gwen said. "Maybe we should eat at the Freehold, first. I know rooms are expensive, but it might even be worth it to stay overnight."

Haley said, "Why don't you both come back to the Fae's camp with me? We've got plenty of food, thanks to Tom letting us have those bounties. You can spend the night there, too. We'll pitch an extra tent for you two."

Both Tom and Gwen blushed and spoke at the same time.

"No."

"You don't have to do that."

They glanced at each other, even more embarrassed they had both denied the offer simultaneously.

Haley grinned ear-to-ear, tickled to see their reactions.

"Or we can pitch two separate tents. You two look like teenagers."

"I am a teenager, still," Gwen grumbled.

“There’s not a lot of privacy in the tents, anyway,” Haley said, still smiling. “We all have enhanced hearing.”

She pointed a finger at her ears, drawing an even deeper blush out of Gwen.

Tom said, “Why don’t you have pointy ears? I thought you used to be with them.”

“I had the operation reversed. It looks odd when you’re not with the group. Plus, enhanced hearing is annoying. I kept the enhanced sight, though. It helps with shooting.”

“Come on. We’ll be nice, I promise. And it’ll save you six hours of riding.”

“We could get rooms at the pub,” Gwen said. But her tone revealed a weakening resolve.

“You don’t want to do that. That old biddy would gouge you. And we’re more fun than a bunch of drunks at the pub any day. Come on. Please? Everybody would love to catch up with you, Gwen. We miss you.”

Gwen glanced at Tom.

“What do you want to do?”

“I suppose it couldn’t hurt. Besides, it’s just for one night, right?”

“That’s the spirit!”

Haley urged her horse into a trot before they could change their minds. Bessie and Lucas sped up as well, intent on staying together in a display of equine unanimity.

She led them out of town a ways before turning off the road and into a field with trees at the other end.

“This is a park. Or it will be someday when Little York gets bigger. It’s public land, not claimed by anyone. We’re back in the woods a ways, off the road.”

They entered the forest, high branches blocking out the ambient light of the setting sun. Visibility lowered quite a bit under the trees.

Haley whistled, loud and sharp. An answering whistle came from high in a tree. Looking up, Tom saw a woman dressed in brown and green camo, blending in perfectly with the foliage. She grinned down at him when she saw him looking.

“Is that a boy? Are you bringing a male into our camp, O Fearless Leader?”

“It’s Tom Savage, Gwen’s beau. Don’t molest him, he’s spoken for.”

“Gwen’s back? Gwen!”

Gwen waved and smiled up at the girl.

“Hi, Kenzie!”

“Hey, everybody! Gwen’s back! With a man!”

They rode into a clearing and dismounted. A couple of younger girls came out and took the horses away, smiling shyly at Tom. Then, nearly 20 women of all ages gathered around them, pouring out of the trees and nearby tents.

All eyes were on Gwen and Tom.

Gwen hugged several, and made introductions.

“Tom, this is Eva-Marie. We call her Em. She’s a crack shot, she’s our best. This is Morrie. Say hi, Morrie. Yes, Morrie, this is the one who donated the sand dragons . . .”

Tom met so many women, all at once, shaking hands, smiling, saying hello. He had no hope for keeping track of all their names.

He did subtly take a snapshot of each face, though, and stored it in his implants’ memory, along with a recording of everything said. He hoped to go back later and link names to faces that way.

They indeed all had pointed ears just like Haley. It seemed a requirement for membership. Only the youngest girls kept their natural ear shapes. He suspected they were not yet fully initiated.

When everybody had a chance to greet the newcomers, Haley lifted a fist up and conversation died down. Everyone in the clearing gave her their attention.

“We want to welcome back Gwen and thank her new boyfriend Tom, who has been our most recent patron with the sand dragon bounties. Welcome, both of you, to the Fae Phalanx. They are to be treated as guests, with all the hospitality of home. We’ll need two extra tents set up for tonight.”

A couple of eyebrows rose and more than one young lady tried to furtively glance Tom’s way.

“But, remember, girls. He’s off limits. Gwen has called dibs.”

At this, everyone let out a loud, “Awww!” followed by laughter.

Tom felt the tips of his ears growing warm.

Glancing over, he saw Gwen looked even more embarrassed.

Haley lifted her voice over the laughter.

“For right now . . . let’s eat!”

The dining area consisted of three long picnic tables set up under the trees with lights strung overhead. Tom watched as the women in charge of cooking set up a huge iron pot of stew on a fourth table, with baskets of bread and vegetable dishes filled with what looked like carrots and sweet potato variants.

As guests, he and Gwen were allowed to go through the line first, grabbing plates and a fork before heading to one of the tables.

Everybody, it seemed, wanted to talk with Gwen and find out what she’d been doing lately. They were also very interested in Tom. Many had not seen a male up close and in person for several months, it seemed.

Within minutes they all knew he was a new arrival to Phaethon. Most assumed he was from Petra Roe, since he mentioned that planet as his departure point. He carefully steered away conversation about himself, always asking about the person he spoke with at the first opportunity.

“How long have *you* been here?”

“What led you to join the Fae?”

“Does the operation to enhance your hearing hurt?”

“Why does it leave your ears pointed? Does that do anything aurally, or is it just for aesthetics or something?”

All of these questions easily shifted the conversation away from him and back to the women. He found the pointed ear look was indeed primarily for aesthetics. It served as a marker for those who had the bionics installed.

When the eating ended, and the youngest girls cleared everyone’s plates away, Haley stood up again and conversation died down as before.

“We’re going to have a leadership meeting in my tent. There’s been some new developments with the Dalmont brothers. Gwen and Tom, I’d like you to be in the meeting, too.”

1.34

Later that night, in the field outside Ferguson's Freehold, four sky train cars landed after a long vertical descent, performing a rare nighttime disembarkation.

A young rider slowly picking his way across a distant pasture saw the lights coming down and clicked his tongue, urging his horse to speed up for a closer look.

Hervé Alvarado stopped on the edge of town with a perfect view of the landing field, wondering who would be coming in this late at night. Like all the residents of Little York, he knew the sky train schedule. And nothing was expected right now.

At 13, Hervé spent most evenings hunting marked owls, a local night bird highly prized in League City. The Alvarado family shipped back the birds Hervé shot in cryogenic containers, where their wholesaler put the specimens up for auction. The feathers were exported to other planets for healthy profits. On occasion, a taxidermist might make a tableau for a wealthy investor looking for something different, with a rabbit or some other animal and the owl swooping down on it.

Marked owls were large predators, often surpassing a meter in height with three-meter wingspans. They earned their name not for any colorings or feather patterns, but for their ability to apparently mark their prey. Once

they picked out a meal, it did not seem to matter where that animal fled, or what actions it took. Eventually, the marked owl would swoop down and kill it, even hours later.

Unfortunately, marked owls favored pets and livestock, which were easy prey. Cats and dogs did not live long near Little York, especially if allowed outside at night. Calves and foals were popular targets, too.

Marked owls looked at anything the same size or smaller than themselves as potential meals. Even children, which meant the days of their large populations near human settlements on Phaethon were numbered.

Everyone knew the time would come when an organized planetary government performed biological surveys to figure out how many marked owls and sand dragons were still out there, and lay down restrictions so both species would not be hunted to extinction.

But right now, they were fair game. And Hervé was a prolific hunter. Tonight, he had two dead owls strapped to the back of his horse. He carried a railgun rifle that used electromagnetic force to sling bullets quietly and without a bright flash. That, combined with nocturnal optics and a lot of patience while guarding fields of cattle at night, supplemented the Alvarado's household income considerably.

Hervé held his breath, watching the train cars, wondering who could be making an unscheduled stop in Little York at night.

The doors opened on all four cars simultaneously, and mounted riders made a short jump down to the ground. The horsemen milled in the pasture, controlling their animals and speaking soothing words in the dark.

A figure detached from the surrounding shadows closer to town, and rode into the light surrounding the sky train cars. All the riders focused on Britt Dalmont as he urged his nervous steed closer.

The boy watched from 100 meters away, breath caught his throat. Britt and the leader of the riders spoke softly, but a few words drifted through the night. He saw Britt hand over a moneybag, apparently filled with tokens.

“ . . . the rest afterwards, Mr. Ever.”

“How bad you think it’s gonna be?”

“ . . . just one marshal.”

“That’s enough. That’s more than enough . . .”

“ . . . why we sent for you and your men.”

“Alright. You made the right call. But we’ll collect the second half regardless . . . Lead the way.”

Britt pivoted his horse back in the direction he came and headed out toward the Dalmont place. The other cowboys fell in line behind him, riding two abreast. They stayed to the shadows and did not go into town, heading across open pasture before taking the road west.

The boy watched them go, holding his breath until the last pair of horsemen disappeared in the night. Then he clicked twice, urging his mount to a trot.

Moments later, he burst into the pub. At this late hour, only a handful of patrons remained out front. A couple of men had fallen asleep at their tables. Three sat at the bar, still drinking.

“The Dalmont boys brought in help!”

Oma Ferguson walked out of the kitchen, scowling, followed by her husband Eddie. Equipment lights in the kitchen were off, and everything looked cleaned and stored away for the night.

“What do you mean, they brought in help? How did anyone get out here?”

“Four sky train cars, Ms. Ferguson! They was filled with horses! There must be 50, 60 men. Everyone had guns. Ol’ Britt Dalmont met them and talked to James Ever himself! He done led them to the ranch. I seen ’em ride out that way, followin’ him in the dark!”

Oma and Eddie glanced at one another. Those not asleep, or only lightly inebriated, gave the boy their full attention.

Eddie said, “Must have been Captain Mathers with *Cloud Nine*. He’ll ferry anyone anywhere for the right price. That’s the only sky train remotely close to us right now.”

A man at the bar said, “Who do y’think it was that the Dalmonts brought in? Was that really James Ever, you think?”

One of his drinking buddies said, “Has to be the Ever Riders. That’s the only big hired gun outfit anywhere close. Last I heard, they was scoping out the continent of Iliou and roughin’ up new settlements out there, extortin’ folks for ‘protection money.’ They don’t have any law enforcement out that way yet.”

The third one at the bar chimed in and said, “We don’t have no law enforcement out here, neither.”

“We gots the marshal. We gots the Fae.”

“How the heck is the marshal gonna take on 60 Ever Riders? Even the Fae are outnumbered with that many, three-to-one.”

Oma interjected at this point.

“I ain’t wakin’ up a guest for something he can’t do nothin’ about. Speakin’ of sleep, it’s closin’ time. Y’all get out.”

Reluctantly, the barflies knocked back the last of their drinks and made their way to the exit. Eddie walked over and shook the sleepers awake, then half led, half carried them to the door. Neither had paid for a room, and the Fergusons showed no mercy.

Hervé made to leave, too.

“Come back in the morning for breakfast, and tell the marshal what you saw,” Eddie said to the boy. “Maybe you’ll get a share of that reward money.”

The boy’s eyes lit up in excitement as he walked out, hurrying to head home with the news.

1.35

In the morning Metger got up before anyone else, walking in from the connecting rooms to the pub. He waited impatiently for his coffee, then asked about breakfast options. Eddie said he was cooking one meal for breakfast: marked owl eggs and toast. Reluctantly, Metger ordered a plate.

Several minutes later, his eyebrows rose in surprised delight as he wiped his lips. The eggs had a far more distinctive and vibrant taste than chicken or poshbird, or even quail.

He leaned back and enjoyed his second cup of coffee when Oma came out from the couple's rooms on the other side of the common area.

"That boy come by to tell you about the men headin' out to the Dalmont place?"

Metger looked up with a quizzical expression on his face. The door opened and a regular came in.

"Hi Eddie. Owl eggs today? Yum! I'll take a plate. Hey, Marshal! You heard the Ever Riders are out at the Dalmont spread to protect ol' Mal Dalmont from you?"

"Apparently," he said, looking at Oma, "everybody in town has heard of it, save for myself."

“You was asleep. Weren’t nothin’ you could do about it anyways. Sixty men on horses in the dark is nothing a lawman can handle by himself. Even a marshal.”

He decided not to argue with her on this point as more people streamed in for coffee, breakfast, and the latest news.

While he sat there, Oma came over and handed him an old fashioned sheet of paper. He frowned at it.

“This a communiqué from League City, Marshal. It has your name on it. Came in on our municipal transceiver. I take the mail for everybody hereabouts.”

“How quaint.”

He read through the letter. More people came in, and conversation centered on the Dalmont brothers.

On his third cup of coffee, Hervé ran through the door.

“Marshal! Marshal!”

He said, “I know. The Ever Riders came in on a sky train overnight. There’s about 60 of them, and they’re holed up at the Dalmont place to keep me from retrieving Malcolm Dalmont. You were the one who saw them come in?”

“Yes, sir. I came right away, but Ms. Ferguson said you were already asleep.”

The boy looked so crestfallen that the marshal already knew everything, the old man decided to throw him a bone.

“I will remember that when I write up my report, and take your information in consideration for the final dispensation of the reward money. Thank you for your efforts, young man.”

Hervé brightened up right away with these kind words. He ran back out, not realizing that he had never shared his name with the marshal.

Meanwhile, more and more townsfolk surged into the Freehold, most of them anticipating an eventful morning.

It grew so crowded that Oma started getting upset. Eddie was swamped with breakfast orders, and fast running out of owl eggs. Already, a third pot of coffee was on, the first two having been drained. Noise inside the pub grew so loud, no one could hear themselves think.

Metger decided he had enough. He stood up to go outside. But as soon as he headed for the door, the crowd surged with him. They spilled out onto the street in front of the pub, swamping the porch and everywhere else.

People pressed in all around him, everyone talking at once.

The marshal held his hand up and said in a loud voice, “May I have your attention, please!”

The crowd noise died down as he attracted all eyes. A tall man with a pageboy haircut, albeit all the hair was gray, he cut an authoritative figure.

“I am Marshal Miller Metger. And I am going to bring in Malcolm Dalmont, no matter how many hired hands he has. For anyone who would like to assist me in this endeavor, I have just received word this morning that the reward on Dalmont’s head has been increased to 50,000 credits. That’s dead or alive, although alive is preferred so he can stand trial and answer for his crimes.”

He paused a moment to let that bigger number sink in. It totaled about four years of salary for most people back home.

Metger looked around the crowd expectantly, but nobody stepped forward to take him up on the offer.

After a moment of silence, he said, “I’m not afraid of a few dozen hired guns. I just need a little help.”

Eddie cleared his throat, standing nearby. He stood on the porch with several of the regulars, wiping his hands on an apron.

“Begging your pardon, Marshal, but the Ever Riders are not just hired guns. They’re big time mercs with a nasty reputation. They’ve taken over entire

towns before, when somebody gets on their bad side. Ain't nobody's stopped them so far. I just hate they're on Anatolia. There's never been nothin' worth their while out here before now. The Dalmonts must be payin' them a lot."

A murmur of assent rippled through the crowd. It became clear to Metger that everyone's hesitancy centered on this mercenary group's reputation.

In a loud voice, he said, "I don't care how big they are. I don't care how bad they are. If they stand in the way between the Marshal's Service and Dalmont, they'll be dealt with as necessary. But, I do need some help, especially to get close. Now, who's with me?"

Again, silence greeted him.

But this time, it was broken up by the sound of hoofbeats drawing near.

Tom, Gwen and Haley rounded a corner on horseback.

Tom raised his hand and said, "We're with you, Marshal!"

Gwen nodded, enthusiastically.

Haley smiled and said, "The Fae Phalanx stands ready to assist inter-system law enforcement! We have twenty armed riders waiting right outside town."

"Alrighty," the marshal said.

For the first time this morning, he smiled.

"That should be plenty."

"Them's still three-to-one odds, Marshal," Eddie said. "And don't forget to count the brothers."

"Nah, it's probably about right. I've had worse."

Metger looked back at the three on horseback.

"I'm going to get my gear, then I'll meet you at the stables."

Tom nodded, and they turned to leave as the marshal went back indoors.

Unnoticed by anyone, a boy of about ten years of age ran from the crowd toward the edge of town. When he hit the road leading west, he kept running, heading straight for the Dalmont place and a promised ten credit token for any news from Little York.

He felt certain this was information the Dalmonts would find worth the money.

1.36

When Metger rode away from Cajun Cal's stables, he found the three young people waiting for him just outside town. Now they were dressed completely different.

"What's that you're wearing? And what's on your horses?"

Everything was draped in a layer of natural sand colors. The skins pulled over the horses matched the leather jackets and leggings the trio wore.

"Sand dragon hide," Haley said, smiling. "Straight off Mr. Chan's automated processing machines. They fit perfectly."

"They're blaster proof," Tom added. "At least to an extent. This is a good opportunity for us to try them out."

The marshal shrugged, dismissing the odd sight.

"I don't care. I just want to apprehend Dalmont. Any of you know directions to his ranch?"

"It's this way, Marshal," Haley said.

She turned her horse and led everyone down the West Road.

At an open field just outside town, they found the rest of the Fae Phalanx waiting for them, all but the youngest girls who stayed behind to watch the

camp.

Em rode out to meet them, carrying a particularly nasty looking gun. She nodded politely at the marshal, then addressed Haley and Gwen.

“The girls are ready. We’ll follow you in. We’ve got every weapon we own with us, including this thing.”

She carefully turned it around and handed the weapon over butt-first to Gwen. Everyone eyed it warily.

Gwen smiled, and strapped the big rifle over her shoulder.

“It’s nice to have Big Bertha back, even if only for now.”

The marshal raised an eyebrow at her.

“What are you doing with a Firedog 3W? Those things are highly regulated. Civilian sales were banned across both systems years ago. They’re supposed to be for military use only.”

“This is a family heirloom, Marshal.”

“A highly regulated heirloom. It’s illegal to own one.”

“In the League and the Republic, yes. Out here? Phaethon has not declared an allegiance yet. I believe this is what you would call a gray area, Marshal. Plus, there’s always an exception on weaponry for law enforcement.”

Metger took a breath, and looked ready to argue the point. But he stopped, and let it out through his nose, controlling himself.

“As long as it helps me apprehend Malcolm Dalmont, I don’t care. But I would not try to bring that thing back home with you. Nor would I have it around whenever this planet joins an established governmental system. You could get into serious trouble owning that thing, young lady.”

Gwen gave him a smile, wordlessly saying, “Don’t worry about me.”

Metger turned back to Haley and said, “Lead on.”

Haley took point and brought her horse up to a trot. The marshal followed, then Tom and Gwen. Behind them, the Fae fell in, riding two abreast along

the road.

Within minutes Haley slowed to a walk, then she stopped altogether. The marshal rode up beside her as she pointed ahead. The road curved and disappeared near three big trees.

“Around that bend, another few meters, we’ll come to the entrance to the Dalmont place. It’s a private road extending one klick into the middle. They built four houses right next to each other. Each brother constructed one on his own section. They’re at the four corners of the combined property.”

“Any other buildings besides houses?”

“Yes. Various barns and other structures. We’ve ridden to their place multiple times for various reasons.”

“What’s the layout of the houses like?”

“They’re all two-story structures. I think they used the same builder, and they probably all follow the same floor plan. Can’t tell you much about the insides.”

Metger sat back in his saddle to think, weighing the best approach.

Before he could say anything else, a flurry of bolts popped out of the trees near the bend in the road, sending the horses scattering.

Tom felt a zap hit his right leg. He winced.

Lucas jumped, startled by the impact. He turned to canter away but Tom fought with the reins to calm him down.

The other horses did not do much better. One went down, a bloody gash from an energy bolt splitting its neck open. The horse fell on its side, breathing hard and raspy. The rider limped away after being thrown off.

Other women pulled out their guns and returned fire at the trees. But they could not see the shooter. Their horses pranced nervously as the sniper traded shots with the Fae.

Bolt after bolt struck the branches, burning away twigs and leaves. And still, the gunman shot back.

Haley yelled, “Fall back! Take cover!”

The horses gladly raced off. Lucas followed them all, and Tom gave up fighting the reins.

Two more bolts slammed into Tom’s back as they galloped out of the sniper’s sight. He felt the punch of impact through the sand dragon skin, and a vague shock going through his hands. But he suffered no injuries. A bolt popped Lucas’s rear end, making the horse kick his legs up and gallop faster.

Gwen managed to hold Bessie in place. Two other Fae stayed with her in the road, the fallen rider and one other whose horse was shot. Both women hunkered down behind the carcasses of their horses. Bolts popped the ground around them, occasionally slamming into their dead steeds.

The stench of burnt horse flesh wafted over the road.

Now Gwen and Bessie were the largest target, and they attracted the sniper’s attention. Gwen dismounted and patted Bessie’s neck through the lizard hide.

“Just stay put for a minute.”

Three bolts popped the side of the horse. But the girls behind the dead mounts took that opportunity to fire back on the tree.

By now, enough leaves had burned off that the sniper could be seen from his perch. He lay sprawled out on a huge branch, in a prone position covering the road. But even visible, he proved hard to hit. The Fae’s bolts continued flying into the tree until he turned back to the other two and shot up their horses some more.

Gwen flipped a switch on her Firedog Whillicker Wildcat, a gun loosely modeled after an immersive gaming rifle, the Werlton Whizbang Weapon.

Weeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeee!

The gun warmed up, alarming Bessie who pranced in place. The sniper returned his attention to the only living horse, and squeezed off three more

rounds in quick succession. They pounced into the sand dragon hide, popping on impact.

Bessie had enough, calm words or no. She cantered off riderless, heading down the road after the others.

That left Gwen standing in the open, aiming her big gun at the tree.

The sniper lined up another shot, but Gwen pulled her trigger first.

PHLABAM!

An enormous arc of energy stretched across the open space, over the heads of the downed horses and their riders, reaching out to the trees several meters away. It slammed into the branches like a bolt of lightning.

All three trees burst into flames as energy engulfed them in a blinding explosion.

A rifle fell out of the branches, landing on the ground with a clatter.

Then a body dropped, like a bird shot from the sky. It hit the ground with a sickening thud. Smoke drifted up from blackened skin and burnt clothing.

The two women stood up as Gwen walked toward them, the big gun resting over her shoulder now.

One of the Fae smiled as she approached.

“We sure are glad you’re back, Gwen. Everybody else is afraid to shoot that thing.”

1.37

When everyone gathered on the road again, Metger met with Haley to discuss plans going forward.

“They’re obviously alerted to our presence. I presume you don’t want to take your people into a frontal assault.”

“We’ve got some experience doing this, Marshal. We’ll split up and attack the compound from two sides.”

“Sound like a good way for someone to get caught in the crossfire that way.”

“No. We’ll come in at angles from the southwest and southeast. All gunfire will be to the north. No crossfire. Like I said, this is not our first rodeo.”

“Alright. That sounds good. I’ll ride with your group.”

By this time the dead horses had been dragged off the road. Haley had their riders set up watch near the entrance to the Dalmont place.

Tom expected some kind of gate, although the land was not fenced. If the Dalmonts raised cattle, they pastured them somewhere in the interior.

What they did find was an arch with the name “Dalmont” carved in wooden letters stretching over the entrance. The caliche road wandered off deeper

into the property, following the high ground of gently rolling ridges and hills.

Haley rode over to the other group.

“Em, do you know where you’re going?”

“I do. Be careful, Haley.”

“You, too.”

Em led half the Fae out into the pasture, heading to the left side of the road.

Haley looked at the marshal, Tom and Gwen, and her remaining riders as she returned to the first group.

“Follow me.”

She guided her horse to the right side of the road.

Twenty minutes later, Haley paused the group, holding up her hand. She pointed to the ridge of a gentle slope while consulting a pocket map, looking at the holo in her hand.

“The Dalmont’s place is on the other side of that ridge, about 150 meters or so. Let’s see if we can spot Em’s group. Everybody stay here.”

“Don’t you have some sort of communication device to contact them with, Ms. Stonecipher?”

“No, Marshal. We don’t have implants, and we don’t have an AI on this planet yet.”

“I know that. I just thought maybe you’d have a pair of transceivers or something.”

Haley shook her head.

Metger muttered something under his breath about living in the Iron Age out here.

She approached the ridge, dropping down to her belly near the top. Haley carefully peered over the top.

Tom and Gwen dismounted and walked up there with her. So did the marshal. They all peeked over the ridge.

On the downhill slope, a beautiful green valley showed fields planted with crops, a pecan tree orchard, and four two-story houses along with several barns, stables and outbuildings, all fenced off from the pastures by wooden posts. A gate barred entry on the caliche road to the compound's interior.

The Ever Riders were out in force. They patrolled the perimeter of the fence in pairs, walking around the compound, heads swiveling. Two manned the gate at the road, idly chit-chatting but watching for anyone on approach.

"There's a sniper on each house's rooftop," Haley said softly, making sure her voice did not carry across the pasture to the guards below. "Makes sense. They're at the highest points. I can see three, but not the fourth. They're covering the cardinal directions."

"I hope the one facing us doesn't look this way," Metger said.

Haley said, "If there's 60 Ever Riders, how many are outside? Twenty? So, we've got a lot more inside to worry about. Which house is Malcolm's, Gwen?"

Gwen's ears reddened, embarrassed to know the answer.

"It's on the far side, the one where we can't see the sniper."

"It's safe to say, Marshal, that your man is in his own house. Once we start shooting, I imagine the other 40 Riders will come out. Maybe the Dalmonts, too."

"Maybe. In my experience, this type likes to hole up in a safe room or something, surrounded by an inner circle for protection. If he's smart, it'll be a layered defense, growing increasingly more difficult the closer we get. But I agree, more guns will show up once the fireworks start, regardless. Speaking of which, how will your other group know when to attack?"

"They'll attack when we do, don't worry."

"How do you know they're ready?"

“Look off to our left, along the ridgeline as it slopes that way. Do you see it, Marshal?”

Metger squinted, hampered by a lack of enhanced sight.

“I see a . . . is that a white square of cloth?”

“A lady’s handkerchief. It’ll look like litter or something if the snipers notice it. But it means that Em and her girls are in place. They’ll wait for us to take the lead.”

Together the four pulled back from the ridge and returned to the others. Haley started handing out orders.

“Gwen, stay behind the ridge and open up with Big Bertha. That’ll be everyone’s cue to go over the top and charge. Marshal, stay behind us. We will get you to the compound safely if you let us go first and you stay behind the line. Tom, you’ve got blaster-proof accouterments like I do. I’d like you out front with me. We’ll attract any shots from those left standing after Gwen finishes shooting. Everyone ready?”

Gwen tied Bessie to a tree and patted her neck, whispering a few soft words. Then she returned to the ridge, unstrapping the Firedog 3W along the way. Going back down on her belly, she carefully peeked over the top, then pulled the big gun into position as it warmed up.

Weeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeee!

She took careful aim at a pair of Ever Riders patrolling the perimeter . . . and squeezed the trigger.

1.38

PHLABAM!

A bolt of energy streaked out from the ridge to the distant fence line in the blink of an eye.

Air exploded around the two guards, knocking them flat.

Gwen adjusted her aim, picking another pair of guards farther from the gate. They tensed, bending their knees, looking in the direction of the first blast.

PHLABAM!

To her left, Tom and Haley's horses crested the top of the ridge at a canter, jumping over the incline and arcing down on the other side in a smooth equine jump.

Haley's horse picked up speed on the downhill side as she urged it into a gallop, kicking her heels into its sides. Lucas raced after, struggling to keep up.

PHLABAM!

Another streak cracked out from the ridge, the Whillicker Wildcat taking out another pair of guards.

Behind Tom and Haley the Fae crested the ridge, screaming at the top of their lungs, horses charging full tilt. One after another jumped over, flying down the slope in graceful arcs.

On the other side of the valley, more Fae crested the ridge screaming, horses galloping and guns blazing.

The sniper on the closest rooftop took aim at Tom and Haley, the nearest threats. Tom grunted as a blast hit him square in the chest, tossing him out of the saddle. He tumbled backward, head over heels, and landed flat on the ground, knocking the wind out of him.

Suddenly riderless, Lucas turned away from the scary gunfire. Terrified, he ran back for the ridge as fast as he could.

The gunman aimed at Haley next, ignoring her shots. She fired in his direction at full auto, but the galloping gait threw her aim off.

PHLABAM!

The Whillicker Wildcat reached out again, blowing a hole in the roof and sending the sniper airborne for a moment. His rifle flew away. His dead body rolled down the incline, dropping to the ground like a sack of sand. Smoke drifted up from a fresh hole on top of the house.

Tom stood up, dazed, as dozens of Fae galloped past him screaming and shooting.

He felt at his side for his gun and found it still holstered. Pulling it out, he ran for the compound on foot.

Men poured out of the homes, like hornets from a nest. Everyone held pistols or rifles.

PHLABAM!

Gwen knocked down a dozen men at once as they filed out a door. More ran out after them, though, jumping over the bodies and scrambling for cover, shooting back at the charging Fae.

Men flowed out of a house in back. These had cover from Gwen's position and she did not see them. A few peeked around the corners of the front

buildings and started firing on the Fae from there.

Haley kept her horse racing for the wooden fence, a meter and a half high. It jumped and gracefully topped the barrier, as if flying for a moment. Then she landed inside the perimeter with a thump of hooves and a blaze of gunfire, spraying the yard on full auto.

Dozens of shots answered back, slamming into her and the horse. But the sand dragon skins held up well, and both survived the onslaught.

PHLABAM!

Gwen blew a hole in the fence. Dozens of Fae came in behind Haley, streaming through the brand new opening. Soon there were too many targets for the Ever Riders to hit. The women returned fire on full auto, swapping out weapons as soon as their power packs depleted.

The other Fae arrived, spraying the far side of the compound with blaster fire now.

Another sniper belly-crawled into a better position to face the threats.

Gwen saw him and a streak of firepower arced across the valley to his rooftop. A loud bang and a puff of smoke went up . . . but she missed. The sniper scrambled back, unwilling to face another shot from the mighty 3W.

By that time, the Fae reached the two front houses.

“Mind the windows!” Haley shouted.

As if on cue, one burst open with a shower of broken glass. An Ever Rider stuck his gun out, shooting one of the women in the face.

Six Fae responded with a hail of bullets smashing into his body, knocking him back. Other strikes hit inside the room and around the outer wall. Wood ignited somewhere, and smoke trickled out the broken window. Men inside scrambled to put out the fire.

Metger cantered through the busted fence, safe from snipers and other gunmen now. A few more blaster shots sounded as Fae finished off the last of the resistance on this side of the Dalmont family compound.

Behind the marshal, Tom ran through on foot, panting and hot under the dragon skin. He looked around as the firefight on this side died down. Most Ever Riders here had already been shot and were either dead or wounded.

Glancing over his shoulder, he tried to find Gwen. A very small lump disrupted the line where ridge met sky. She waved at him, and he remembered her enhanced sight. He waved back.

Satisfied, he ran deeper into the compound's yard. Haley made a "follow me" motion, and the women with her surged to the back two houses. But a line of cowboys headed out of the nearest one, all shooting on their way out the door.

Fae dropped to the ground and returned fire. Men scrambled for cover. One ducked behind a well. Three more sought cover behind an outhouse. Red and green bolts streaked through the air, heavy with the smell of ozone, energy crackling.

Metger caught up with Haley as she peered carefully around the corner of a house.

He yelled in her ear over the gunfire.

"Any sign of our boy?"

"He's going to be in the last house!"

Before they could go anywhere, eight more men ran out of the third home, shooting. They clustered near the outhouse, bringing a dozen guns to bear. Blaster fire covered the house, the grounds, and all points in between.

"They've got us pinned down!" one of the Fae shouted.

Tom ran up to the safe spot behind the house with Haley and Metger. He stopped to catch his breath, hands on his knees. Then he poked his head around the side. Bolts flew everywhere, but the Ever Riders had the high ground. Glass broke out from two upstairs windows as more men inside shot down on the Fae.

Haley cursed.

"This don't look good," Metger said, agreeing with the profanity.

“I’ve got something that might help,” Tom said, fishing in a pocket while holstering his gun.

He pulled out a thick black disk and thumbed it, activating the mechanism.

“I know what those things are,” Metger said with a frown. “They’re called ‘boppers.’ They’re heavily restricted. Military use only. New technology, too. How did you get one out here?”

“There’s a time and place for that discussion, Marshal. Just a minute, I need a clear throw.”

Tom stepped further out. The motion attracted one of the shooters in a window, and Tom took a blast to the shoulder.

He grunted as the tough hide absorbed the bolt, then he slung the little disk like a Frisbee toward the outhouse.

“Don’t look,” Tom said, pulling back behind the corner of the house.

The little disk sailed over the heads of the Fae and dropped behind the outhouse in a perfect spinning arc.

A flash as bright as the sun lit up the entire compound.

The cowboys screamed, suddenly blinded. All the shooting stopped.

Tom nodded at the other two, pulling out his gun.

“Now we can get ’em.”

The three stepped out around the corner, shooting.

1.39

From the ridge where they started, the four houses were arranged in a diamond pattern. The house at the point facing them and the one to its left were first to be neutralized. This third house was the one to their right.

Men groaned near the third house, if they still breathed. Most were blinded when the bopper detonated. Those who could see, or at least still had the presence of mind to fight, tried to shoot. But everything within the EMP's radius had been taken out.

Most of the Fae were unaffected, save for the three closest to the outhouse. The others could see, although many suffered afterimages left over from the flash. But the bopper had detonated behind the outhouse, and the structure had mostly shielded them from the intense burst of light.

One of the gunmen on the second floor either stood back before the bopper detonated, or he retrieved another gun. He was the only one left standing, and he shot down at the women below.

Haley, Metger and Tom fired into the second floor window on full auto, sending a shower of blaster bolts into the room. The cowboy fell out headfirst, dead before he hit the ground.

The Ever Riders still alive dropped their useless weapons and held their hands up as the Fae approached.

“Secure them. March them out of the yard and into the field out front. Shoot anyone who looks at you funny.”

The three women Haley pointed to nodded and motioned for the men to move. They prodded the blinded men with their guns. As soon as everyone rounded the corner, Haley turned back to the marshal.

“He’ll be in the next house. How do you want to handle it?”

“Oh, y’all are doing fine so far.”

He turned to Tom and said, “Got anymore of those highly restricted boppers handy? You could toss one or two inside the house and be done with it.”

Tom shook his head.

“No. Like you said, they’re restricted. I only brought a couple with me, and that was the second one. I doubt they’d cover the whole house, anyway. The EMP effect is highly localized.”

One of the Fae walked up and showed something to Haley.

She said, “We’ve got this. It’s not nearly as high tech as those bopper thingies, but I bet it’s just as effective.”

The marshal stared down at the Molotov cocktail the young woman held, a handkerchief stuffed into a bottle filled with flammable liquid.

He said, “That’s young people for you. Always thinking violence is the answer to everything.”

“It’s the answer to a lot of things,” Haley said. “Especially when somebody has guns and they’re shooting at you.”

Metger reached into his pocket and pulled out a small conical device.

“Let’s try another way. If it doesn’t work, then we can burn the whole place down.”

Haley made an “after you” gesture and Metger rounded the corner. She followed him, as did several other Fae.

Tom turned and waved at the ridge. They would be walking out of Gwen's sight now.

Everyone gathered at the corner of the third house. One of the women popped her head around the side and promptly pulled it back in a hail of gunfire.

"They're barricaded in there," she said, eyes wide.

Metger put the conical device to his lips and everyone realized it was a miniature megaphone. His voice boomed out, echoing off the wooden buildings.

"This is Marshal Miller Metger. I am here for one man, and one man only: Malcolm Dalmont. Now here's the thing, you men still in there with him. I've got a small army out here. We can come in, shootin' and blowin' things up, and a lot of you will die. Or . . . you can grab that Dalmont fellow and drag him out here. You can bring him to me. There's a 50,000 credit reward for his capture."

He pulled the mini-megaphone down and smiled at Haley.

"That ought to do it."

"You're still giving us most of that reward, aren't you?"

"Of course, of course. But we've got to get him first, and this is the path of least resistance. Maybe."

He put the megaphone back to his lips.

"You have three minutes to bring him out here before we burn the whole place down."

"They're talking about it," Haley said, tilting one ear toward the house.

"They're arguing. Mal is telling them he'll double the reward. Matt Ever is saying Mal doesn't have that kind of money. He's right. A hundred thousand is a lot."

She paused, frowning.

“Oh! Somebody hit somebody. Hard. Okay, they’re coming to the door. I guess we’ll find out.”

Cautiously, Haley leaned around the corner to watch the house. When no one shot at her, the marshal stuck his head out, too.

The front door burst open, and two men dragged Malcolm Dalmont out, one on either side. Blood dripped off his face as his head lolled, evidently knocked unconscious.

“Marshal! Here’s your man!”

Metger smiled at Haley.

“You see? You don’t always have to use violence in every situation.”

She shrugged and said, “Sure. Bribery works sometimes, I guess.”

1.40

The next day, Marshal Metger prepared a speech in front of Ferguson's Freehold.

Tom and Gwen stood beside him, along with Haley, Em and the other Fae. The whole town pressed in around the front of the pub to see the marshal off.

Beside him, Malcolm Dalmont stood confined inside a containment suit. Dark gray polymer covered his entire body, keeping him immobile. No one could see his face, and he could not see, speak or move. The suit looked like a blank, featureless statue.

Pipes fed into the polymer covering his head, where Metger explained a tracheotomy tube kept the prisoner nourished and hydrated. Other pipes below the belt line handled waste, although the marshal did not dwell on that. A unit on the back took care of all the liquids going into and out of the prisoner's body, along with the air supply. Everything remained self-contained.

Gwen stared at the featureless statue suit. A small holo floating above the head showed vital signs, the only indication Dalmont remained alive inside the polymer.

"How long can he stay like that?" she said, horrified.

“Long enough for me to get him back to Juventas. Longer actually. I think the record for holding a prisoner in a containment suit is six months. But don’t you worry about that. I plan on delivering him alive so he can stand for trial and pay for his crimes.”

Metger turned and addressed the crowd that had gathered, using his mini-megaphone. His voice echoed off the buildings.

“I must go now. On behalf of the Marshal’s Service, I thank you all for your hospitality. When I get Mr. Dalmont back to civilization, and he is formally arraigned, I will divide the reward appropriately. The Fae Phalanx has proven enormously helpful. Without them, I would not have gotten close to the fugitive. They will receive 25,000 credits for their efforts, a full half-share of the reward money.”

The crowd stirred at this amount. Tom noticed none of the Fae seemed overly pleased, though. They obviously felt they deserved more. He sympathized with the women, having faced the line of fire along with them.

“Mr. Savage and Ms. Wilder are not part of the Fae, but they helped considerably in this endeavor, fully participating in efforts to retrieve Mr. Dalmont. They will each receive 2,500 credits.”

Tom’s eyebrows rose at this. He had not expected a share of the reward. Judging by the look on Gwen’s face, she hadn’t either.

“The Ever Riders, the ones who gave up Mr. Dalmont with a little encouragement from the Fae, will receive 20,000 credits deposited into their joint account. This I believe is a fair amount, since they were the ones who actually handed the fugitive over, directly into my custody.”

Tom watched James Ever’s face, out in the crowd. The leader of the Ever Riders, a tall dark man in his late 30s, did not look happy, either. Tom thought he probably expected the full award. But if so, the mercenary made no outward indications he would fight anyone over it. Not out here in the open, anyway.

Metger spoke a while longer, mainly to sing the praises of the Marshal’s Service, an organization whose resources were shared by both major

systems, whose valiant personnel always remained willing to go wherever justice is needed, etc. etc.

Finally, everyone heard a distant boom in the air and looked up. A single sky train car descended from the haze.

“That’s my sign to wrap this up. The Fae will accompany me in the boarding process. I’d appreciate the rest of you staying here, in order to give us some room.”

With that, the marshal pushed on the containment suit. Tom realized it stood, or was mounted, on top of Metger’s hover platform. The marshal picked up a suitcase by hand and left the porch, heading around the back of the pub and into the field where the sky train car descended.

The Fae clustered around him, making sure the Ever Riders or anyone else could not backstab him easily. Five women stayed behind at the pub’s porch, holding one hand out and covering their pistol grips with the other, watching the crowd.

People got the hint and no one followed.

As the car landed and the door opened, Metger said, “Glad to see them here on time. The *Sky Slip* was the closest train, but they’re charging me an extortionist’s fee to detour back here and then head straight to League City.”

The train’s steward stepped out of the car and helped load the containment suit along with Metger’s luggage.

The marshal turned at the door before boarding.

“Oh, I almost forgot. Here’s a little message for you two lovebirds.”

He handed a portable holo player to Tom, the size and shape of an old business card.

Tom said, “Oh, we’re not . . .”

Gwen looked highly embarrassed, her ears turning pink.

All the Fae wore face-splitting smiles at this exchange.

“Right, right,” Metger said, dismissing their protests with a wave of his hand. “Well, hopefully nobody else will wander out here to the edge of nowhere trying to avoid justice. You can’t escape the long arm of the law, no matter how far away you go. That’s the key message I want to leave you all with.”

Metger eyed the 3W strapped on Gwen’s back as he said this.

He graced them with a rare smile and stepped into the car. The door slid shut and everyone backed away as it rose into the air.

The Fae wandered off, most of them heading to the stables to fetch their horses. Everyone wished Tom and Gwen well. The crowd dispersed, except for a few who went inside the pub for a drink and to talk.

Tom kept an eye on Ever’s men, but they did not seem inclined to start trouble.

Then the sound of crying caught his ear.

He peeked around the back of one of the buildings near the landing field and found Hervé leaning against a wall, bawling his eyes out.

Tom and Gwen cautiously approached. She knew who the boy was, but Tom had never met him.

Gwen gently touched the boy on the shoulder and said, “Hervé? What’s the matter?”

The story came out about the marshal’s promise to consider sending him a share of the reward money, and Hervé had waited with bated breath to find out how much he would take home. But the marshal never said a word about it.

When Tom figured out what happened, he gave the boy a pat on the back.

“Don’t worry. You can have my share when it comes in.”

Hervé stopped crying and looked into his eyes with an amazed expression.

“Are . . . are you serious?”

“Absolutely. You deserve it more than I do, anyway. It was just an oversight by the marshal. We would not have been as prepared for battle if we hadn’t known the mercenaries were there waiting for us.”

“You can have mine, too, Hervé.”

He turned to Gwen.

“I . . . I can’t take your money, Ms. Wilder!”

She shrugged it off.

“Tom’s right. You deserve this. It’s ten percent of the total, and I’d say that’s about right for what you did, warning everybody about the Ever Riders. We’ll transfer it to your parent’s account in League City when we get it, if they have one. If not, we’ll make sure you get the tokens for it.”

“Thanks! You guys are great!”

Hervé ran off to go tell his family.

Tom and Gwen smiled at each other, then headed to Cajun Cal’s to retrieve their horses.

1.41

Gwen and Tom rode Bessie and Lucas at a stately pace out of town. They decided not to put the dragon skin armor back on the horses, hoping it would not be needed. In the heat of the summer, both steeds had suffered wearing the pelts, although the tough hide saved their lives more than once. Tom rolled the skins up and tied them behind their saddles with smart straps.

Neither said much as they rode out of town, heading back for the homestead. They made it half a kilometer when the Fae met them on the side of the road. Eighteen of the women rode out from the woods.

“Did you think you were going to leave without saying goodbye?” Haley said, giving them both a mock scowl.

“Actually, I’m glad you came out to see us,” Gwen said. “I need to hand Big Bertha back over to you.”

Haley held her hand up and said, “Nope. That gun is yours. And you used it well yesterday. It belongs with you, and that’s where it’s going to stay.”

“But . . . the Fae might need it. You saw how it can make a real difference in a firefight.”

Em spoke up, smiling as she tucked a strand of hair behind her ear.

“Gwen, nobody else is willing to shoot that thing. It’s a literal beast. We’re all scared of it. You keep it.”

Gwen smiled and stopped arguing, strapping the gun to her back again.

Haley said, “So. How long are you going to stay out there? Since you two aren’t married or anything.”

Gwen shrugged.

“I don’t know. We’ll see.”

She caught Tom’s eye and smiled. He smiled back. They both blushed when they realized everyone else noticed. All the girls grinned at them.

They said their goodbyes and promised to see everybody again soon. The Fae drifted back to the woods while the couple resumed heading north.

Some time later after the road degraded to a path, they heard the sound of clanking as an enormous bot stepped out from a cluster of trees.

“Timmy! It’s good to see you!”

Bessie and Lucas moved sideways, shying away from the bot as it approached. Timmy fell in behind them several meters back. Both horses snorted and lowered their ears, but kept walking.

“I’m glad we didn’t need him,” Tom said. “What with Marshal Metger making such a big deal about your gun and my boppers being marginally legal . . .”

“Marginally? Our stuff is totally illegal anywhere else. He was very surprised to see these weapons out here.”

“Well, imagine how he’d feel seeing an X99 battle bot showing up and shooting everybody.”

“Hm. Good point. I’m glad nobody else saw Timmy, either. It makes him sort of like our ace in the hole, you know?”

At last they neared the homestead, passing by the MicaBot sawmill. It stood quiet, not producing anything. Soon they rounded a bend and looked at the bridge standing where they left it.

Crossing over, they found a corral with a wooden fence, and stables for six horses the little bots had recently erected. Tom dismounted and opened the gate. They stripped the tack from their mounts, finding places to store everything inside a connecting barn.

Gwen took out a brush and started rubbing down Bessie. Tom followed suit with Lucas.

He said, "We should get some grain in here so we can bed them down overnight."

"Leave the gate open. They can eat grass and we'll call them back when we need them."

They headed for the house next, and Tom smiled at the little pile of gold coins on the porch.

He picked them up, then opened the door and they headed for the kitchen. He popped open two packages marked "Carne Guisada," handing one over to Gwen.

After eating for a while, she said, "Well? Let's see what the marshal has to say."

"Probably fussing about our weapons," Tom said, pulling the holo player out of his pocket.

He set the flat, transparent rectangle in the center of the table and thumbed the middle. Metger's head appeared in the air above the player.

The holo had built-in virtual sensors, and the marshal's eyes met them both, swiveling between them as if he were really there and not just the recording of a disembodied head.

"I wanted to let you two know, that I know who you are."

His eyes twinkled, and just the hint of a rare smile appeared on the old man's lips.

"I thought I could guess when I first met you, Tom, whose boy you were. Your name sounded awfully familiar, and I knew I heard it somewhere before. So I did some digging tonight, and checked with my contact back in

League City. You did not immigrate here with your complete name. So I suppose you didn't lie outright to immigration officials when you got off the ship. But maybe you lied by omission."

He paused dramatically, and the recorded eyes of the marshal seemed to lock with Tom's for a moment.

"Your full name is Thomas Savage Raleigh. You are the son of the galaxy's most famous pirate, Christopher Raleigh, and his wife, Lead Tetrarch Julius Thrall's daughter, Jillian Thrall."

He paused, looking very pleased with himself.

Gwen exchanged a glance with Tom. He shrugged, and did not deny the allegation.

"And as for you, Ms. Wilder . . ." the holo recording turned to her. "You were harder to pin down. But I did manage to figure it out, with a little help. Your real name is Gwendolyn Wilcox Del Rio. You are the only child of the Diego Zeitung's editor-in-chief, Javon Del Rio, and his wife, Agency of Justice Director Gina Wilcox Del Rio."

He paused, with a smug expression on his face.

Tom raised a questioning eyebrow at her.

She said, "Wilder is sort of an amalgamation of Wilcox Del Rio. I thought of it while standing in the immigration line."

"Ah."

"So, I happen to know, Ms. 'Wilder,' " the recording continued, "that you are the daughter of the top law enforcement officer in the Republic. But that also means your maternal grandmother was the infamous Gertrude 'Granny' Wilcox, who served as Quartermaster on the *Ultima Mule*, Captain Raleigh's privateering ship during the war."

"Hey, that's neat," Tom said. "I think I met you, sort of, at a reunion when we were kids. Didn't your mom serve on the *Mule*, too?"

"A little bit. There were some joint operations with Naval Intelligence, from what I understand. She doesn't talk a lot about the war."

“It’s all probably still classified, I bet.”

Metger’s recording interrupted them.

“I am truly curious what the kids and grandkids of the most famous, most successful pirate crew in history are doing out in the middle of nowhere. You’re not only on a Godforsaken planet, you two are about as far away from the nearest big city as you can get on that Godforsaken planet.”

“I didn’t even know who you were,” Gwen protested.

“I didn’t know who you were, either. But it’s a neat coincidence, I guess.”

“Yeah, but he’s gonna think it’s sinister.”

“Maybe, maybe not.”

“Trust me, I know. Cops are trained to be suspicious of everybody. It was heck growing up. You think dating is easy when your mother is the Director of AOJ? She knew more about my boyfriends and their families than I did!”

Before he could answer, Metger continued. Tom settled for offering her a sympathetic look instead.

“If you’re up to no good out here, be assured that the law will eventually catch up with you. This planet you’re on is not aligned with a system yet. But the day will come when it will be. And I don’t care if Phaethon joins with the League, the Republic, or even the Lutian Alliance . . . if you are operating outside the law, I will come back and find you, and arrest you. I don’t care who your parents are.”

His holo looked stern, scowling at them both as it floated above the kitchen table.

Tom said, “You know, I believe him. He’s a tough old guy. He came after Mom back in the day.”

Metger’s holo said, “You both know the reputation of the Marshal’s Service. Tom, you may or may not realize that I came after your mother before you were born, when she was a fugitive of sorts.”

“Yeah. Dad had to marry her because the Tetrarch, my grandfather, had her declared incompetent by the courts. He sent the Marshal’s Service to fetch her from Lute. That was after Dad sort of, you know, kidnapped her.”

Gwen grinned and said, “So in a way, he’s responsible for you being born.”

“Let’s not take it that far.”

“Anyway,” the recording interjected, “that’s all I wanted to say. Watch yourself. And stay out of trouble. Both of you.”

The recording winked out, and the marshal’s holographic head disappeared.

“Well, there goes all our plans for larceny and mayhem,” Gwen quipped.

“Maybe,” Tom said, smiling back at her. “Or maybe we can keep it all on the down-low.”

“Yeah. That sounds like more fun.”

1.42

The following morning after breakfast, Tom and Gwen sat on the back porch drinking coffee, this time in two new Adirondack chairs.

A pinprick of light appeared in the eastern sky, cutting through the haze.

“Here comes the new containment unit,” Tom said. “It’s about time.”

The light grew larger and larger, until a sonic boom reached them and a capsule quickly slowed down, thrusters burning hot.

The bus-sized object slowed to a crawl in the air, then landed vertically next to the other one behind the house. They left their coffee on the porch and walked over to inspect it.

Steam drifted off the vessel’s hot surface, rapidly cooling as they approached. The door dilated open for them.

Inside, crates were stacked with all kinds of supplies. Tom quickly found one marked “SCU.” He called Timmy over to carry it out of the capsule.

“What else did they send? And who sent it? Your parents, or the company they set up?”

“Both, I think. Oh, hey! Here’s wiring for the house. We can have lights and air conditioning now. And . . . awesome! They sent a bunch of pipes. I’ll

have to program the MicaBots so they'll know what to do with all this stuff. I don't know about you, but I am looking forward to a shower."

The sun rose high in the sky before they finished unloading the capsule with Timmy's help. Tom spent time explaining to the MicaBot's terminal what he wanted it to do with all the new material. The tiny bots appeared and began taking spools of wire and lengths of poly pipe out of cartons, marching them over to the house.

Once everything was taken care of and in motion, they broke for lunch. Four of the new crates included more meal kits, most of them involving poshbirds.

"We sort of have a big poshbird farm. Uh, several actually. I'm glad you like it. I guess you could say my parents have a corner on poshbird exports right now, to be honest. They'll probably send more meals. A lot more."

"That's okay. My parents own some businesses, too."

"Yeah?"

"Yeah. Granny was big into investments. It rubbed off on Mom. The Firedog Armory was one. They pretty much bought it out of bankruptcy and turned it into a major weapons producer after the war."

"That's a good one."

"Yeah. Mom insisted I take along the 3W."

"That's cool."

"Dad has major shares in the Zeitung, so I guess you could say we own part of a major media company, too."

"Very nice. My parents invested in Sergio Productions after the League disbanded the tetrarchy."

"Is that the one where the *Mule* kidnapped the scion or something?"

"Yeah."

They paused in their banter, leading to an awkward silence.

Finally, Gwen broke it.

“I came out here to find myself. I mean, I think it’s every kid’s dream to help colonize a planet, and I wanted to do something with my life. But as soon as I get here, everybody who sees me wants me to get married. And I’m not ready for that. My dreams did not include cleaning a farmhouse and getting pregnant every year somewhere out on the prairie.”

He nodded, following along as she continued.

“Not that there’s anything wrong with that, you understand, but it’s not what I wanted to do at this moment. Thank God for the Fae Phalanx. Haley had a bunch of likeminded women who banded together for protection, and each other. They try to do some good out here as rangers.”

She smiled sweetly.

“Anyway, thanks for letting me hang around. I’m still trying to find myself.”

“Absolutely. I’m glad you’re here. I’m trying to prove myself, too. Dad said I could learn a lot by setting up a ‘field office,’ as he called it, all on my own. He talked about letting me make mistakes. ‘Mistakes are the best lessons, son. Try to make them when they don’t cost other people’s lives. Or your own.’ He likes to say things like that.”

Gwen laughed at the impersonation of his father.

“That sounds like something a starship captain would say.”

“Yeah. So, here I am. Young and dumb, and making mistakes like blowing up containment units.”

“Well . . . at least it didn’t kill anyone. Like your dad said, if you’re gonna make mistakes, hopefully they don’t cost any lives.”

He nodded.

Neither spoke for a moment.

Gwen looked up into his eyes and smiled again.

“So, are we gonna harvest a star particle today, or what?”

“I guess we should try before dark, huh? Timmy! Carry that thing for us.”

-+-

An hour later, the new solar containment unit stood all set up on a different rock, several meters away from the massive crater left by the old one.

Timmy ran through the desert nearby in a grid pattern, scaring away Big Ugly. The sand dragon burst out of cover, plumes of dust flying up. It ran deeper into the desert, shrieking in rage as the battle bot chased it away.

A voice came over Tom’s implant.

“Hello, Thomas. Are we ready to harvest solar particles? This will be our second attempt, Particle Two.”

“Yes we are, Lisa. I want you to pull in the bare minimum this time.”

“The bare minimum is one gram of dense solar matter. Are you sure that is what you want me to do?”

“Yes, I’m sure. Let’s get a baseline established and we’ll go from there.”

Tom and Gwen stood a hundred meters away from the black box as Timmy ran back to their location. They tied both horses to rock outcroppings so the animals would not bolt away in the event of another catastrophe.

They stood together, all three watching as the distant cube hummed louder and louder, seeming to warm up to the task.

Gwen reached over and grabbed Tom’s hand, surprising him.

But he gripped hers back, and watched as Lisa teleported a tiny piece of Phaethon’s sun into the big black box . . .

End of Book 1

PARTICLE TWO

2.1

A door set in concrete on a small isolated island opened, one obviously rarely used in two and a half decades.

Flexible mil-spec seals endured, though, and the slanted door's surface broke smoothly, letting a burst of fresh air tinged with salt of the sea rush inside a darkened corridor.

Light-emitting diodes brightened, recessed into the ceiling of a long concrete tunnel sloping down. The merry diodes seemed to race the fresh sea breeze, lighting up the long tunnel long after the salty gust wheezed out, deep underground.

Two men on the island's surface stared down at the angled walkway, now thoroughly lit with all its stale air gone.

One stood stooped and swarthy, an older man in his 60s. The other looked young, in his mid-20s. He had sharper eyes, tinted green, betraying a keen wit and a high intellect.

"How in the world did this place stay hidden for so long?" he said.

The older man shrugged, but he looked pleased. Almost smug.

Here stood a man sharing a secret few beside himself knew. He took a moment to revel in gnostic glory.

“Well, you know . . . After the Pugs took over, they arranged an election. But the Pugs came in before and after, and looted everything not nailed down. Anything military, or government-related. I suppose you’ve heard the SSI record retentions were kept here on Sporades?”

The young man nodded. It was a legend now, but no doubt the story had a strong basis in truth. The Republicans came in and raided the SSI backup servers, somehow stealing all the data from the League’s secret police going back years. They used it on subsequent League worlds they conquered, systematically eliminating agents and freeing any political prisoners still alive.

Some said they still used the data, even now. One documentary he saw likened it to the Israelis hunting down Nazis in South America decades after World War II.

League citizens did not always care for that analogy. Those left under StarCen and still living in the former tetrarchy had a different view of things. Rather than recall the tyranny of those days, they preferred to see the past in rose-colored glasses.

Stalwarts noted that things ran well under the old AI before she was reset. Crime had been low (mainly because most prisoners were executed), and civil unrest was unheard of (mainly because most dissenters were hunted down and executed).

The League remained open to reabsorbing its former quadrants, and made no secret about it. StarCen, the League’s AI, assured PLAIR, the Planetary Republic’s AI, that she would only encourage former planets to hold elections, not revolutions. StarCen would then willingly reincorporate any former territory that wanted back in the fold. It would all take place peacefully, at the ballot box.

So far, only minor outposts had reverted. Twenty years was long enough for a planet’s population to turn over, however. Many who suffered under the yoke of the tetrarchs’ tyranny had passed away. Many more under the age of 20 had never known what being ruled by a dictatorship was like.

So, hope sprang eternal for the League to convince some of their old major holdings to turn back and readopt their former government.

Sporades, an ocean planet with tens of thousands of scattered islands and very little mainland, remained firmly in the Republic's aegis. Here, as on other major planets, all elections so far uniformly favored remaining under Republican rule.

And so it remained. The new Republican planets maintained their representative democracies, with regularly scheduled elections rather than reverting to autocratic rule in the League.

Even if the trains ran on time over there.

"What'd you say your name is again?"

The older man ventured inside, heading down the concrete tunnel into the depths below. He called out the question over his shoulder.

The younger man followed, glancing back nervously at the open door.

"Wink McKelway," he said. "At your service."

"And you're a 'trader,' huh?"

"That's right. A merchant *par excellence*. A trader *extraordinaire*."

"Sounds like a smuggler to me."

Wink laughed it off.

"Let's just say I never let any pesky regulations get in the way of a fair trade, Mr. Billingsly."

Wink had no reason to hide his name. Customs kept track of who ported down onto planets, and with biometrics there was no hiding his true identity. For independent ships like his, the locals handled all teleportations, and they did not let anyone come down to the surface without knowing who, exactly, they were letting in.

Billingsly, on the other hand, was almost certainly a pseudonym, the young man thought. It was likely based on the old Tetrarch Billings, who had been in charge of Sporades before the Republican invasion during the war.

The older man smiled and said, "Uh huh. Well, here on Barton's Atoll, we've been kinda forgotten by everybody. A lot of stuff was left behind by

our LEAF boys after Sporades fell. Then, when the Pugs took over, much of that stuff just . . . disappeared.”

“I take it some of it disappeared down here,” Wink said, keeping up with the man as they continued heading down the long ramp. “Good thing the door is watertight. If it were ever left open in the rain you’d have an issue with moisture.”

Wink cracked a smile when he said this, but the older man did not. He just nodded, taking the comment seriously.

“Climate controlled. Low humidity. Are you familiar with the history of Soviet stockpiling of weapons, Mr. McKelway?”

“Um, no.”

“Well you see, after World War II the Soviets were fully convinced their former allies in the west were going to turn around and invade them. Stalin grabbed huge chunks of Europe and held on tight. He always expected another attack. Hitler tricked him once, and he wasn’t going to let that happen again. So, peace reigned . . . but the Soviets prepared for the next war. Wisely, I say. Have you ever seen an AK-47 preserved in Cosmoline, Mr. McKelway?”

“No. Can’t say that I have.”

“Well you should watch some of the old documentaries put out by Sergio Productions before the war. All their current stuff is crap, but the holos from twenty, thirty years ago are golden. They made some great stuff on the Soviets in their heyday. You know, the League borrowed a lot from the Soviets. My boy served on the Khrushchev.”

Wink rolled his eyes, but he walked slightly behind the older man and Billingsly did not notice.

At last they came to the end of the long ramp, deep under the surface. Here, the tunnel opened into a huge underground dome, dark as midnight.

Billingsly smiled at the young man and took one more step forward. As soon as his foot touched the floor of the vast open space, massive overhead lights clicked on, illuminating an area the size of several athletic fields.

Wink's jaw dropped.

Hundreds of battle tanks stood parked in rows, dully reflecting light off teardrop-sleek gunmetal-gray chassis. Main guns all pointed in the same direction, as if frozen in a parade stance, without a speck of dust on anything. They looked ready to float up and fly into battle at the drop of a hat.

"This," Billingsly said, "is what *I* got to trade."

He turned and looked with no small degree of satisfaction at the stunned expression on Wink's face. Slowly, the younger man pulled his eyes away from the largest stash of League battle tanks no one knew existed, and he locked eyes with the older man.

"How . . .?"

Billingsly chuckled and shook his head, unwilling to reveal more.

"Getting them off planet is going to be your biggest problem. But if you can manage that, I'm sure you can resell them for a pretty penny. These are fully operable without an AI, you see. Made for invasion, and war, with the strong possibility of losing contact with StarCen. So, each one is designed to be controlled by a human, making their own independent decisions. They still are. Even you can drive one of these right now. Everything is very intuitive. All their power packs are juiced up and ready to go. They've *been* ready to go for the last twenty years."

He grinned again at Wink's widening eyes.

"Like I said . . . getting them off planet is going to be your biggest problem."

2.2

“Jinx. Jinxie? Come in, Jinx.”

A young woman with dyed blue hair floated mindlessly in her cabin, in a state of bliss.

She ignored the insistent voice of her captain.

“JINXIE!”

“Okay! What? Why do you have to ruin everything, Wink? I was sleeping.”

“I’m going to need you to get down here.”

“Well, that’s going to be a problem. I’m *persona non grata* on Republican planets right now. Gosh, however am I supposed to get through customs? Oh yeah. That’s right. I can’t! So, no. I’m not coming down there. Next question. Or request, whatever.”

She could not see him over her implant, but she smiled, imagining his expression.

Jinxie Malone served not only as the ship’s pilot, navigator, second mate, ship’s cook and everything else . . . she was Wink McKelway’s girlfriend.

It bothered her not a whit that he was six years older, and often seemed more mature and thoughtful. She enjoyed pestering him, playing the brat.

“I’m not asking you to *port* down here, Jinx. I’m going to need you to bring the Pulsar down to my coordinates when I reach them.”

The smirk disappeared from her face.

“Wink . . . are you serious? That is a major violation of Sporades’s airspace. They’re not going to like it.”

“I’m aware of all the ramifications, Jinx. But I have acquired some cargo that we can’t bring up into orbit by normal means. And we don’t have the capacity to port it aboard ourselves, so . . .”

“Wait . . . what did you get that can’t be ported up? How big is it? How much of our money did you spend on this, Wink?”

Silence.

“Wink?”

“All of it? I don’t know, it was a lot. But it’s worth it, Jinxie!”

“*All* of it? Are you crazy? Wait, don’t answer that.”

Jinxie slapped a holo button on the wall and gravity returned to her cabin. Her feet thunked down to the deck as she returned to normal weight.

Her face carried doubt as heavy as the sudden G-force.

“I . . . I can’t believe you did that . . . I would have to go down there by dead reckoning. The Pulsar doesn’t have anything in our navigation databanks for landing on Sporades.”

“I know. But I know you can do it. I believe in you, Jinxie. Just follow my signal when I give it. I’ll transmit the coordinates when I get there.”

“Thanks. That does make me feel better. But still . . . they’re not gonna take this lying down. I don’t know if we’ll be able to get back in orbit if I stay down there too long. The old planetary defense system is still active. What am I going down there to pick up, anyway?”

“Can’t tell you. Sporades might be monitoring our link. Or rather, PLAIR might. I just need you to get here, to my spot, when I signal I’m ready. Then we’ll load up and take off again. Piece of cake.”

Billingsly had insisted the Pulsar land far away from the subterranean vault holding all the battle tanks. Wink had no idea how the man planned on sneaking these weapons of war off the island without anyone noticing. But the old man still had some cards up his sleeve.

They haggled over how many tanks Wink could buy, and for how much. The old man remained dead set on getting 50,000 credits per machine. He would not budge off that price.

“That’s highway robbery!”

“These are battle tanks. They’re for battle. They don’t even make these anymore. But you find the right buyer, and someone will give you two, three times that price. Then you can come back and buy some more. That is the fastest route you’ll ever find to becoming a millionaire, Mr. McKelway. I kid you not.”

Reluctantly, Wink agreed to purchase two of the weapons for 100,000 credits, which just about wiped out his bank account at First Galactic.

Of the major financial institutions, First Galactic was the only one still doing business in both the League and the Republic. Smugglers, and others operating on the periphery of the law, favored the bank since it remained under the League’s regulatory authority. The Republic had cracked down on money laundering and the use of bank accounts for illicit gains in recent years.

Billingsly opened a secure terminal for him, and Wink made the transfer.

“Now let’s get your two tanks to the drop-off point so your ship can come down and pick them up.”

“Okay. Where’s that?”

But Billingsly only smiled. He walked into the cavernous room and weaved between the tanks, heading to the other side. There, a warehouse door opened and more lights turned on, revealing a long room filled with dark

water. Wink could make out a dock with a long dark tubular shape floating nearby.

“Is that a submarine?”

“Cargo sub. And it can carry up to four tanks. But you only bought two. Come on, I’ll drive one. You can follow me in on the other one.”

2.3

“How does all this escape detection? I mean, I know we’re in a sub, but . . . aren’t there underwater sensors or something?”

“It’s true sound travels much faster underwater than it does in the air. And Sporades has a series of sensors underwater, but not for defense. Scientific research, mostly. Defense systems are all space-based, for external threats, such as they are.”

Wink stood with Billingsly on the bridge of the cargo sub. The older man had explained how the sub, like the tanks, were designed to be operated by one or two people, independent from the AI.

“Wait, I’ve seen some old movies about this. Those sound sensors should be able to hear us moving, right?”

Billingsly smiled.

“Two things. One, our propulsion system does not run on propellers like ancient submarines, but a force-projection system similar to standard space drives. So, it’s very hard for any sonic detectors to ‘hear’ us coming and going. We just sound like so many other underwater currents. Or maybe a big fish or something.”

“Oh.”

Wink chewed on this for a moment before another thought struck him.

“What’s the second thing?”

“We’re actually using an underwater network of tunnels that stretches around this location for kilometers. We’re on autopilot right now. We’ll come out at a random spot pretty deep, and almost certainly continue evading the Pugs’ detection. I don’t take this tub out too often. Been a few years, in fact. They’ll never see us, and they’ll never hear us.”

“Okay. Seems like you’ve thought of everything. Where will you deposit me and the tanks so my ship can pick us up?”

The old man smiled again, his face crinkling in amusement.

“It doesn’t exist yet.”

“Come again?”

“You’ll see.”

Billingsly chuckled in delight at Wink’s expression, one of bafflement combined with irritation.

“You’ll see,” he repeated.

Soon the graphical map on the holo at the front of the bridge shifted, and Wink felt the sub pick up speed. He realized they had reached open water, coming out of the massive tunnel network.

He tried to reestablish a connection with the Pulsar and Jinxie, but found they were still too deep for that. So he waited patiently. He could not tell how fast they were going, but it seemed to be speedy for underwater travel.

An hour later, the graphics altered again, and he realized they were ascending.

“Now you should be able to contact your people. You can give them these coordinates on the holo there. We’re a thousand clicks or so from the nearest island, and several hundred from any surface vessel. They should be able to land your space vessel with no trouble.”

The submarine surfaced and the holo changed once more to show an exterior view. Half-meter waves bobbed up and down as far as the eye could see, an endless expanse of dark blue water.

“Okay. But . . . where?”

Billingsly smiled again, and Wink found himself getting irritated at that smug expression on the old man’s face.

“Just watch.”

Wink looked back at the holo showing the open ocean and . . . he noticed something.

Meter-long white triangles of some kind seemed to be floating all around them.

Wink blinked and looked again.

The triangles . . . moved.

He watched as hundreds . . . thousands of white triangles clustered together on the surface. Then they seemed to lock, as if their molecules joined. First they formed hexagons . . . then the hexagons fused together.

They all seemed to move on their own accord, clustering in a spot on the ocean’s surface a hundred meters from the nose of the sub.

More quickly floated toward the center, and he noticed even more slipping under the first ones, buttressing and building up the others. A white circle quickly formed, lifting out of the waves and quickly growing larger, a large geodesic dome floating on the water, the top cresting well above the surface.

“What *are* those things?”

“Part of the old homeland defense network for Sporades, now defunct. Well, not entirely defunct, as you can see. Its called the Portable Island Emergency System, or PIES. But we always called it a ‘Pie in the Water’ whenever one formed. Millions of these buoyant triangular smart boards were released all over the world. They can come together and form an island wherever needed, anywhere on the ocean’s surface, given enough

time to gather. Internal power packs are constantly recharged by the sun and wave motion. They've been floating out here since the war, and the Pugs know nothing about it. Of course, some of them are defunct after all this time. But there's still plenty for our purposes. This PIE island they're forming right now will be plenty big for your ship to land and take off from. Then, it will just . . . disappear. The triangles will separate and float free again until the next time they're called."

Wink continued watching in amazement as the artificial island formed in front of his eyes. When it finished, the old man guided the sub up to the edge.

"Well, let's get your tanks offloaded. Then I'll be on my way."

Wink touched the implant under his ear.

"Jinxie! Are you there? I need you to land at my current coordinates."

"That's out in the middle of the water, Wink. You're literally in the middle of nowhere."

"No . . . No, it's not. Just trust me on this one. Get down here and you'll find a place to land."

2.4

“**P**etra Roe flagged ship Pulsar. Resume your position in orbit. You are in danger of violating Sporades airspace.”

“I know that, numbskull.”

Jinxie’s voice did not carry over the comlink. She ignored the warning lights flashing on the forward-facing holo, and did not respond to the hail from Rostin, where the planetary defenses were headquartered.

“Petra Roe flagged ship Pulsar. Please respond. Defense measures will proceed in ten seconds.”

“Oh shhhh . . . sugar.”

She waved a finger through a holo button on the bridge’s control panel, keeping her eyes on the forward view. Jinxie aimed the ship down, gripping the manual stick so hard her knuckles grew white.

“Uh, hello! Uh, this is the Pulsar. Mayday, mayday! I am making an emergency landing on your planet.”

The briefest of pauses ensued.

They’re probably wondering what I’m up to, she thought.

“Understood, Pulsar. Proceed to Rostin’s secondary municipal spaceport. We have pad sites for ships your size and technicians there can address the problem. I am transmitting coordinates now.”

“Uh . . . Roger that. Let me just orbit one more time. I’m at altitude 200 kilometers and descending by hand.”

Another pause, this one longer this time.

“We will alert any air traffic along your trajectory. Adjust course and proceed immediately to the spaceport.”

Air traffic? Makes sense, I guess, Jinxie thought. Wouldn’t want to knock anybody out of the sky.

Out loud she said, “I didn’t think about that . . . I *told* him this was a stupid idea!”

Below, the forward view showed Sporades, a magnificent ocean planet. She saw no continents, but Jinxie spotted a few of the larger islands through streaks in the white clouds.

The coordinate tracker on the holo quickly ticked by as she raced east to west. An alarm sounded and a big red arrow pointed down. She pushed forward on the stick and the ship’s nose dipped.

“Pull up, Pulsar. You are coming in too low to maintain proper course trajectory for Rostin.”

The *beep-beep-beep* of the hull’s temperature alarm sounded on the bridge.

Jinxie ignored that too, keeping her eyes on the coordinates tracker.

“Pulsar. Come in, Pulsar. You are off track.”

Irritated, she swiped a finger through the holo button again.

“Uh, guys? I’m not gonna make it to Rostin. Pulsar out.”

“Pull up, Pulsar. Your current trajectory will not take you to any land mass. Pulsar? Come in, Pulsar. You are landing in the water.”

The temperature alarm kept beeping, and she knew right now the ship must look like a meteor streaking across the sky to anyone watching below.

If there is anybody, she thought with a glance at the forward holo.

Nothing but blue water stretched out below.

She touched the implant under her ear.

“These better be the right coordinates, Wink!”

“Trust me, Jinx. I see you. Start slowing down.”

“I know how to do this!”

The forward engines roared, slowing her momentum as the ship came down at a sharp angle. Jinxie was now low enough she could make out individual waves on the water.

There, slowly filling up the view on her forward holo, a large white circle grew larger on approach.

“What is *that*?”

“That’s your landing spot. Set down right in the middle.”

“Is that thing gonna support our weight?”

“Yes. We’re not going to be here very long anyway. Open the cargo doors first thing.”

Jinxie eased back on the stick and the ship slowed precipitously. When she hovered over the artificial island, the coordinate tracker on the holo dinged and turned green. She swiped a finger through more buttons, initiating the landing sequence. The ship settled down and the engines turned off.

She felt the manmade landmass sink slightly as it accepted the spaceship’s weight. Then it bobbed back up in the water.

The Pulsar stood short and squat, a relatively small vessel mostly devoted to cargo space.

“The doors, Jinxie!”

“Okay! I’m not used to doing a land-based transfer!”

Quickly, she swiped a finger through another button floating on the control panel, and the rear door came down as a ramp, scraping the buoyant hexagons fused together.

Jinxie watched on the exterior rear view as an old League battle tank floated up the ramp and into their hold.

“Where did you get *that*?”

“Ask me no questions and I’ll tell you no lies. Now stay put, I’ll go get the other one. And hold our discussion until we leave. You don’t know who’s listening when we’re planetoid like this.”

She watched the tank park in the hold, settling down. When it stopped floating, the top opened. Wink jumped out and climbed down to the deck, then jogged back outside. Soon, both weapons of war were securely onboard.

“Let’s go! Close the doors and get us out of here.”

She swiped the door button again, then quickly ran through the lift off sequence. Standard engines fired up, and within seconds the ship hovered above the artificial island, now bobbing higher in the water without the weight.

Wink made his way to the bridge and sat down beside her, a smile on his face as they took flight.

“Where did those come from? And how did you get here?”

“Cargo sub. He’s already gone. The island will take itself apart after we leave. Speaking of leaving, we need to port out of orbit before the locals get wise and come after us.”

“They already directed me to a spaceport in Rostin. I think they’re pissed. I told them I had no choice, but they’re not going to buy that once they see us going back into orbit.”

The ship climbed higher in the air and Jinxie pivoted west before thrusting forward.

Behind them, the island broke apart as thousands of white triangles detached from one another. Wink watched it disintegrate in the rear view holo.

“Pulsar. Proceed to Rostin. Come in, Pulsar.”

The ship flew faster, struggling against the atmosphere pulling on the hull.

“Pulsar, come in. You are in violation of Sporades airspace. Proceed to the coordinates previously transmitted to you immediately.”

“You’d better say something, or they’re going to get mad.”

“Uh, hello! This is Pulsar. Yes, we are all good now. Uh, we fixed our problem after our emergency landing, and we’re now, uh, going to resume our position in orbit.”

Jinxie and Wink traded a glance as the ship’s speed increased, angling up in the sky.

He said, “You’re a terrible liar.”

A few seconds later, Jinxie realized something.

“They’re no longer responding. That’s worrisome.”

Another alarm sounded and the forward viewing holo swapped places with the rear. They saw a tiny pinpoint of light on the horizon, quickly growing larger.

“They’ve activated MARS, their missile defense system! We need to jump! Now!”

“We can’t port yet, Wink! We’re not supposed to while still in the atmosphere!”

The light grew brighter, a fiery circle rapidly expanding in diameter.

“Jump, Jinxie!”

“I can’t!

“Jump! Do it now!”

“It’ll tear us apart!”

The light grew bigger . . . bigger . . .

Wink slammed his hand down on the manual teleportation button just as a massive explosion lit up the sky.

2.5

Tom Savage and Gwen Wilder waited a moment, both holding their breath.

They stood in the Skoni Desert, horses to their backs. Yellow dust swirled in the distance, the unfettered view of rocks and sand broken only by a black box, one cubic meter in size.

Her hand gripped his. Tight.

“Is . . . is it in there?”

“Lisa?”

“Solar Particle Two has successfully been teleported into the containment field. Stabilizing.”

“Lisa says it’s in there.”

The unit hummed loudly as Tom and Gwen cautiously approached it, still holding hands.

A slight dusty breeze from the desert brushed her blonde hair and rustled his darker flattop. Ahead, the brown sands and rocks of the Skoni stretched away into a hazy horizon. The black box stood perched on a flat rock, near a giant crater.

“What are we looking at, Lisa? How are things holding up?”

The AI responded in Tom’s inner ear.

“One gram of solar matter from the inner core of Phaethon’s sun has expanded outside of its gravitational nexus to approximately four centimeters, or about the size of a ping pong ball. This is within the parameters of the solar containment unit’s artificial gravity to hold the sphere in place. It is hovering within the designated inner space inside the box. We are now ready to perform experiments.”

“What’s she saying?”

Gwen’s eyes never strayed from the humming black box. Neither did Tom’s.

“She says it’s the size of a ping pong ball now, and the SCU is able to contain it. It’s floating inside there, held in place by artificial gravity to keep it from exploding.”

“Great. What do we do with it?”

“What’s up first, Lisa?”

“First, we will examine the efficacy of solar absorption using the six panels installed in the inner cube. We have the most efficient cellular mix available, using a combination of silicon and enhanced monocrystalline structures. Under normal terrestrial atmospheric conditions, this mixture results in 54 percent efficiency when absorbing sunlight and converting it to electricity. I will monitor the particle for the next 24 hours, gauge the efficiency of the internal solar panel array, and deduce expected wattage among other things.”

“Okay.”

Tom turned to Gwen and said, “She’s monitoring stuff. Right now, she’s seeing how much solar radiation she can convert to electricity.”

“Have you . . . have you discovered a perpetual motion machine? Or some kind of limitless energy source? Will the solar chunk make enough power to recharge the SCU’s battery and keep going forever?”

“Ha! It’s a good question, but no. The unit is taking up more energy to hold the particle in place than it is receiving back from the particle. So no, not a perpetual motion machine. We may be able to get close to replenishing the battery, though not all the way. Our guys back on Lute have some ideas about thermal energy combined with solar that should produce more power. Imagine a miniature power plant with a cheap and virtually unlimited heat source.”

“That’s nice. Assuming the power pack holds out, then, how long will the solar particle last?”

“That’s another good question, and one of the purposes of all this is to find out. Lisa? How long do you think Particle Two will stay with us? It’s going to die out at some point, right?”

“That is another data point to monitor. I will know more in 24 hours.”

“She says give it a day or so and she’ll know more.”

“Okay. I guess we’ll come back tomorrow.”

They walked back toward the horses, still tied to a large rock some 100 meters away.

Gwen said, “It’s kinda fun, being on the cutting edge of science, huh? Nobody has really done stuff like this before, right?”

Tom rubbed his chin.

“Well, our company, that is my parent’s company, or at least one of them, tried some minor experiments sort of like this on Lute. But it was all deemed too dangerous. Some things blew up. And then the governor found out. He’s an investor and partner, so it was kind of hard to hide things from him. He was the one who suggested we take these experiments off world. And by ‘suggest,’ I mean he insisted.”

“So you’re telling me that this is all part of a vast conspiracy involving the major power movers in the Lutian Alliance?”

“Well, I wouldn’t go that far. But yeah, it’s kind of a big deal.”

“I’m glad to be a part of it. You know, Granny would have been right in the thick of this, if she were still alive.”

“That she would. She was a remarkable woman. I met her when I was a kid, but never got to know her very well. She and her husband retired on Halcyon, so we only saw them at reunions. But I’ve heard a lot of stories over the years from my parents and others who served with her aboard the Mule.”

“Yeah, Mom doesn’t have the same financial acumen that Granny had. Granny could always pick a winning investment. Mom inherited everything after Granny died, but she relies on financial advisors to make the calls now. I suppose I’ll inherit things after Mom dies. Of course, I don’t want that to happen.”

“What are you doing out here on a frontier planet? You could be living the high life back on Diego, hitting all those Octavian hotspots.”

“Ha! Not hardly. Don’t forget, my mom is still the top cop in the entire Planetary Republic. I can’t get away with anything back home, without both my parents breathing down my neck. For right now, I’m with a guy I just met a few days ago, running experiments the likes of which have never been seen before, on a brand new world that’s not even fully explored yet.”

He smiled at her.

“That’s the spirit.”

She smiled back.

“And this is right where I want to be.”

She finally let go of his hand when they reached the horses.

2.6

As Bessie and Lucas trotted back home, both young riders appeared lost in thought out in the desert.

When the landscape changed abruptly from dark yellows and browns to scraggly green brush and then verdant rolling fields, Gwen verbalized her thoughts and broke the silence.

“How much energy is in one gram of the sun, anyway?”

“I don’t think anyone’s studied Phaethon’s sun much. But I did some research before I left Lute. I can spout off some figures from others that are similar, if you like.”

“Please do, professor.”

They both cracked smiles.

“The typical sun for an Earth-like solar system produces four times ten to the 26th watts of light. That’s a four with 26 zeros after it.”

“I understand exponents.”

“Good. And, another salient data point is that the surface gravity of a typical sun for an Earth-like planet is around 28 G’s. Where it gets tricky for us is that we are pulling from inside the sun, not the surface. So . . . the luminosity is different. And gravity is different in the middle. We don’t

know for sure how much, without experiments, but everything is more compressed. The core is a fifth of a sun's diameter but contains a third of its mass. That's one of the reasons fireballs from the core expand so rapidly when they're ported out. They make for great solar torpedoes. But there's a lot we don't know about suns. The main thing most people have been doing with star cores the last 20 years is using them to blow things up."

"Right. Like your first SCU."

He gave her a hurt look.

She smiled back with an innocent expression.

He looked away and muttered, "Between you and my parents . . ."

"Anyway, what you're saying is, we'll know more later."

"Yeah, hopefully. Lisa is monitoring everything, and all the data's being relayed back to Lute."

They neared the homesite. The barn and house were clearly visible in the distance now, along with the corral and two space capsules. Farther out, the peak of a flat wooden bridge could be seen, cresting a little river marking the southern boundary of Tom's homestead.

"But to answer your question, the formula to calculate how much power is in one gram of sunlight involves Einstein's famous equation, 'E equals MC squared.'"

She raised an eyebrow.

"Oh really? Do tell."

"Ah, well. I'll have to rely on Lisa for all of it. But I know that E is for energy, which is what we want to know. And the mass, for the M, in this case is one gram."

"Okay. I'm impressed."

"Yeah, and C is the speed of light, which I don't recall at the moment . . ."

Inside his inner ear, Lisa said, "The speed of light in a vacuum is 299,792,458 meters per second."

“Ah. Lisa says it’s about 300,000 kilometers a second.”

“So, the answer to the formula is . . .?”

“Uh, she’s saying, ‘One gram of this sun becomes nine times ten to the 13th joules, if fully converted to energy.’”

“Okay. So, what’s that mean? How much is a joule?”

“She says it’s the amount of energy for a one-watt light to shine for one second.”

“So, not much.”

“No, but when you get to nine times ten to the 13th, you’re talking about some serious energy. That’s a nine with—”

“I know, I know.”

They neared the barn and slowed the horses to a walk, heading for the gate in the wooden corral.

Now they could see around the front of the house. Standing near the door, looking south and facing the stream, the X99 battle bot known as Timmy stood guard. He did not “look” back at them, but they both knew his sensor detected their presence.

Gwen said, “It’s still abstract to me. I know we’re talking a lot of energy and everything. But how much energy will you actually get out of that little gram of sunlight? And how long will it stay shining, if it’s not going to blow up?”

“Patience, grasshopper. We’ll know more when we know more.”

She stuck her tongue out at him while he dismounted and opened the gate. The horses walked in and headed straight for the water trough near the stables. Gwen dismounted and Tom moved to take the saddle off Lucas while she did the same with Bessie.

They rubbed their horses down, then watched them wander out of the corral to graze in the lush grass growing near the stream.

“I’d like to get some grain or hay and bed them in the stables at night. At some point it’s going to rain. I’m sure the weather gets nasty around here on occasion.”

Gwen nodded and said, “Dust storms are a problem. We’re due for at least one of them before the rainy season starts.”

“Great. I didn’t think about dust storms when designing the house.”

“It’ll be fine. Things just get a little dirty inside. You will have to be careful about Big Ugly and his friends, though. Sand dragons love to hunt the green areas during dust storms. It’s not a good time to be outside.”

“Great.”

“Anyway, the best place to get grain is from the Asa family’s farm.”

“They’re the ones that made your beef jerky?”

“Yep. They sell beef, in every cut imaginable. They also sell the oats they feed their cattle. And they’re not that far from here. Their land is along the road leading into town, about ten clicks out, so about halfway. They’re one of the last homesteads outside of Little York until you get to our place.”

Inside, Tom felt a little spark of joy to hear her call it “our place.”

Out loud, he said, “Well, good. Maybe we can trade for something. Do you think Mr. Asa would take gold coins? The tailor acted like he’d never seen the stuff.”

She gave him a funny look.

“Most people have never seen a gold coin. We’re a token-based society, if we have to use physical money at all.”

“Have *you* seen gold coins before?”

“Yes, but . . . Granny retired on Halcyon, like you said. You can walk across a field and step on a hundred grams of the stuff there. At least you could when it was first settled. There’s probably more gold coins on that planet than tokens. But *most* people have never seen or held much gold, other than their own jewelry.”

“Well, I do have some stuff I might be able to barter with them. Like you said, the poshbird dishes should be popular.”

Her face changed to a look of horror.

“Not my poshbird!”

2.7

That evening they sat on the floor of the living room, cuddled together, watching old movies using Tom's personal holo. He fretted about furniture, or the lack thereof, and vowed to ask his mother to send them some on the next transport.

The next morning, Tom woke up to a MicaBot patiently tapping his toe. He slept on the floor in the smaller upstairs bedroom on a pallet of blankets while Gwen had taken the bed from the first transport and commandeered the larger bedroom.

When he opened his eyes and looked at the little black bot, it saluted him with a tiny leg, turned around and left.

He yawned and sat up, trying to think about what that meant, if anything.

Absently, he stood up and made his way to the upstairs bathroom. He stared down at the sink and turned the faucet on. A steady stream of crystal clear water flowed out.

His face broke into a grin, and he quickly stripped, heading for the shower.

Half an hour later, he knocked on Gwen's door holding a steaming cup of coffee.

When she opened it, looking at him with tousled blonde hair and sleep-encrusted eyes, he grinned and handed her the cup.

“We’ve got running water now. And lights, too.”

She took a little sip.

“Needs sugar. Lots of sugar. And milk. But not that ultra-high-temperature super-pasteurized stuff you have that can sit on the shelf for a year. That stuff’s nasty.”

He looked crestfallen at her comments for a moment.

Then he gave her half a grin and said, “You should learn to drink your coffee black. You never know what resources you’ll have. Or the lack thereof.”

“I’m in the house of one of the richest men in the galaxy. His family sends him literally millions of credits in supplies on an as-needed basis. He can get me some sugar for my coffee.”

Gwen gave him back the cup and shut the door on him.

Before he could move, she cracked it open once more.

“And stay out of the bathroom for the next hour. It’s mine!”

The door shut again.

He shrugged and made his way back downstairs while sipping on the coffee, determined not to let it go to waste.

An hour and a half later they saddled up Bessie and Lucas, then headed for the bridge and the trail that would eventually turn into the North Road, leading to Little York.

Gwen shouldered her Firedog 3W, an exceptionally powerful gun. Tom strapped a heavy rifle onto the saddlebags for Lucas, and he made sure the pistol holstered at his side had a full charge.

After several incidents since arriving on Phaethon, he was determined never to travel unarmed again.

At the top of the bridge's little arc, Tom took his hat off, turned in the saddle and waved it at Timmy. The robot saluted him across the distance, maintaining his vigil. He had not moved from that spot since yesterday.

On the other side of the bridge, when they reached the first ridge and the start of the path, Lisa spoke in Tom's implant.

"Thomas, I have concluded initial testing on Particle Two. Its fusion has expired."

"Oh. Okay. What does that mean?"

"Presently it is one gram of super-hot solar plasma. Experiments are ongoing, and I will continue to monitor the particle. But I am now able to expend additional processing cycles on other planetary resources for future upgrades."

Gwen glanced at him with a raised eyebrow, but she knew he was speaking to the portable AI system, so she did not interrupt.

"Great! What's our first upgrade?"

"I am ready to experiment with terrestrial teleportation. I am tracking a total of eight miniature sensors you have placed on this planet's surface. One is in a sewer tunnel under a street in League City. The tunnel is vertical, so that will be the most difficult for a live person to teleport to, as they will appear in the air, in the dark, in a concrete shaft, approximately five meters above the nearest flat surface."

"Oh, yeah. Well, it seemed like a good idea at the time. I was being shot at. There was a gun battle going on at the time."

"Another miniature sensor is aboard the Jet Stream. That one will give us an opportunity to experiment with teleporting things onto a moving platform when I am ready. It is hidden in the crew area bathroom."

"Yeah. That was the only place I could find."

"Another is in the bathroom of the public house in Little York."

His ears turned red as he glanced at Gwen, as if she could hear.

“Look, it’s hard to find good hiding places where those things won’t get disturbed.”

“One more is out in the desert near the solar containment unit. Three are on this side of the river, on open ground. They will likely move over time, particularly during rainfall. Three more are at different distances between here and Little York, in fields alongside the road. In addition, there are five on your person at the moment, and ten more back in the first space capsule.”

“Okay. That sounds about right.”

“It is precisely correct.”

“Okay.”

“I am prepared to experiment with teleporting inanimate objects within close proximity to my main unit at the homesite. Observation Satellite One is currently undergoing initiation self-checks. When it is fully online and operable, I will be prepared to attempt longer distance teleportation, such as between continents. I will keep you informed of the progress and let you know when I am ready to transport living creatures, such as yourself.”

“Okay, sounds good.”

“The MicaBot’s central processing unit informs me she dug a well to the water table, approximately 50 meters below the surface of your house. This is a pristine subterranean reservoir. Your property sits on the northern extremity of it. She estimates you will have essentially unlimited water, even if hundreds of thousands of people tap into it.”

“Wait, ‘she?’ I thought the MicaBots were a ‘them.’”

“The MicaBots are controlled by an independent artificial intelligence control unit using a wide-area network. I am able to communicate with her, but she is not coded for natural language conversations such as we are having right now. Perhaps future versions will be able to do so. Technically they are both a ‘them’ and a ‘she.’ For your purposes when accessing the control unit, you may consider the MicaBot a ‘them.’ When I am communicating in machine language with this entity, I may consider the control unit a ‘she.’”

“Okay, whatever. That’s not important right now. Just let me know when you’re ready to experiment with live people. That’s when the fun starts.”

“It will require multiple security checks and strict adherence to safety protocols before I am ready to do so.”

“What do you mean, ‘live’ people? What are you two cooking up?”

He chuckled at Gwen’s startled expression.

“Nothing we need to worry about just yet. Right now . . .”

The distant *Thoop!* of a blaster cut him off.

An energy bolt whizzed by his head, exploding in a fireball behind him.

2.8

The tree to Tom's left, three meters behind Lucas, burst into a ball of burning bark and leaves.

Lucas reared, but Tom's riding skills had improved. He squeezed his legs around the horse's middle and gripped the saddle horn, keeping his seat this time.

Both horses bolted ahead, ironically in the direction of the shooter.

Gwen had better control over Bessie. She jerked her reins to the right. Bessie veered off the path and into scattered trees on the side of the road, offering some cover.

Lucas followed the mare.

As they ran, both steeds calmed down, expending energy and putting distance between themselves and the explosion. The burning tree faded behind them.

More bolts scattered through the foliage, but the light woods provided cover. Too many obstacles blocked the gunners' view, although they were close and shot at the fleeing couple anyway.

The horses burst free of arboreal cover a couple hundred meters later. Tom looked ahead and saw a distant ridge. Gwen headed for it, crouched in her

saddle like a jockey racing for the finish line.

Lucas raced after her.

Just as Tom thought they might make it without being seen, a red bolt of energy sizzled overhead, hitting the uphill ground in front of them.

Gwen jerked Bessie to the right again as another bolt sailed by. She zigged and zagged to throw off the gunman's aim.

Other gunners found them and more bolts flew by, popping the ground, churning up grass, and dotting the ridge with smoky holes.

The horses strained on the final bit of slope as the angle increased sharply. More bolts splattered the ground around them.

They topped the ridge in a final rush of stampeding hooves.

The land slanted steeper on the downhill side, and Gwen pulled hard on the reins. Bessie slid to a stop, sending a mound of dirt and small rocks tumbling down the incline.

Tom came over right behind her, veering to the left, red bolts sailing over the ridge.

“Whoa! Whoa, boy!”

Lucas looked like he had every intention to keep running until dark, but the sight of the mare and her rider made him change his mind. He slid awkwardly on the slope, legs scrambling, finally stopping a meter lower than the girls.

The horse snorted in fear and annoyance, eyes wide, as more bolts sailed overhead.

Lucas did not care for the current circumstances, and somehow managed to display equine displeasure all over his face.

“Come on!”

Gwen dismounted and pulled a gravity stake out of a leather tube on her saddlebag. She bent down and held it vertically while squeezing the middle.

A bolt of energy shot down into the ground, impaling the rod firmly in the sediment.

When she let go, the stake stood up straight. Quickly, she tied Bessie's reins to the circlet on top.

"Tie Lucas there, too. They're spooked. I don't think they'll come back if we call them, and we may need them."

Tom did as he was told.

"That thing's going to hold them?"

"Yes. It works on the same principle as artificial gravity on a ship. Times five."

She unstrapped the Whillicker Wildcat, flicking it on simultaneously.

Weeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeee!

Tom pulled out his heavy rifle from Lucas's side and followed her back up the ridge.

The land does lend itself to long distance shooting, he thought. This is like the ridge near the Dalmont's place.

Both dropped down to their bellies. Tom took his hat off and peeked over the top with Gwen.

In the distance he could see the wooded area they rode out of, and way off to the left he saw the path meandering back toward home.

He turned to the right and tried to find the shooters.

"Where are they?"

"They're riding through the trees over there."

Gwen pointed, being careful not to show her hand above the ridgeline. Tom squinted in that direction, but saw nothing.

At last, he could make out flashes of movement through the foliage. Then four horsemen broke cover, riding hard.

“Ever Riders,” she said, squinting. “I recognize them.”

Gwen brought the big gun up to her shoulder and lifted it above the ridgeline. She aimed carefully, and squeezed the trigger.

PHLABAM!

A huge streak of energy jotted out from the weapon’s muzzle. It exploded in the middle of the four horses, killing riders and animals alike.

Tom and Gwen stared at the corpses, smoke drifting up from each one.

“Hate to see the animals die.”

“Yeah, I do too,” Gwen said. “But this thing’s not made for precision strikes. It’s for taking out a bunch of enemies all at once. Unfortunately, it’s indiscriminate.”

“I told them to hold back . . .”

They both froze. The voice shouted at them from across the distance, back in the trees.

“You see anything? Your eyesight is enhanced.”

Gwen shook her head.

“I’m missing the bionic hearing right now that I had removed. Wherever they are, or that person is . . . I can’t see them.”

“Now look . . . I’d like to parley . . . but you done went and killed most of my men with that supergun y’all got!”

Tom and Gwen looked at each other.

Tom said, “Who is that guy? That’s not James Ever . . . is it?”

“I don’t know. I’ve never met the leader, either. I’ve only seen him at the Dalmont place, and later in town.”

“So here’s what we’re gonna do. I got the Asa girl with me. And I’m gonna keep her near me so that giant videogame rifle don’t kill me. Because I know if you use it, you’ll take us all out. The girl included!”

“Well, he’s right about that. Like you said, you’ve got a weapon of mass destruction there.”

Tom looked at Gwen, but her expression had changed. She was seething. She had caught sight of the speaker and realized who was with him.

“He’s got Prisha Asa. She’s twelve.”

“Oh.”

Tom’s face dropped as he suddenly realized what that likely meant.

He saw movement in the trees as a rider came out of the woods, a young girl sitting on the saddle in front of him.

He stopped near the dead horses and men. Even at this distance, Tom could see the look of horror on the girl’s face.

She had been crying.

The rider slid from the saddle, then reached up and grabbed Prisha, dragging her off the horse. He carried her effortlessly in one arm, holding his weapon with the other hand.

“Now come on out and let’s parley!” he shouted at them.

Then he put the gun up against the girl’s head.

And waited.

2.9

“That bastard.”

Gwen scrambled to get up, but Tom held her back. He put a hand on her arm.

“No. You need to stay here.”

“Why? He’s got Prisha!”

“Well, it’s not James Ever. That must be one of his subordinates. No, you stay here. He’s afraid of your gun. It’ll be much more effective if he still thinks you can take him out from a distance. I’ll go talk to the guy and see what he wants.”

“Then he’s going to have two hostages. Prisha and you.”

Tom grinned at her.

“He’s not going to take me hostage. Trust me on this.”

“You’re out of boppers.”

“I know. Look, keep an eye on things. If I can get the girl away from him, take him out. But I need to at least go talk with him.”

“Hurry up!” the Ever Rider yelled. “I’m waiting! I’ll do somethin’ to her! You wouldn’t want this sweet young thing to get shot or something, would

ya?”

They heard Prisha whimper, even from across the field.

“You get her away from him, and I’ll kill him. That’s the plan, Tom Savage.”

He nodded, and set his rifle down. Tom patted the pistol still holstered by his side, and stood up, hands raised.

“Alright! I’m coming out to parley! Don’t shoot the girl!”

Quickly, he topped the ridge and started walking toward the gunman.

“Where’s your woman? And the supergun? Don’t make me hurt her!”

The man pointed his weapon down at Prisha’s side. She whimpered again, and tried to pull away, but he kept her arm firmly in his grip.

“Shmoggle derr bishop joiks!”

“What?”

Tom walked faster now, almost jogging to cover the distance quicker, keeping his arms up.

“I *said*, ‘Schmoggle the schmoggle excrement!’”

“What in the blue blazes are you *sayin*’?”

Tom kept his mouth shut now as he drew closer.

Yelling gibberish seemed like a good strategy. It kept the man from hurting his hostage and took his attention away from Gwen.

Tom could make out the rider’s features as he drew near. Mid-thirties, probably too young to have fought in the war. Tanned face, topped with a cowboy hat. His clothes looked dirty, like they hadn’t been washed in weeks.

“Awright, that’s far enough.”

The man turned his gun to point it at Tom.

One trigger pull, and Tom would have a hole in his chest.

He stopped, keeping his hands up, thinking back to the shield that Mal Dalmont had, and how nice having one of his own right about now would be. Or even the blaster-proof skins they had gleaned from the three dead sand dragons.

Maybe I should start wearing that vest more often, even in this heat.

Out loud, he said, “Who are you, and what do you want?”

“Well, now, that’s more like it. I can understand you, now. All I wanna do is talk. Mr. Ever done sent me and the boys to scope out your place and deliver a message. We stopped and picked up this little filly out in a field near here.”

He turned to the girl and gently pulled a strand of hair out of her face with a dirty hand.

She shuddered.

“Then we was surprised to see you on the road headed our way. The very people we was lookin’ for. I told ol’ Garpo not to shoot, but he just couldn’t pass up the opportunity. I’m gonna be honest. It’s too bad he missed.”

The girl whimpered again, softly this time. She looked at Tom with pleading eyes. He tried to give her a reassuring look before turning back to the outlaw, who kept talking.

“My name’s Silas Vick. And I know about you, Mr. Savage. They say you got a place out in the middle of nowhere, about as far from town as someone can get. We was comin’ to find out what’s up with you and that killer gal with the supergun. Folks say she belonged to Mal Dalmont before you took her away. Mr. Ever would like to meet her, maybe get to know her a little better, if you know what I mean. She needs to come out here, too, by the way. Or the young filly here gets hurt.”

Slowly . . . ever so slowly . . . Tom moved his right hand closer to his ear.

“What are you doin’?”

He moved it closer, maintaining eye contact with Vick all along.

The man tilted his head like a dog, a confused expression on his face.

At last, Tom touched the implant under his ear.

“Lisa? Do you have a reading on my location?”

“Who in tarnation is Lisa?”

“I do indeed, Thomas. You are carrying five mini-sensors. I can sense everything around you within a thirty meter diameter circle.”

“Good. Override your safety protocols. I want you to teleport the gun that is aimed at me . . . away.”

A loud *pop!* sounded.

Vick stared down at the stump where his hand had been, holding the gun. Both were gone.

He screamed as blood spouted from the stump of his arm.

Tom reached into a pocket and pulled out the set of brass knuckles he retrieved from the streets of League City shortly after arriving on Phaethon.

He raced up to Vick in two quick steps and slugged him in the jaw, knocking the man out.

2.10

The girl screamed and pulled away, eyes fixed on the blood.

Tom ignored her and pulled a handkerchief out of his back pocket. He knelt down and quickly formed a tourniquet, stanching the flow before Vick could bleed out.

Then he looked over at Prisha.

“You’re okay. It’s over.”

They heard hoofbeats, and both turned to see Gwen riding toward them on Bessie, leading Lucas with reins in tow.

She jumped off and took out the gravity stake again, taking the time to hitch both horses to it. Then she hurried to the girl and wrapped her arms around Prisha in a full-body hug.

The girl burst out in tears, releasing everything all at once, shaking with sobs while holding her tight.

Gwen made soft comforting sounds, not unlike when she soothed the horses, Tom thought.

He turned his attention back to Vick, who stirred as Tom snapped his fingers in the man’s face.

The cowboy's eyes fluttered open and the pain from his missing hand brought him wide awake. He screamed, staring at the bloody stump.

"Hey. Hey, look at me. You can get it back, alright? I'm going to give you your hand back if you answer some questions for me."

Finally, through a haze of pain, Vick turned his attention back to Tom.

"Answer truthfully, okay? Is Ever out to kill me? Why did he send you to scope out my place?"

"Yeah . . . yeah, we was told to kill ya. He figured five of us was plenty if we could avoid that gun."

It was Vick's turn to whimper, now. He held the stump of his arm close to his chest.

Tom looked at him in astonishment.

"Why?"

"Why not? Without you, there'd be more reward money to go around."

"Five thousand credits more. That's nothing."

Tom could hardly believe what he was hearing. It was a mere tenth of the total reward sum for capturing Mal Dalmont. Marshal Miller gave him and Gwen 2500 each, almost as an afterthought for their contributions in the battle against Ever's men.

"'Every credit counts.' That's our motto. Oh, the pain . . ."

Gwen looked over her shoulder, still holding Prisha.

She said, "You deserve it. Scum."

"How many men does Ever have left, after the Fae tore into him?"

Vick shuddered, gripping his wrist hard.

"About 20." His eyes flicked to the dead men nearby, and their horses.

"Sixteen after this."

He looked back up at Tom, tears welling in his eyes. He held up his stump, still gripping it tight.

“Please . . .”

“Last question. Where is Ever now?”

“We’re stayin’ at the Dalmont’s place. They got plenty room, ’specially now that Mal Dalmont is gone.”

Tom frowned and said, “Okay, one more. How long are you all going to stay out there? Surely you can’t expect the Dalmont boys to extend their hospitality forever.”

Vick shuddered again, pulling the stump back close to his chest.

“We’re gonna take over the town.”

“How are you going to do that? The Fae will never allow it.”

Vick met his eyes then, and Tom could see the answer there, without any words needed.

“Right. That’s why he didn’t send everybody out here. He figured five was enough for the two of us.”

Vick turned away, holding his wrist, his entire body shaking.

“We was gonna help, after we took care of you.”

“Alright. Thanks for answering truthfully.”

Tom stood up and touched his implant again as he walked a couple meters away.

“Lisa, return the gun and hand. Aim it away from me.”

He heard a small *pop!* and the gun reappeared on the ground with the hand still attached.

Tom bent down and picked them both up. He carefully removed the fingers from the gun, making sure not to accidentally pull the trigger. Then he

tucked the firearm into the back of his belt and returned to Vick with the hand.

“Ooo . . . scary . . .”

He held the severed hand out and waved it in front of the outlaw’s face.

Vick whimpered.

“Please . . .”

“You’re no fun. Here, hold this against the stump.”

He gave the hand over to Vick, who awkwardly held it up at the end of his arm. Tom walked over to Lucas and pulled out a first aid kit, retrieving fast patches and a pneumatic syringe.

“You are not seriously going to waste that on him!”

“Come on, Gwen. Have a heart. We’ve got to give the man a hand.”

Her mouth opened as she stared at him.

“That is *so* not funny.”

He smiled and took a knee near Vick again.

“Hold it steady. Line it up right.”

Vick grit his teeth and squeezed his severed hand close to the wrist. Tom wrapped everything up in fast patches. Then he shoved the pneumatic syringe inside the crook of Vick’s arm.

“Alright. Just hold on. Get it? I mean literally . . . Look, I gotta hand it to you . . .”

He smiled, but Vick stared back at him with pain-filled eyes.

“Never mind. Just hold it steady. These are mil-spec nanobots, with osteoblasts included. They should have you fixed up in no time. Now I’m going to go loot the bodies of your friends over there. Any secret compartments I should know about? Hidden stashes of money? Any private weapons tucked away somewhere?”

Vick shook his head, still shuddering. He never took his eyes off the severed hand. Tom suspected he would start feeling it again soon.

“Nanobots have come a long way since the war. You’ll be fine. There might be some ghost pains for a while . . .”

He absently rubbed his neck, where Big Ugly slashed him a short time ago. Then he turned away and looked at the bodies.

“Lisa, can you port away all the guns, please? Put them in the barn somewhere.”

Four rifles and four pistols disappeared with pops. Anything touching them teleported away, too.

“Can you sense any tokens or other items of interest on the dead bodies here?”

“I can. They have a total of 110 credits between them.”

“That’s not much. Okay, put that in the barn, too.”

He heard muffled pops this time, as the money disappeared from their pockets. Chunks of cloth went with the tokens, and at least one piece of flesh, too.

“That’s pretty gross. Probably not worth 110 credits. Okay. Do you have the ability to toss these guys into the sun?”

“I do. I recommend porting them to the surface of the far side of the sun.”

“That sounds good.”

Instantly, the four bodies popped away, taking small divots of soil and grass along with them.

“Okay. Saddles and tack next. Let’s put them in the barn again.”

“I am still calibrating things. Parts of the horses will go, too.”

“Ah. Well, let me take them off, then.”

Tom pulled the smart straps off and piled the saddles, saddlebags, blankets, harnesses, bits and reins all in a large pile off to one side. When he finished, everything disappeared, displaced air rushing in and making a louder *pop!*

When he returned to the others, Prisha had settled down. She no longer sobbed uncontrollably, but she still held onto Gwen, burying her face in the older girl's side.

Vick sat on the ground looking at his reattached hand, fingers spread wide. He made a fist, then spread his fingers out again, an expression of sheer amazement on his face.

Tom said, "Ride with us, Mr. Vick."

All three of them shifted their attention to Tom.

He smiled and said, "I've got a proposal for you."

2.11

“As I’m sure you’ve probably guessed by now, I have the only AI on this planet. Well, besides the administrative one the courthouse has.”

The two men trailed the girls by fifty meters. Tom kept his voice low, grateful that Gwen had given up her enhanced hearing upon leaving the Fae.

On occasion, Prisha looked over Gwen’s shoulder to stare at them. Other than that, the men were ignored by the two riding on the mare.

“And in case you’re wondering, it only works for me. Killing me does nobody any good, so far as the AI goes. Also, you can’t coerce me to make it do something. It can sense what’s going on.”

“There’s no sensors . . .”

“This is the latest technology, Mr. Vick. We don’t need no stinkin’ sensors.”

Technically, that was a lie. Or at least close to one, Tom thought. The sensors Lisa used were a fraction the size of the big municipal ones that a planetary AI used. Tom had sensors, just not the kind most people were accustomed to seeing and using.

“But that’s not the important thing,” he continued.

“It isn’t?”

“No. The important thing is, my AI now knows all about you, thanks to the hand you ‘gave’ it. She knows your fingerprints, she knows your blood type. She even knows your DNA.”

The look of horror on Vick’s face almost made Tom burst out in laughter, but he controlled himself.

“And not only that . . . wherever you are, anywhere in this world, if my AI wants to take your hand again . . . she will.”

Now the blood drained from Vick’s face. He desperately searched Tom’s eyes to see if the young man told the truth.

Tom held his gaze.

This time, the lie was bigger. Lisa did not have near enough sensors to track Vick across the whole planet. She would not know where he was unless he walked within 30 meters of one. And right now, there were only ten sensors spread around in a few places, and most of those were in isolated spots out in the wilderness.

But Vick didn’t need to know that.

Most liars will look you in the eye because they think that helps sell the lie, Tom thought. Dad taught me that. The thing is, it usually works. People want to see eye contact when you’re telling them something important.

He held Vick’s gaze until the older man looked away.

“What do you want from me?”

Now we’re getting somewhere.

“I want you to switch sides, Mr. Vick. I want you to work for me.”

Vick chuckled.

“You can’t pay me enough.”

“How much do you get riding with Ever?”

“Three hundred credits a month, plus a share in the spoils. A town like Little York ought to be worth . . . a thousand credits per man when we was

full strength. It'll be more now."

"More now, but do you really think sixteen men can take that whole town? Ever's not going to get off easy with the Fae, either. They're going to chew him up if he attacks."

"When we get the Fae out of the way, we'll get the town," Vick said confidently. "That's the plan."

"Alright. Let's say you get 3000 each, with fewer men. Then what? Go find another town to pillage?"

"Pretty much. Yeah."

"But that's not guaranteed. You don't know how much you'll make next month."

"Maybe more, maybe less. But my 300 is a sure thing, even if it's weeks and weeks before our next big hit."

Tom wiped a hand down his face, fighting down a wave of irritation with the outlaw. The man's life seemed so simple.

"What did you make last year?"

"I dunno."

"What do you mean, you don't know? Surely you know how much money you brought in."

"I don't keep track."

"Well, how many towns did you guys pillage?"

"Uh . . . four, maybe? I don't remember exactly."

Tom closed his eyes for a minute. He listened to Lucas's steady hoofbeats, swaying gently in the saddle along with the horse's stride.

"Okay. So, let's say that you pulled in 1000 per town, for five towns, since you don't remember. That's 5000 credits."

"Sounds about right."

“And you brought in 3600 credits total for your monthly ‘salary,’ such as it is.”

Vick nodded.

“So, you pulled in about 8,600 last year.”

“Yeah. That’s a fair assessment.”

“That’s a lot less than you’d make back home working an honest job, you know.”

“I’m free out here. I do what I want. That’s worth somethin’.”

“You get shot at,” Tom pointed out.

Vick shrugged.

“I made it so far.”

Tom took a deep breath and held it for a minute before exhaling.

“Okay. Here’s the deal. I’ll give you a thousand a month. That’s more than you got working for Ever. No big score from robbing a town, but it’s a lot more per month. And more per year. It’s stable income. In a year’s time you will have made a lot more than you did last year.”

They rode in silence for a moment. Vick looked to be deep in thought.

“You got that kind of money?”

“Will you take gold over credit tokens?”

“Are you kiddin’ me? Who wouldn’t take real gold if you got it?”

Just about every merchant in town, Tom thought. But he kept his mouth shut.

He reached into a pocket and pulled out one of the blank gold coins the MicaBots had produced. He held it up between thumb and forefinger, catching the hazy light.

“I’ve got a stash of these my AI can port to me anytime. Killing me means you won’t get anymore. If someone else kills me, you won’t get anymore. If

anything happens to me, you won't get anymore. But so long as I'm safe and sound, you can have 20 of these at the start of every month."

He reached across and handed the coin to Vick. The man's eyes lit up as he rubbed the gold between his fingers.

He bit it, hard, then pulled the coin out of his mouth to look at the slight indentations his teeth left.

"I always wanted to do that. It's past the first. Do I get twenty for this month anyway?"

"Yes. That's the carrot. The stick is, if you ever double cross me, my AI takes your hand away again. And you won't get it back, next time. She'll send it into the sun like she did to your friends."

They rode in silence for a while. Tom glanced over at Vick, who rubbed his chin, deep in thought. Then he rubbed his wrist where the hand had been reattached.

Tom noticed the gold coin had disappeared, no doubt finding a home in the gunman's pockets somewhere.

Finally Vick said, "I can live with that. You got yourself a deal, Mr. Savage. I'm your man."

2.12

“**Y**ou did *what*?”

Tom smiled at Gwen.

“I can tell you don’t like the idea.”

“Are you crazy? He’s a hired killer!”

“I know. I hired him. He’s our hired killer now.”

They rode down the trail leading to the Asa farmstead, rutted tracks making two narrow tracks that sliced through the grass.

Vick stayed behind at Tom’s request. He tied off his horse at a tree off the North Road and promptly sat down. He leaned up against the trunk to take a nap while the other three rode to the Asa family’s house without him.

“He’s not a bad man,” Prisha said, speaking up for the first time.

Both Tom and Gwen looked at the young girl, and she nodded, firm in her convictions from her spot on the saddle in front of Gwen.

“He kept the others from touching me. Said it wasn’t right to molest any woman, least of all a girl. Those were his words. It’s why I was with him, riding behind the others, instead of out there with those four that charged at

you. I'm pretty sure his threats to kill me were just an act, now that I think about it."

Tom traded a glance with Gwen.

He said, "I grew up around this type. They're looking for money. Easy money. Lots of pirates are like that. The funny thing is, they'll endure all kinds of trouble, do all kinds of backbreaking labor, all for a shot at some easy pickings. They've got their own sense of internal ethics. Offer a carrot and a stick to keep them in line, and they're loyal to a fault. They make for great crew on a pirate ship."

"And when they turn disloyal? When they try to stab you in the back?"

Tom shrugged.

"Then you use the stick. But if your carrot is generous enough, the stick should never be needed. I learned that from my dad."

They came to a fence line with a metal gate crossing the road. Beyond the fence, a couple hundred meters away, stood a simple house made of lumber. It looked roughly finished, as if all the materials were locally sourced.

"I'll get the gate!"

Prisha slid off Bessie and ran to unlatch the chain. She pulled the gate wide and danced in place as Tom and Gwen rode inside the fenced-in section of the Asa homestead, then closed it again behind them.

"I'll go the rest of the way on foot! Meet you there!"

Without waiting for a response, the little girl scampered off toward the house, running fast.

Tom and Gwen smiled, following her at a more sedate pace on horseback.

"Mama! Papa!"

They heard a screen door slam as Prisha disappeared inside.

Moments later, Tom and Gwen rode up to the yard. Two large dogs barked from the front porch, but they had been obviously trained not to run up to horses. They stayed inside the yard.

The couple dismounted and tied off their steeds at a hitching post near the front gate. A man of Indian descent came out the door, followed by a woman who looked more mixed in ancestry.

“Gwen!”

“Mr. Asa. Mrs. Asa. How are you? This is Tom Savage, he’s your closest neighbor to the north, now. In fact, he’s the only neighbor north of you.”

“Come in, come in.”

Asa opened the yard gate and let them inside. The two dogs ran up, tails wagging, sniffing the legs of the newcomers.

“I’m Samar Asa. This is my wife Josephine. Before you ask, I’m not named after any Indian ancestor named Samar. I’m actually named after the island in the Philippines.”

He smiled with pride.

“Ah. Very good,” Tom said, shaking the man’s hand.

Tom wasn’t going to ask, but he knew sometimes people could be touchy about their ancestral ties to Old Earth. Or prideful, as the case seemed to be with Samar Asa.

The answer to the question of why someone primarily of Indian descent would be named after an island in the Philippines probably stemmed from the mixed races out here among the stars, he decided. Over the centuries, racial lines had merged and intertwined with one another to a far greater extent than when humans were confined to only one world.

“I’m Josephine,” the woman said, shaking his hand. “Like he said. And Prisha says she had quite the adventure with you two.”

Josephine was dressed like her husband, in blue jean overalls, cotton shirt and boots. Tom thought they both looked like typical farmers, as if they had just stepped out of a holo.

“She was supposed to check on the crops in the north pasture and report back,” Samar said, giving the young girl a meaningful look.

“It wasn’t my fault, Papa! Honest!”

“We’re so grateful Prisha is safe, and nothing bad happened,” Josephine said. “Why don’t you all come in and tell us all about it? Maybe we can get a better idea of everything that occurred today.”

“Sure,” Tom said. “I’d also like to discuss buying some grain from you for our horses.”

“Ah!” Samar’s eyes lit up. “I think we’re going to become good friends.”

2.13

The Asas knew Gwen from her time with the Fae Phalanx. The rangers got to know everyone in the area with a homestead, checking in with them often to make sure they were safe and catch everyone up on the news.

The Fae also bought food from the farms, and the Asas were known for quality oats, good for both horses and people, as well as their beef jerky.

They had two other daughters besides Prisha: Aanya and Ridhi. Both were out tending cattle in the “South Pasture,” which Tom figured was on the other side of the homestead and away from the road where Prisha had been abducted.

After catching everyone up on the recent events involving their daughter, her parents became far more aware of just how dangerous Prisha’s situation had been. They were no longer as phlegmatic about the matter, insisting she was now grounded for an indefinite period.

Prisha loudly proclaimed her innocence and wailed against the unfairness of punishing her for something beyond her control.

Eventually, passions on both sides cooled. The Asas allowed that perhaps grounding Prisha might be an overreaction, but because the girl had skated so close to death and disaster, she should stay around the house more in the days ahead.

After the family drama died down, Samar invited Tom out to his barns to take a look at the grain stores. The women stayed behind and continued talking. Josephine wanted to know everything going on in Gwen's life. The men left them to their devices and walked outside, going behind the house.

Samar said, "I'll sell you some grain. But I want you to know it's not easy to harvest it out here."

He paused and lifted up a simple wooden latch on the first big barn door, then pulled it open.

"I'm doing this without any fancy technology. Except for a couple things like this."

The hazy ambient light of Phaethon's sky slowly filled the barn's dusty interior as the door swung wide. There sat a large contraption made of metal, with huge circular blades mounted on the side, like a skeletal paddlewheel on some old steamboat.

A seat mounted up front offered a place to sit. Simple wheels and a harness made the whole thing look ready to go. All it needed was a horse and driver.

"That looks more complicated than a bot," Tom said. "What is it?"

"This is a binder. Technically, it's a horse-drawn harvester-binder. The original patent goes back to 1872, in America. It harvests the oats we grow out here, and binds the stems into sheaves. Those are left out in the field to dry. Then we pick up the sheaves for threshing. I can run this whole thing by myself, with one horse. It's made out of the latest carbon-alloys, and it can't break or rust. Once I run it over the fields, the whole family is involved in the rest of the process. But this is the first step in harvesting our oats."

"Very nice."

"Now, the second step is also complicated. You can thresh oats by hand, but that takes a while as you can imagine. The stalks are edible for horses. Ordinarily, oat straw is not the best for their consumption, but these oats have been engineered to be easily digestible. Lulu loves it."

"Your horse's name is Lulu?"

“Yup. The girls named her that. Daughters. What can you do?”

He closed the door and latched it again, then led Tom to the next barn.

When he opened the door this time, a large stainless steel contraption greeted them, taking up most of the barn’s interior. To Tom, it looked like a giant coffee grinder, three meters tall.

“So, the basic process in threshing oats is to separate the stalks from the grains. Then you roast the oats and separate the groat from the hulls. In the old days, you’d just grind them all together and throw it all up in the air to winnow the edibles out. The hulls would fly away in the breeze on a windy day while the groat would fall to the ground. But this here machine . . .”

He waved proudly at the contraption. Tom noticed it had a lid on top. The octagonal shape funneled down to a tapered midpoint about one meter across, then flared back out to two meters in diameter at the base. He saw what looked like a small oven door, shaped like an upside down U, just below the midpoint.

“This does all that at once. Cost me a pretty penny, too. But it’s worth it. We toss the sheaves in up top, and roasted oats come out the front. Straw goes out the back, already baled. Horses can eat raw oats, still in the hull. Sometimes we give Lulu the same stuff we eat, what we don’t sell. Oats are the best grain for horses. This particular strain was designed on Pearl, at the university there. It’s engineered to thrive in bio zones with limited direct sunlight, like ours. I won’t bore you with how much I invested in my first round of seeds. Or this monstrosity. Everything’s on mortgage. Everything you see. House, machinery, crops.”

He slapped the metal oat-processing machine with the palm of his hand, a smile of affection on his face.

“Now, I know some people like to use bushels for measuring out grain. But I sell our oats in bags of 15 kilos each. That’s close to one bushel. Not exact, you understand. It’s about 33 pounds, American. And you see what all goes into it just to get one bag of the good stuff. It’s a lot of work. And that’s why you’ll understand my price is five credits a bag for roasted oats. That’s firm, by the way.”

Tom rubbed his nose. He suspected, although he did not know for sure, that the price of oats from the mass industrialized farms elsewhere in the galaxy were a lot cheaper than that. Cereal grains, after all, were traditionally among the least expensive foodstuffs down through the ages. Cheap and carb-dense, it could feed the masses.

On the other hand, out here in the middle of nowhere, the farmer's prices were probably reasonable.

Still, Tom wanted to hold onto his credit tokens for as long as possible.

He smiled at Samar and said, "Do your wife and girls like poshbird?"

2.14

In the end, Tom traded eight poshbird platters with Mr. Asa. They agreed on an equivalent rate. One platter would go for 20 bales of straw, or five bags of unhulled raw oats, or two bags of fully processed roasted oats.

The horses could eat it all, but of the three the farmer suggested unprocessed raw oats and the straw were the best choices for equine nourishment.

“They love the straw. And raw oats are good for their stomachs, packed with nutrition. ’Course, they’ll take roasted oats same as anybody. But it’s a waste to feed them that when it could go on your breakfast table instead.”

Tom agreed to take the majority of the oats in raw form, since he was primarily looking to feed the horses rather than himself and Gwen. He traded one tray for twenty bales of straw, five trays for 25 bags of raw oats, and two trays for four bags of the good stuff.

Samar quickly pulled out the oats from a third barn, where he stored his harvest. Tom, meanwhile, went back to the horses, ostensibly to fetch the food trays.

He stepped behind the animals and double-checked the house to make sure no one watched him. Then he touched his implant.

“Lisa, I need you to teleport eight platters of poshbird to me.”

“I am still refining my parameter matrix, Thomas. I cannot yet get that granular with teleportation. All food platters are either stacked in your kitchen pantry, or reside in a storage crate within the second space module. I cannot currently extract a specific number of items that small without porting collateral errata.”

“Okay. Can you safely port the entire crate to me?”

A large crate popped into existence behind the horses. Lucas flattened his ears and snorted to let Tom know he did not appreciate surprises, especially ones that displaced air like that.

Tom opened the top and retrieved eight identical platters, all marked “Poshbird.”

He closed the lid and said, “Okay, Lisa. Send it back.”

The box disappeared again with another pop. Tom thought Lucas gave him a baleful glare as he gathered up the food in his arms and headed back.

As he walked to the barn, Tom said over his shoulder, “You’re just going to have to get used to that, Lucas.”

When he handed the food packages over, Samar’s eyes lit up.

“I would say I’m getting the short end of the stick on this deal,” the farmer said, mopping sweat off his brow. “But . . . it’s been a couple years since we had poshbird. This will be a real treat for me and the girls.”

“There’s more where that came from,” Tom said with a smile.

“Don’t tempt me. I already made you a heck of a deal. I do have to get *some* money back and pay down that mortgage.”

The smile on Samar’s face betrayed jocularly behind the stern tone of his voice.

He said, “How are you planning on getting the grain home?”

Tom raised his eyebrows, looking at his haul piled up on the ground. He had planned on having Lisa teleport it directly into his barn, but he did not want

to mention that to the farmer. He felt the fewer people who knew about Lisa, the better.

For one thing, she was something no one else in the world had at the moment. Exclusivity breeds resentment. So did overt displays of wealth. His parents taught him to never brag about how much they had.

King Solomon said, one man pretends to be wealthy but is poor. Another pretends to be poor, but is rich. 'We're the latter,' Tom recalled his father saying.

This was a lesson Tom took to heart, and he felt letting people know about his teleportation capabilities would be a bad idea.

Eventually everybody will probably find out about it, Tom thought. *But for right now, I'd like to keep it under my hat.*

"I uh . . . hadn't thought that far ahead, I guess."

Samar laughed.

"You can borrow one of my wagons. We'll hitch it up to Bessie and you can bring it back when you come this way again. How about that?"

"That'll work. In fact, we might be meeting someone out there heading back toward our place. He can return it on his way back to town, maybe. Do you mind if he parks it somewhere near your entrance?"

"Not at all. There's a grove of trees near the road. Have him leave it there. Nobody will bother it. Hardly anybody comes out this far. If they do, they're coming here, anyway."

They fetched the horses. Samar felt confident that Bessie could handle being hitched.

"All them Phalanx horses are trained on wagons."

He led Bessie by the reins and hooked her up to a medium-sized wooden trailer with meter-high sides all around.

Tom helped him load the bales of straw and bags of oats. Samar had color-coded them: blue for raw and unprocessed, white for roasted.

When everything was ready, the girls came out of the house. Josephine sent along some beef jerky with Gwen as a gift.

“I’m sorry I missed your other two daughters, Josephine. Tell them I said hi when they get in.”

“We will. And you’ll be back soon, now that you’re a neighbor. Right?”

They waved goodbye. Bessie pulled the wagon down the road with Gwen in the driver’s seat. Tom and Lucas followed.

At the gate, Tom gallantly climbed down and opened it for Gwen, then led Lucas through afterwards.

Several minutes later they were out of sight from the house. Looking around, Tom could not see anyone, and he felt comfortable enough for another teleportation.

He had Gwen pull off the road and together they tossed out the bags in a pile on the ground, placing the hay bales nearby. Lisa popped them all away, startling the horses again. But Tom was prepared, and made sure he had Lucas’s reins in hand.

They continued on, quickly making their way back to the Asa’s entrance off the North Road. Tom spotted the grove of trees Samar mentioned. They unhitched Bessie there, leaving the wagon behind.

When they finally reached the road, they found Vick asleep under a tree, his horse nearby. Tom nudged him with a boot.

“Get up. We’re headed into town.”

“Mr. Ever will be expecting me. And those four fellas you ported into the sun.”

Tom nodded.

“If we see him, I’ll deliver a message to him, personally.”

2.15

“**W**hen were the Riders going to attack the Fae? Did they have a time picked out, or were they just thinking after sunset or something?”

Vick shrugged. He rode alongside Tom and Gwen looking a lot better after his nap.

Tom noticed the older man still favored his gun hand. No doubt ghost pains would bother him for a while. Maybe for the rest of his life.

“We left first. Been gone since this morning, so I dunno if plans have changed. Mr. Ever said he wanted to hit them, though. A couple other guys were going to try and scope out their camp so we could take it tonight. I don’t recollect a set time for it all.”

“Seems kind of foolhardy to try and go after them,” Tom said. “The Fae are seasoned gunfighters. Attacking them on their home turf is not the best idea.”

Vick shrugged again.

“Mr. Ever has taken on Robin Hood types before. Plus, he’s still bent outta shape about the whole Mal Dalmont thing. Lost a lot of men. Lost out on the rest of the reward. That whole thing was a mess.”

The horses chewed up the kilometers, and signs of civilization grew more numerous the closer they came to Little York. All the fields along the road were cultivated now, and they saw various people in the distance picking crops or tending to animals. Many waved at them, and the trio waved back.

At last they drew near to town and the large green space surrounding it.

Sharp blasts of gunfire punctuated the air.

Tom and Gwen exchanged a glance.

“Sounds like the ‘scoping party’ ran into some trouble,” Tom said.

Gwen did not respond. She pulled her reins to the right and gassed Bessie’s sides with her heels. The mare shot into the pasture toward the Fae’s camp and the gunshots.

Tom frowned.

He looked at the former Ever Rider and said, “Come on, Silas. Time to earn your keep.”

Both men urged their horses after her. They bounded into the field the same time as two cowboys burst from the trees on the far side of the green space.

One of the oncoming steeds jerked as an energy bolt whizzed by its ear. The rider lost his balance and tumbled out of the saddle while the horse kept going.

His companion pulled back hard on the reins, making his steed pivot in place. He fired back at the trees on full auto, spraying bolts. Then he raced up to his fallen comrade and reached down to haul the man up behind his saddle. Together they galloped out of the pasture, veering away from the trio riding toward them.

Five horses burst from cover on the far side, young women riding hard.

“Hold back! Watch for traps!”

Reluctantly, the women slowed. They turned and looked at the three entering the pasture from the north, and everyone recognized the person

riding out front. They abandoned their chase and turned toward the newcomers.

“Gwen! What are you doing here?”

“Hi Haley! We’re coming to check on you. We were on our way to town.”

The horses drew near and stopped, five facing three.

Haley laughed.

“Those idiots thought they were being sneaky or something. We heard them coming a kilometer away.”

She raised a finger to her pointy ears, the physical modification signifying bionic implants. The other women riding with her had similar aural enhancements.

“They were trying to check out our encampment or something. We heard them talking about their plans as they approached. I mean, how stupid can you get?”

“They were talking about what they planned on doing to us when they took down our camp,” another woman said with a shudder. “Hi Gwen. Tom.”

“Hi, Em.”

Gwen smiled at Haley’s second-in-command. All the Fae were under thirty. One looked to be about 16. They were dressed in jeans, boots and cotton shirts.

Haley said, “Yeah, let’s just say their plans did not endear them to us. You’re one of the Ever Riders. What are you doing here?”

The shift in topic took Silas by surprise. He opened his mouth but paused, as if uncertain whether to hedge around the blunt assertion regarding his allegiance or simply answer the question.

Tom answered for him.

“This is Silas Vick. You could say he’s our . . . hired hand.”

Gwen guffawed and rolled her eyes.

Vick looked down and surreptitiously tucked his gun hand into a pocket.

“You changed sides that easy?” Haley said, looking at him intently.

He shrugged and said, “Mr. Savage pays very well.”

The skeptical look she gave him spoke volumes, mostly along the lines of deep distrust. But she said nothing else about it.

Instead she turned back to Gwen and Tom.

“Well, I would invite you to stay for lunch . . .”

She glanced pointedly at Vick.

“But we just chased off two of Ever’s men. Not sure I want to invite a third one in right now. No offense.”

“That’s okay,” Tom said. “We need to make our way into town anyway. It seems James Ever is planning on attacking both your camp and my place again sometime soon.”

Em said, “Oh he is, is he? That explains why those two were trying to feel out the lay of the land.”

Haley said, “Don’t let us keep you, then. If he’s planning on making a move, he’ll probably go for the easier target. And that would be you two.”

“We are definitely *not* an easy target,” Em said, nodding.

“And now that we’ve been forewarned, we’ll be keeping a sharp eye out for Mr. Ever and his men if they come this way.”

After speaking a while longer, the two groups parted. The Fae drifted back into the woods.

Surreptitiously, Tom dropped a mini sensor on the ground so Lisa could keep an eye on this part of the pasture leading to the Fae encampment in the woods. Then he and Gwen headed back to the road with Silas following.

2.16

The Pulsar popped into empty space one astronomical unit away from Sporades, in hypertime.

The old defenses in and around Sporades's solar system kept good track of ships coming in and leaving, positioned as they were at the AU and half AU marks. But the technology had not been updated for ships traveling in hypertime, for several reasons.

Hypertime detection remained extremely difficult and costly. More important, especially to those concerned with external threats, it was not always accurate.

Besides all that, it remained exorbitant for ships to upgrade to the Machro-drive needed. Many Republican Navy ships had it, but Sporades was part of the Republic. Typically only luxury liners, or the private ships of the very wealthy were equipped with the proper apparatus outside the Republican Navy.

In other words, very few ships could slip into hypertime, and the requisite upgrades to partially effective sensors were not deemed worth the time and expense.

No one had one outside of government, except for the very wealthy had a ship so equipped. Except for maybe smugglers who had the resources and inclination to install a Machro-drive . . .

Wink and Jinxie sank every spare credit into one from their earlier efforts running tobacco and other various restricted products between Pearl, Italia and the outer planets.

So there was nothing to stop the smuggler's ship when it appeared, still inside the Sporades system. It remained in place, in hypertime, before popping away again.

In real time, it was already long gone.

Time aboard the ship remained the same. But outside the ship, it seemed as if Pulsar had disappeared entirely, not just through teleportation.

Aboard the Pulsar, three seconds later and following three more ports, Jinxie caught her breath. She looked around in wonderment.

"We made it!"

"Of course we made it," Wink said. "What did you think would happen? Don't tell me you believe that old superstition about a ship blowing up when it ports from the atmosphere to space."

"That's . . . that's happened before. I've read about it."

"Maybe a hundred years ago. Haven't you heard about how the Ultima Mule won the war for the Republicans? They popped into Epsilon's *atmosphere* to attack the League Capital. They even took their ship underwater to avoid the League Navy hunting them. And they did not explode when they ported back out to space."

"Okay, okay!"

Jinxie shook her head, letting all the tension fly out through her hair.

"I was just worried, you know? I've never done that before."

Wink relaxed, too, letting his own tension seep out of his shoulders.

"Yeah, me neither. Airspace is so controlled. Nobody wants you down there. You can't really experiment much unless you're running from the law or something."

He turned to the forward holo and watched stars blink as they ported, one AU at a time.

He said, “Where are we going, anyway?”

“Phaethon, that new planet. Lots of colonists. Maybe they’ll want to buy something we have.”

“Like battle tanks? What are colonists going to do with battle tanks? Who could even afford one out there, Jinxie?”

The young woman put a hand up.

“It was preprogrammed, okay? You know how jumps are when you don’t have an AI. It’s not like I could yell out, ‘Hey, PLAIR! Take us away!’ and we’d go somewhere random and safe.”

“You’re right, you’re right. And I guess we can’t really tread over to Republican space right now. I bet they’re gonna be mad about our little foray into Sporades airspace for a while.”

Jinx gave him flat look.

“We’ll probably have to change the name of the ship and falsify some logs if we ever want to go back into a Republican system, Wink. And I don’t think you can ever go there again without some bio scanning chicanery.”

He waved it off.

“Yeah, we’ll figure it out later. For right now, let’s get to Phaethon. Boy, aren’t you glad we invested in the Machro-drive while we were at Lute. Huh? Huh? We’ll be at our destination in a few hours in real time. Maybe we can unload these two tanks, make a tidy profit, and go back to Petra Roe before the sun sets on that portable island we landed on.”

“I can’t believe you bought two League battle tanks. How do they hide those things for 20 years without anyone finding out?”

“They were literally underground. And underwater too, I suppose. There’s apparently a lot of stuff hidden away from the war that nobody knows about. You should have seen the cargo sub this guy had. If there’s ever another war or a revolution or something on the former League planets, the

bad guys are going to be very well armed. At least, that's certainly the case on Sporades."

-+-

Four weeks passed aboard Pulsar, and Wink savored every minute. Despite his ability to pour on the charm with clients, he was a private person. He enjoyed solitude, and months aboard the spaceship with no one to bother him suited him just fine.

Jinx, on the other hand, required interaction. She would pester him if he did not talk to her every day.

In real time, they could stop and allow her to contact friends and family back on Petra Roe. But in hypertime, of course, only a few hours would pass everywhere else while they spent their weeks traveling through space.

So Wink was her only human source of interaction during all that time.

She could be entertained by the holo library. She could even partake in virtual reality games in which the NPCs could easily pass the old Turing test. But it was not the same when she knew they were not human, no matter how good the representation.

Not to Jinx Malone. She wanted to interact with a real person, and Wink was it.

For his part, Wink humored her and always engaged in conversation with her. Besides, she made it up to him in other ways that involved real human interaction. He tolerated her need for talking hours on end all for the sake of a few moments of special togetherness later.

At last the ship popped into real time, in orbit around Phaethon. Both stood on the bridge, looking at the planet that had been steadily growing brighter the last few seconds. Now, it filled the holo, rotating majestically.

"It's . . . brown," Jinx said. "Aren't planets supposed to be . . . I dunno. Blue? Green?"

“Well, obviously it’s habitable down there. And I’d say dark yellow, more so than brown. Like the color of sand, maybe.”

“Is it a desert planet?”

“I know literally nothing about it.”

“Attention Petra Roe flagged starship Pulsar. Welcome to Phaethon. Please state your intentions.”

Wink and Jinxie traded a smile. He touched his implant, connecting him to the comlink.

“We’ve got some cargo to trade, Phaethon. Is there a place we can land on the surface to do some business?”

2.17

Jinx settled the Pulsar down on a massive concrete pad. They could see a city nearby through the external holos. It looked new, rough, and unfinished.

“They certainly have poured enough concrete,” Jinxie said, shaking her blue hair at the expanse before them.

When the landing feet bumped down, she cut the engines and lowered the rear ramp.

“It must have been the first thing they imported,” Wink said. “Or maybe they made it from local ingredients? It’d be hotter if the sun was out. Imagine the heat this thing must reflect.”

“I guess this is how you have to do it with no teleportation or sensors. Everybody lands.”

“Looks like our welcoming committee is approaching. I’ll go talk with them.”

“Good. I’ll be in my cabin doing anti-grav.”

Wink made his way to the stern and walked out on the ramp. He smiled at the two approaching men, used to dealing with customs officials and other bureaucrats.

First rule is, always smile, he thought.

“Hi, how are you? Nice to meet you. I’m Wink McKelway. This is the Pulsar. We’d like to do some trading, if that’s possible.”

The two older men shook hands and informed Wink that to land and do trade would require a license, which cost a hundred credits. He expected that, and handed over a token.

On some more established planets, the fee was far higher. Italia, for one, required licenses of 12,000 credits to trade, meaning one had to trade a lot in order to not lose their shirt.

Other, smaller outposts were much more reasonable. Since Phaethon was newly colonized, the trading license involved a trivial sum.

“What do you have for us, Mr. McKelway?”

“A fair amount of cryogenically preserved food from Pearl. Lamb chops, ground beef and preserved grapes, mostly. Plus a few other minor culinary items.”

It was a poor haul, actually. Wink had traded most of the good stuff from his trip to Pearl long ago. This was the leftovers nobody else had taken.

Nonetheless, the men’s eyes lit up.

“I’ve also got a variety of athletic wear from a store on Diego that closed out. And a couple hundred pairs of gloves made of Kelvingarb. They’re practically indestructible. I would imagine that’s something a colonist could use out here.”

It seemed apparent the men were convinced he had some decent goods to sell.

He did not mention the majority of his cargo involved tobacco leaf. Nor did he even hint at the two battle tanks onboard. Those were not the kind of things to mention out loud to officials at a spaceport.

“Anything in particular you’re looking to buy from *us*, Mr. McKelway?”

“I’m always open to a good deal. I prefer unique items unavailable elsewhere that I can turn for a profit.”

This was a pat answer for Wink, except in the old League areas. There, making a profit was still frowned upon by the socialist bureaucracy, unless it was in service to the League. Even then, making money still carried the stench of evil in the minds of many there, especially among the older generations.

But Alliance, Republican, and unaligned territories understood the need for profits. Without allowing traders the opportunity to make money, no one would ever do business.

“We’ll notify the town’s merchants of your presence,” the second man said. “How long will you be staying with us?”

“Not long. Maybe an hour.”

Thanks to the wonders of hypertime, the Pulsar escaped Sporades mere minutes ago, although it seemed like almost a month had gone by to Wink and Jinxie. He hoped it was too soon for an alert about them to go out, although he doubted this unaligned planet would take any steps against them.

“We have some tables nearby you are free to use if you want to display your goods. You should have some people approaching soon. Everyone in town saw your ship land.”

Wink nodded, relieved that everything went well. You never could tell with bureaucrats.

The smaller the fiefdom, the more ruthless the ruler. Sometimes.

He shook hands with both men and watched their backs as they made the long trek across a flat concrete plain to return to their distant office building. Then he turned to go fetch his first crate of goods.

Several minutes later, two dozen local merchants haggled with him over all his stuff. As the one hour mark approached, he realized he was going to sell out. The locals wanted everything he had.

Food was the first to go. They took it all, even the expensive lamb chops Wink had been unable to turn over elsewhere. He sold the ground beef for a very healthy profit, more than he could have anywhere else. He kept a running tally in his implant, and realized he and Jinx could make bank just selling ground beef to Phaethon residents, provided they remained willing to pay this much of a premium.

It seemed odd to him, because he figured someone would be raising cattle out here. When he mentioned something about it to a restaurant wholesaler, the woman laughed at him.

“It takes a year to raise a cow for slaughter. A year and a whole lot of grain. Beef is one of the most expensive things to raise out here.”

By the look on her face, he realized she thought she spoke too much. Mentally, he adjusted his asking price for ground beef here in the future. His profit potential for future trips escalated. Especially considering that more agrarian planets practically mass-produced cattle and sold beef by the kiloton.

Wink even unloaded the clothes he had onboard, leading one fellow into his hold to look at cartons of shoes and boxes of t-shirts.

“Yeah we can always use clothes. People go through what they brought with 'em. They're always looking for more. How much for the whole lot? I've got load bots that can haul everything out of here for you.”

The tobacco sold with far more subtlety. The forbidden leaf remained illegal in many places, along with most other things that could be smoked. A few spots in the Republic were open to its consumption, including Pearl where most of the good stuff grew.

Wink hoped, but he did not know for sure, that a colonial planet would not yet have restrictions on importing tobacco. A couple of discreet questions confirmed his guess. Then it was simply a matter of casually mentioning his supply of loose leaf tobacco, perfectly preserved and ready to be processed.

There was something about tobacco that attracted attention from black market types, even more so than the marijuana variants found on multiple planets. The plant had been so demonized for so long on Old Earth, it held

an almost mythic status out in the stars. Despite its comparatively minimal narcotic value, everyone wanted to at least try it, if they ever got the chance.

Wink sold everything he had, raking in 32,000 credits on tobacco alone.

Finally, most of the merchants left, all satisfied. Their servants, or bots, helped load up vehicles which drove down the concrete to park near the spaceship.

A rare few had indents, biocollars evident. These would be highly successful types who could afford the contracts on indentured servants. Wink was surprised to see any indents this far out, but the few collared men and women he saw were older. The young, he remembered, had the most expensive contracts purchased at the auction houses. Older people who got into too much debt would sell themselves, but not many wanted or needed someone in their 40s or 50s.

At last, only half a dozen men stood outside his ramp, sharing a few words or just staring at him.

Wink knew the drill. It remained the same no matter what planet he visited. The ones lingering to the end were interested in real black market items, things that were way off limits locally and could be flipped for extreme profits.

This usually involved tobacco on most planets. He suspected he might have something these men would be more interested in, though.

“So . . .”

Conversation stopped and all eyes fixed on Wink.

“How are you all doing on weapons?”

2.18

Tom, Gwen and Silas found no sign of Ever's men as they rode into town on the North Road.

Tom suspected the Riders were shorthanded right now. Then he smiled as he thought of another pun to use later on Silas.

They stopped at Cajun Cal's and handed over their horses. Cal gave Silas a funny look, but he took Tom's money for three animals without a second thought.

When no one was looking, Tom scuffed the dirt outside Cal's corral and dropped a mini sensor, then covered it up with his boot.

With this one, Tom thought, Lisa would have coverage on both sides of town, since he had already left one in the pub's restroom. It wasn't perfect coverage, like a large municipal sensor could offer, but he felt it was better than nothing.

The trio moved to a wooden boardwalk running along buildings on the right side of the street. They made their way to the public house, boots tromping on the planks.

Tom held the door open for Gwen and Silas, then followed them inside Ferguson's Freehold. A handful of regulars at the bar turned to look at them as they entered.

Tom scanned the room and found one cowboy sitting at a table with his back to the wall. He pegged him as Ever's man. The fellow's eyes widened at the sight of Silas walking in with Gwen and Tom.

He'll do nicely for transmitting my message, Tom thought. I should have known they'd have a man posted in the pub rather than putting someone at every road coming into town.

"What are you doin', Vick?"

Instead of answering him right away, Silas said to Tom, "This is Pearson McGrew. He's Mr. Ever's main man. Handles finances and such."

That explains what he's doing here, then. The Freehold has the only line of communication with the outside world.

"I'm glad I saw you, Pears. I need to turn in my resignation to Mr. Ever. You won't be needin' to pay me this month. I quit."

McGrew stared at him expressionless for a moment, and Tom took the opportunity to commit the man's face to memory.

In his late 30s or early 40s, McGrew had brown skin and eyes like most people, with jet black hair curving up in cowlick. He looked intelligent. If attired in a business suit, the man might easily pass for an accountant or a lawyer on a civilized planet.

"We got a saying, Vick. You know it. 'We work for Ever forever.'"

"I know. But . . . Mr. Savage here pays better than you all do."

McGrew's eyes flicked to the couple for a second, drinking them in. He quickly returned to Silas.

"How much does he pay?"

"About double."

McGrew did not wince, exactly. But Tom noticed his left eye squinting involuntarily for a split second.

"Well, let's not be too hasty, Vick. I wouldn't want you to make a move in employment that you'll come to regret later on."

“He pays in gold.”

This pronouncement was met with a long, long silence.

Inwardly, it was Tom’s turn to wince. He made a mental note to say something to Silas about that later, about keeping the gold part of the man’s pay under his hat.

On the other hand, since apparently few merchants out here were all that interested in taking gold blanks over tokens, maybe it was no big deal.

But now that McGrew knew about the gold, Ever would know about it soon, too.

Maybe I can turn that into an advantage.

“Well Vick, I hope you change your mind. Mr. Ever hates to lose men, and you’re no exception. Can you tell me anything about Smith? Garcia and the others?”

“They was lost in the gunfight with Mr. Savage here. He done killed them all. And their horses.”

“You weren’t a part of that killin’, were you?”

“What? No, of course not. They were stupid enough to charge him, and they all got shot by that supergun of hers.”

He nodded toward Gwen, standing behind him with the Whillicker strapped over one shoulder.

“That’s when Mr. Savage made me an offer of employment and I took him up on it. Tell Mr. Ever I quit.”

Tom nodded, thinking this was a nicely edited version of events. No mention was made of Silas losing a hand, and then getting it back as part of the deal ensuring his loyalty.

“I see.”

McGrew pulled together the papers lying out on the table and stuffed them into a folder.

“I need to head out to the Dalmont place and inform Mr. Ever of these latest developments.”

“We saw your goons running from the Fae on the way in.”

McGrew stopped mid-motion and locked eyes with Tom, who returned a small smile.

Tom continued.

“I think it’s pretty stupid of Mr. Ever to attack a bunch of rangers. Especially ones armed to the teeth and ready for him. Why don’t you tell your boss if he’s got any brains, or other things that start with ‘B,’ to come out and pay me a visit? I’d love to talk with him in person.”

The older man held Tom’s gaze a moment, then he nodded and finished shuffling his papers. He tucked the folder inside his vest.

“I’ll be sure and tell him that.”

He laid down a couple tokens on the table, and stood up. He approached the trio and stopped in front of Silas, standing a few centimeters taller than the other man.

They locked eyes for a moment.

McGrew slugged Silas in the jaw, without warning.

Silas flew backward, completely off balance. He landed on a table, falling over and crashing to the floor.

Tom reached into his pocket and pulled out his brass knuckles. He lunged forward and struck at McGrew with a sharp jab.

McGrew blocked it, deflecting Tom’s blow with a swipe of his hands. He glanced down at the metal on Tom’s fist and lashed out with a sudden kick to the groin.

Thunk!

Silence smothered the bar as everyone waited for Tom to double over in pain. It took McGrew a second to realize the younger man wore a cup.

Tom smiled and took another step forward. He struck in a flurry of blows. McGrew shielded his face with his fists, blocking Tom's punches.

The brass knuckles made an impact, though. They made a different sound connecting with his flesh, and McGrew's hands grew red from the impacts.

He kept backing up.

He bumped into a regular sitting at the bar, knocking over the man's beer. McGrew looked over his shoulder at the sound of the mug clattering on wood. The drunk's mouth dropped open in shock. He popped McGrew in the nose, enraged.

Tom took advantage of the distraction and stepped in closer, finally connecting a solid blow with McGrew's jaw.

The man staggered back, nose bloody, jaw swollen.

He reached down to his holster and pulled out a sidearm.

"Enough!"

Everyone turned toward Oma Ferguson as she exited the kitchen carrying a rifle. She aimed it in an arc. The men at the bar ducked, drinks forgotten as she swung it their way.

"There is no fighting in here. And definitely no shooting. Now get out, all of you! Pub's closed!"

Reluctantly, people left tokens on the bar. To a man, they shot nasty looks at Tom and McGrew.

Tom kept an eye on the older man as he and Gwen headed for the door, along with a recovered Silas.

McGrew stayed until the last person left.

They waited for him out in the street. When he finally exited the Freehold, he glanced at them, but turned away and walked toward the stables.

"Should we follow him?" Gwen said.

"Nah. Let it rest."

“Thanks for sticking up for me back there, Mr. Savage. He caught me by surprise. Nasty fella, Pearson McGrew.”

“You work for me now, Silas. I got your back.”

The look on Silas’s face indicated that made him feel good about his employment choice, despite the coercion involved in making it.

“I’m afraid you just set yourself up for a world of hurt, invitin’ Mr. Ever to come out to your place, though.”

“Maybe,” Tom said, smiling. “Maybe not. He was going to make the trip anyway.”

The door to the pub opened and Oma Ferguson walked out into the street holding a sheet of paper. She raised her voice so everyone within listening distance could hear.

“Got the weather report from League City here. Bad news. That new satellite they put up is showin’ a tropical depression out in the Aqua Minor. And it’s headin’ our way!”

Everyone on the street except Tom and Silas groaned.

“What’s that mean?” Silas said with a confused look on his face. “Is it gonna rain or somethin’?”

Gwen said, “It means there’s a dust storm coming. Then it will rain. How long do we have, Oma?”

“It’s gonna hit us tomorrow sometime, if this forecast is correct.”

Gwen locked eyes with Tom, concern in her face.

“We should go back home and get things ready.”

2.19

“They’re barely rested!”

Cajun Cal complained loudly about bringing out the horses, but he complied with the couple’s request. Silas dutifully helped saddle up the mounts.

Gwen climbed up onto Bessie when all was ready.

“We didn’t ride them hard, Cal,” she said. “But there’s a dust storm coming. We have to get back home. There are things we need to get ready so we can ride it out.”

“How do you know that? You don’t know when the next storm is comin’.

No one knows.”

“The new weather satellite that the courthouse back in League City put into orbit says so. Oma told us about it.”

A cowboy jogged up to the corral and unlatched the gate as Gwen spoke.

“Cal, get my horse! I gotta get back home and board things up before that dust storm hits!”

Grumbling, Cal headed toward the stables again, leaving the man fidgeting in place. Tom and Silas mounted up and headed out the open gate with Gwen.

“Let’s go out on the West Road to the Dalmont’s entrance,” Tom said. “I want to see it before we go.”

Gwen frowned, making it obvious what she thought of that idea.

Silas did too, but more from confusion. He said nothing, though, as they headed west out of town.

At the bend near the entrance to the combined homesteads, three scorched tree trunks were all that remained of the firefight there days earlier.

Tom asked Silas to stay put while he and Gwen continued up to the private road.

“No one’s guarding the entrance,” Tom said. “That’s good to know.”

Gwen said, “They wouldn’t be able to alert the guys back in the compound if someone came through. Not without a comlink. And who would come after them, anyway?”

Tom smiled at her and tossed a mini-sensor on the ground, just behind the entrance.

“Lisa, let me know if a large group of riders go past this entrance, okay?”

“I will do that, Thomas.”

They turned around and met back up with Silas, who looked bored sitting on his horse in the middle of the road. He asked no questions, though, and followed them as they rode back to the edge of town and turned left onto the North Road. Tom made sure to leave a sensor at the crossroads, too.

Gwen urged Bessie into a canter, and the men sped up along with her. The horses chewed up the kilometers as the road slowly deteriorated in quality.

The afternoon grew late as the way ahead deteriorated to a mere footpath. They came down a final ridge and approached the MicaBot’s sawmill standing off to their left.

Silas frowned and asked about it when neither Tom nor Gwen saw fit to mention anything.

“What is that?”

“Sawmill.”

“Ain’t it . . . kinda small for a sawmill?”

Tom shrugged and said, “To be honest with you, I’ve never seen one before. I don’t know how big they normally are, so I’ve got nothing to compare it to.”

“I’ve been to Mendor as a youngster for work. Minor planet out past Italia. Heavily, heavily wooded. That’s their prime export, wood products. It’s lightly populated, but there’s all these sawmills and processing plants. They’re careful not to cut down everything, but they select what they need and cultivate the rest, clearing out all the deadwood. Anyways, some of their automated sawmills are huge. Several football fields in length.”

“Well, this one doesn’t make much. Just . . . what you see there.”

They rounded a bend. In the distance, a little bridge crested the river. Beyond it Tom’s house stood, the front door facing their direction. Nearby, the new stables and corral waited.

Tom glanced at Silas, only to see the older man staring at the homestead with his mouth open.

“How did . . . you ain’t been here long enough to build all that.”

“Oh, I had help. That little sawmill was put to good use.”

Silas was so taken with the new construction, he did not notice Timmy at first. The horses clattered over the bridge before he saw the robot, standing motionless in the field between the house and the river.

“Is that a Republican battle bot?”

Tom smiled at the note of incredulity in the older man’s voice.

“Yup. Your little mission Ever sent y’all on was doomed from the start.”

Silas kept his mouth shut as they approached. He paused his horse as Tom pulled the reins on Lucas and they both came to a halt.

“Timmy, this is Silas Vick. He is our employee, and is to be treated as such. Keep an eye on him. If he ever threatens me or Gwendolyn, take care of it.

But otherwise, consider him a friend and protectee.”

“Acknowledged.”

Tom squeezed the sides of his horse and kept going toward the corral.

Silas glanced between the bot, whose “head” was about even with his, despite being mounted, and Tom’s back. The vertical rectangular sensor with rounded edges did not show facial features, but Silas stared at it for a moment.

He quickly reassessed, for the third time in a row, his new employer. Then he hurried after Tom, leaving the bot behind.

Gwen had already led Bessie inside the stables. The mare let it be known, via resistance to the reins and a series of snorts, that she would prefer to roam free outside the corral, but the young woman ignored the protests.

Tom dismounted and led Lucas in after her, choosing a stall nearby. His eyes quickly adjusted to the dimmer light inside the stables.

Silas came in next and Tom pointed out a stall he could use for his horse.

“They should be okay indoors. I hope not too much dust gets in here,” Gwen said.

“It was built tight,” Tom said. “But yeah, I’ll have the Micas put up some cloth on the doors and elsewhere, to try and filter things some more.”

Gwen looked reassured. She went to go find the bales of straw Lisa had ported from the Asas earlier. When she returned, grunting with a bale and then breaking it up in the stall’s feeder, Bessie seemed to relent on her irritation about not going free. She munched down on the straw, all else forgotten.

When Silas went to retrieve another bale, Gwen turned to Tom and frowned.

“Where’s he going to sleep?”

“I was thinking of putting him in the space capsule. It’s airtight, with a good ventilation system. If it can keep someone alive in orbit, he can surely

survive a dust storm in there. That reminds me, I need to have the MicaBots seal up the house, too.”

He turned his attention inward, to his implant, and had Lisa pass along instructions to the MicaBots’ CPU as the sun sank behind the distant mountains.

2.20

Only one man had expressed interest in procuring weapons, much to Wink's surprise. When he let it be known he had bigger weapons than just standard blasters, most of the black market buyers backed off.

This made sense, Wink thought. Black market sellers wanted small, easily concealable items they could carry on their bodies. These could be easily displayed on a table somewhere and quickly flipped for a nice profit. Or hidden in case law enforcement showed up.

A battle tank . . . well, whoever bought one would likely be stuck with it.

Wink maintained his optimism, though. A frontier planet meant that such a heavy weapon could be sold here with regulators looking the other way.

Heck, even if Customs on this planet is monitoring everything I do right now, which they're not, they're making no efforts to intervene.

He decided he quite liked this freedom from authority, and felt determined to make another run to Phaethon in the future. Especially now that he knew what the merchants were most interested in.

They bought up every bit of packaged food he had, including potato chips, canned soups, canned meats, protein bars, cheese wheels and candy bars.

Candy in particular went for top credits. The few boxes of it Wink had in his holds drew heavy interest, and the young smuggler set up a little auction on the spot. He sold three crates of chocolate bonbons, produced on Juventas of all places, containing 500 packages of candy each. They sold for a total of 1,850 credits.

Each box auctioned off a little lower than the one before it, but three different merchants happily carried away their prizes, shoving through the crowd after winning.

Wink suspected the local dentists would be making more money soon, too.

Basically, he thought, items from home that people took for granted on the major planets were worth their weight in gold out here. The next time he came, he could bring nothing but packaged foods and personal goods like toothpaste and deodorant. The trip would likely prove to be his most profitable one ever.

A large distributor with galactic supply chains had not yet set up shop out here. The locals had to rely on independent mom and pop shops, who in turn had to procure goods from wherever they could. In short, Phaethon could be a gold mine for someone like him.

For right now, though, Wink needed to offload the battle tanks. Or at least one of them. Doing so would restore his capital and allow him to make more bulk purchases somewhere else that he could bring back to this planet.

The last man standing after all others left was a tall, stern-looking man of Vietnamese descent. He never smiled. The man introduced himself as Otto Tran. Other than a few terse words, he did not say much else, despite Wink's attempt to banter with him.

“Show me the tanks.”

Wink nodded, giving up on small talk, and turned to go back up the ramp into Pulsar's main hold. Tran followed him.

They stopped where the dim light from Phaethon's shrouded sun no longer penetrated inside the ship. Here, the backs of two identical League battle tanks faced them.

The vehicles looked huge, larger even than a typical terrestrial delivery truck, with massive gun barrels sticking out of a turret. The teardrop design looked sleek and deadly, the gunmetal gray a universal color of war.

“There you go,” Wink said with a flourish.

“Do they work? Prove to me they’re operable.”

“I’m not going to fire them up inside the hold for you. Too dangerous. Take my word for it, though. I loaded them myself. And let me tell ya, I could not have gotten them on this ship if I wasn’t able to do it using their own power. Look how big and heavy those things are.”

Tran seemed convinced.

While possible to move a chunk of metal this size with other means, it would have proven difficult. One of the major AIs in a system could have ported the machines into place, of course. But Pulsar was flagged with a neutral planet, and they both knew that neither PLAIR nor StarCen would have been willing to teleport weapons of war inside a neutral ship.

At least, not under normal circumstances.

So, the simplest explanation had to be that Wink drove them into the hold himself.

“How much?”

Wink smiled.

“One hundred thousand each. That’s non-negotiable, I’m afraid. And, you’re getting a bargain. Where else will you find a fully workable League battle tank in this good of condition, ready to go? I’ll tell you. Nowhere.”

“I’ll need to consult with my superiors. But give me your account info and we’ll wire the money in if the boss says it’s okay.”

“Of course. We’re leaving within the hour if we don’t hear back from you, though.”

This was reasonable. It was a sales technique, but Wink felt it had to look reasonable. He had places to go.

But in reality, he had no place to go to sell these weapons of war. He had no idea where to try and unload them next if Tran did not take them. But there was no point, he felt, in letting the man know that.

Tran nodded and walked back down the ramp, out into the ambient light under Phaethon's sun. Wink leaned up against the edge of the hold, arms crossed, watching him go.

"Did you sell them?"

He smiled at the sound of Jinxie's voice over his implant.

"I've got a strong nibble. I don't know yet if I've set the hook yet or not."

"Well, you need to find out soon and let's get out of here. The lack of direct sunlight on this planet is depressing me."

Twenty minutes later, Wink set his hook.

2.21

“**T**hey was onto us from the get go. We never even got close.”

James Ever sat at a desk in the ground floor den of what had been Malcom Dalmont’s house. The other three brothers let him take over the place after Marshal Metger captured Mal and took him away.

Not that they had much choice in the matter.

Ever turned on Mal the moment the marshal offered him a reward for capturing the man. Of course, things didn’t turn out the way Ever expected. The marshal had minced his words and ended up splitting the reward between the Ever Riders and the Fae Phalanx.

And somehow those girls with guns had lost far, far fewer people than he had in their attack on the Dalmont family compound. A lot of that had to do with the Firedog 3W, an old but highly restricted (and highly effective) weapon.

How they got one out here to a frontier planet, he had no idea. He would dearly love to take it for himself, though.

You can’t just buy those things in the Republic or the League, he thought, before bringing himself back to the present.

“Alright. That answers that question. If we can’t even sneak up on them, there’s no way we can take on that batch of rangers on their home turf. Even if we’re evenly matched. Even if they’re all women. Let’s set aside the idea for now.”

No one would ever say James Ever was not a rational man. He thought things through. He had survived on this frontier planet two and a half years now by his wits and guns alone. He pulled together this band of freedom riders (don’t call them outlaws, thank you very much) and they had managed quite well.

Ten towns on the continent of Glagia paid him fealty money, making deposits into the Riders’ bank account back in Little York every month. So far, no one had stopped making those payments.

Only one had been late the first time, the village of Friendswood. The Ever Riders made a brief reappearance, reminding the townsfolk of the agreement in place.

That the mayor of Friendswood had been brutally executed in the town square might have helped convince them, Ever thought with a smile. Then his wife and daughter were . . . persuaded to provide comfort to many of his men.

The town council was informed, in no uncertain words, that their families would receive similar treatment if the payments were not transmitted in a timely manner. And the payment had been on time ever since.

Ever had never been over to the other two continents. Thus far, there had been no need. Almost all the early settlements were on Glagia, at increasing distances from League City. Few had bothered with Iliou yet. The continent of Anatolia had Little York and some minor outposts, but was rightly widely regarded to be mostly desert. So, Ever had never bothered to come over here.

Then Mal Dalmont reached out to him, sending a message to the public house in Cypress where the Ever Riders had been camped out after their latest conquest.

Ever answered the call and came on a whim. The truth of the matter was, he had started to get bored.

The remaining villages on Glagia were growing. Most were towns, now. Some might even be approaching city status, cresting the 3,000 mark in population. A settlement that size was hard for a band of freedom riders to intimidate and coerce fealty money from the residents. It was a lot easier to pick on smaller targets, the little villages where a few dozen men could murder the people in charge and terrorize the rest. Then the village council could be persuaded to pay protection money to the riders.

In short, the pickings had started to dry up on Glagia by the time Dalmont reached out with an offer to transport the entire gang over to Little York, paying the men for their time and effort.

It was a move that ultimately backfired, because it had proven more lucrative to turn Dalmont in to the marshal. But . . . nothing had been quite as lucrative as Ever had been led to believe. Even now, it might be another month or two before the marshal made his deposit and Ever would receive the promised funds.

Worse, he had lost about two-thirds of his men in the ordeal. Although, there were some good things about losing men. Dead men don't get paid, after all . . .

So he was still here, in Mal Dalmont's house. Eating Mal Dalmont's food. Ignoring Mal Dalmont's brothers.

If nothing else, he thought he could coerce the people of Little York to pay into his fealty scheme. That would add more credits to the riders' account back in League City.

But to do that, he would need to take care of the Fae Phalanx, who would no doubt defend the town if he moved against it. And his scouting party just told him the Fae were next to impossible to ambush.

Since that idea would have to wait, James Ever turned his thoughts to more practical things.

Like revenge.

“What’s taking Silas Vick so long to report back?”

They heard a knock at the door and Pearson McGrew stuck his head in. He looked bloody, with a tissue shoved up one nostril, and a nasty bruise on his chin.

“I got news, Boss.”

Ever made a beckoning motion with his hand. McGrew came in and grabbed a seat.

“What happened to you?”

“Bar fight. But that’s not the news. We lost everybody on that scouting trip to the Savage boy’s place.”

Ever’s eyes dilated. He sat back in the leather seat, stunned for a second.

“Everybody?”

“Yes, sir. They were all killed, save for Vick. He switched sides.”

“He did what, now?”

“The Savage kid offered him at least double what we’re paying. In gold.”

The silence stretched out far longer this time.

At last Ever wiped a hand down his face.

He said, “Where is that boy getting gold? Who has gold out here on this rock? It’s too heavy to bring in, not to mention Customs would notice it.”

He looked up at one of his men, who appeared as astonished as the others in the room.

“Do you have any gold?”

The cowboy mutely shook his head.

Ever turned back to McGrew.

“Nobody has *gold* on this Godforsaken planet! I don’t think the central bank in League City even has gold. Or at least not much. We’re all about credit

tokens out here.”

“I’m just going by what Silas said, Mr. Ever. I don’t think he had a reason to lie. He looked pretty happy to follow that Savage kid around, like he was really gettin’ somethin’ out of the deal.”

Ever took a deep breath and thought hard for a moment.

“Alright. It’s high time we paid Mr. Savage a visit. We’ll look into this gold thing some more. Maybe he’d like to share it with the rest of us.”

One of the men raised his hand and said, “Are we going to take on the whores out in the woods, Boss?”

“We’re outnumbered. If we’re down five more now . . . No. I think we can handle one young man. And if Silas wants to fight for him, well . . . he can contribute whatever gold Mr. Savage has paid him when we search his body.”

Expressions changed around the room. Eyes narrowed. Lips curved up in smiles.

McGrew cleared his throat.

“I got one more important thing to share with you, Boss. Tran, our man in League City, tells us a smuggler has a couple of battle tanks he’s willing to sell us.”

“Did you say, ‘battle tanks?’”

“Yes, sir. Human operable, nearly full charge on the power pack. It’s a one-man army, ready to go. Two of ’em.”

Silence reigned in the room for a moment as all the men slowly smiled.

“How much does he want for them?”

“One hundred thousand each. And he will deliver it to whatever coordinates we give him. All he needs is a flat open place big enough to set down his spaceship. Evidently it’s one they’re used to landing planetside.”

Ever smiled.

“A battle tank should even the odds considerably with that super gun. Ride back to town and send a message to Tran. Tell him to tell the smuggler he’s got a deal. We’ll buy at least one of them. Go ahead and wire the money from our account and give him the coordinates for the ranch. Tell him we’ve got plenty of room for a spaceship out in the fields near the houses here.”

McGrew nodded and left.

After he was gone, Ever rubbed his chin.

“Maybe we can convince this smuggler to toss the other one in for free.”

“You want me to do the convincin’, boss?”

Ever glanced at one of his men, offering to do the dirty work. The others smiled, too, clearly willing.

“Let’s play it by ear. When the money’s in his account, we can’t get it back. But if he sets down here with *two* battle tanks . . . maybe we can figure out how to get the other one from him.”

2.22

James Ever stepped outside when one of his men ran in to let him know when the ship approached. Other people stepped out as well, including the Dalmont boys.

Britt Dalmont covered his brow with a hand and stared at the ship coming in low, standard engines roaring. Emmitt sidled up beside his older brother and copied the gesture. Even though no direct sunlight filtered through the dusty sky, the heat bore down on them as they looked up at the ship.

Newt, the youngest, came up behind them. He stood slightly shorter, but seemed to take comfort in having the taller men out front.

“W-w-what kinda ship is it, Britt?”

The oldest narrowed his eyes as the vehicle slowed to a virtual crawl in the sky, the pilot picking out the best spot to set down.

It finally halted and gently dropped, a picture-perfect vertical landing. Legs sank into the field on the west side of the compound.

The ground was not perfectly level there, gently sloping up to a distant ridge, but the ship compensated somehow. The landing legs closer to the houses sank deeper into the ground.

“That’s a Thespar design,” Emmitt said. “Look at the nose. That’s always a giveaway. Large or small, a Thespar ship will have the same nose.”

“So it’s L-L-League in origin?” Newt said, his head swiveling between the two older men.

“It’s a Thespar Lander-class,” Britt said in a flat tone. “Originally designed for the asteroid belt out past Clarion. They’re made more to land and load up ore, not teleport it in. Those feet can lock into rock, soil, whatever. It’s kinda old. Predates the war, so it’s older than any of us. The League sold ’em off, the ones they had left, a while back. I read somethin’ about it before we moved out here.”

“They’re actually a pretty good choice for smugglers,” Emmitt said. “Sneak in and out easy.”

“W-w-what about microorganism? W-w-won’t they contaminate stuff opening up that d-door?”

Britt said, “Nah. They’ve got a whole-ship decontamination routine. Most spaceships are really big, and they never land. Or, hardly ever. So all they have to worry about is purifying the disembarkation room before and after teleports. The Lander-class decontaminates every square centimeter of air on the whole ship.”

The rear door opened with a hum, and slowly slanted down. Ever and his men approached the ship, heading toward the ramp.

“Sh-should we get closer? Maybe we can l-l-listen in?”

“Nah. I just wanna see what Mr. Ever is buying that requires a Lander-class ship to deliver it all the way out here.”

-+-

Slowly, Wink backed one of the two battle tanks down the ramp and out into the field. He popped the top and stuck his head out, looking toward the houses comprising the Dalmont family compound.

He saw a group of men approaching. Wink decided it would be a nice gesture to cut the distance in half.

Nothing looks more imperious, he thought, than making someone walk all the way to you.

He closed the top and the tank levitated with a meter of clearance, the standard height. Slowly, he glided out toward the houses and the approaching party.

As he neared the four men, he sized them up through the tank's forward holo.

The leader appeared obvious. He had to be the meanest-looking one among them, if not the tallest. The guy had the air of authority about him.

He looks like he could order someone skinned alive and not even flinch while all the blood splattered.

But Wink was used to dealing with rougher types. They were his customer base for some of his more . . . restricted . . . merchandise.

The four stopped in the middle of the field, 50 steps from the ship and its open cargo ramp, where they met the floating tank. Wink settled it down gently on the ground, mindful of what Billingsly had said. The machine indeed proved very intuitive to operate.

He popped the top and climbed out, sliding over the gunmetal gray sides until his feet hit the ground. Then he straightened and walked up to the men with a hand sticking out.

"Mr. Ever, I presume? Wink McKelway."

Ever shook the proffered hand, eyes boring into the younger man, as if memorizing every detail.

"Our man Tran indicates the money is in your account, Mr. McKelway. I want to be sure this tank is fully operable, as agreed upon back in League City."

Wink waved at the weapon of war behind him.

“Feel free to jump in and take her for a spin, Mr. Ever. She’s all yours.”

A gleam came into the outlaw’s eyes. He quickly approached the tank and scrambled up top, then shimmied down inside through the round door below the turret. The three men he left outside with Wink stood back and watched, arms crossed.

“It’s very easy to operate,” Wink said, trying to make casual conversation.

The men grunted, but otherwise did not say anything, so he gave up trying to converse with them.

Soon, the machine hummed and levitated again. It lurched forward, as if Ever applied too much throttle, and the four men scattered before being bowled over.

The tank flew up three, then four meters into the air and picked up speed. Then it banked left and made a sharp U-turn, heading back for them.

Ever indeed seemed to be quickly getting the knack for handling it. He coasted in slower, dipping lower and made another U-turn, hovering again at the standard one meter height.

Slowly, the turret spun, servos whining softly as the giant cannon pivoted in place until it aimed squarely at the closest Dalmont house.

Several meters away, standing near the front door, the Dalmont brothers’ expressions changed. First, their mouths dropped in slack-jawed incredulity, then they stiffened in alarm. Britt, Emmitt and Newt bolted out of the way just as Ever fired off a giant blaster bolt that slammed into the side of the house.

A fireball erupted in the middle of the two story wooden structure, black smoke curling up.

“My house!” Newt yelled in horror. “He sh-sh-shot my house!”

Britt recovered quickest.

“Water! Get some water over here! Don’t let it spread!”

Men raced to outdoor faucets, looking for buckets. Emmitt headed for a watering trough. More men came outside from neighboring houses, alarmed by the explosion.

“My house!”

Everyone ignored Newt who stared up in horror as flames consumed his home.

Out in the field, the tank settled gently on the ground and the top popped open. Ever stuck his head out, smiling at the burning building.

“Yup. Works good.”

His men chuckled, watching the conflagration and all the people scrambling to put out the fire.

“Hey. Where’d that smuggler go?”

Everyone looked around for Wink.

“There he is!”

Someone pointed at the spaceship as Wink jogged up the ramp.

“Hey! Give us the other one! We want that other tank!”

Wink stopped at the top of the ramp and shouted back.

“That’ll be another hundred thousand credits!”

“No! Leave it here!”

Wink smirked at this suggestion. He waved and disappeared inside. The ramp started lifting up.

“That son of a . . .”

Ever climbed back inside the battle tank, pulling the top closed behind him. He levitated again and moved forward, gaining altitude and pulling a U-turn once more.

But by this time, the Pulsar ascended too, even as its rear door finished closing. It rose far faster than the tank, gaining 20, then 40 meters in a

second.

Cursing, Ever angled up and set the target holo on the ascending spaceship.

But just as he pulled the trigger, the ship popped out of sight.

A solitary cannon blast shot upward, but it only met empty air.

2.23

Dawn broke with Phaethon's sun peeking over the horizon.

Tom woke up and stumbled into the upstairs bathroom to brush his teeth. Then he carefully made his way down the spiral staircase to the ground floor and kitchen, where he made a pot of coffee.

He almost fell back asleep before it finished, but stayed up long enough to pour himself a cup. Then he made his way outside to the back porch.

Here, two new Adirondack chairs waited, a recent addition thanks to the MicaBots. Tom slumped into one, grateful for the slightly reclining position. He turned to the east to watch the sunrise.

He blinked, sipping his coffee.

He blinked again as bright yellow rays from the rising sun shined in his face.

“Hmmm.”

He downed half the cup and looked up again.

This time he squinted.

It took him a minute or two to realize he was actually seeing Phaethon's sun for the first time.

That woke him up.

His eyebrows rose along with the sun.

Leaving the coffee behind on the chair's arm, he walked out into the back yard and gazed up at a crystal-clear blue sky, something else he had never seen on this planet before.

“Wow.”

The back door opened and Gwen walked out, wearing shorts and a t-shirt, holding her own cup of coffee. Her blonde hair looked tousled and she wore a frown on her face.

“Where's my sugar? I told you to get me sugar.”

“Come look at this.”

She walked down the steps and joined him, but did not seem nearly as impressed as he did at the sight of a rare clear sky and the unobstructed sun shining down on them at a morning angle.

“The storm's moving in. This is the first sign of it. Next up will be the dust storm. A clear sky means it's probably happening in a matter of hours. We need to make sure we're ready.”

“Thomas, I sense 14 horsemen leaving the Dalmont place.”

“Thank you, Lisa. Keep me apprised of their location.”

“What's going on?”

“Lisa says the Ever Riders have left the Dalmont spread. They're either heading for us or the Fae, probably. We'll know after they pass the next sensor which way they're going.”

The frown on Gwen's face deepened.

“I guess we've got a couple more things to prepare for, then, assuming they come all the way out here.”

They walked back inside.

Tom pulled out another cup and poured some coffee in it, then he walked back outside to the space capsules behind the stables.

He knocked on the door of the first one. A moment later it dilated open. Silas stared at him while rubbing the sleep out of his eyes.

“Coffee?”

Silas’s eyes grew wide, looking at the cup.

“I haven’t had coffee in a while.”

He took the mug in grateful fingers and sipped.

“Looks like your old friends are headed this way. Anything you can tell me to help prepare for them?”

Silas took another sip and thought about it for a moment.

“Mr. Ever really wants that videogame gun your lady has. He’s kinda obsessed with it. He knows that it’s dangerous, and he saw how y’all used it during the effort to grab Mr. Dalmont. Most of our guys who died, were a direct result of that old Firedog. So, they won’t come in all together this time. I would expect them to break up and cross the river in pairs or individually, then try and come at you from all sides.”

“That’s actually very helpful. Excuse me.”

Tom leaned in the doorway and reached into a crate. He pulled out a heavy bag filled with sensor disks.

He smiled at Silas and said, “I’ve got some more planting to do. Or, Timmy does. He can move faster.”

Silas frowned in mild confusion.

“Planting? You mean crops? What are you growin’ out here?”

Tom cracked a smile.

“These type of plants you can’t eat. Don’t worry about it, Silas. I’ll tell you more later.”

Let's get through this and see just how trustworthy you are, Tom thought as he walked away. *Then we might let you in on some more secrets.*

2.24

“It’s a beautiful day for a raid.”

Pearson McGrew heard chuckles behind him. He led the men, riding out front. They followed him, each man armed and ready for war.

Above the Riders, about 30 meters up, the battle tank floated slowly.

At the crossroads north of town, the tank turned left. McGrew gently pulled on his reins and followed the tank and the cluster of outlaws headed down the North Road, away from town.

McGrew picked up the pace, urging his horse into a trot to keep up with the tank overhead. The others followed suit.

At the green space marking the Fae’s territory, the tank stopped and hovered in place.

Slowly, carefully, Ever brought the machine down, landing in the field off the side of the road. He climbed out as McGrew dismounted, and they met in the grass.

“You know, I wouldn’t mind settling down here some day. Retiring.”

McGrew stared at Ever, astonished.

“What would you do, Boss?”

“How long d’you think it’ll take civilization to find this place? We’re standin’ on one of the last spots to be settled on Phaethon.”

“Actually, boss . . . Ee-loo, or however you pronounce it, is the last continent to be settled. Not this one.”

“Ill-ee-you. It means ‘light of the sun’ or some such in Greek. And yeah, it will get some of the new settlements from here on out. It’s next in line for the masses. And yeah, it’s tempting to go over there. Lots of new villages to gain fealty from will start sprouting up. But eventually, they’ll stop expanding and start growing. They’ll get more established transportation, communication lines. Naw, this place . . . this place won’t get much bigger in population, I reckon. This is where we should retire. We can’t keep goin’ on like we been goin’ forever, Pearson.”

“The courthouse will form a military and hunt us down,” McGrew said, nodding.

He knew this line of thought. His employer had explored the possibility of retirement several times before. And that line of reasoning always led to “Ever’s Last Stand,” a hypothetical eventuality that seemed to haunt the outlaw.

Ever nodded, his eyes on the road. Even this early, he noted farmers were heading out in the fields, tending to their crops. One married couple, a farmer and his wife several hundred meters away, stopped what they were doing and stared at the battle tank parked in the green space.

Ever ignored them, though some of his men waved, casting hungry glances at the woman.

“This part of Phaethon has already been settled as much as it’s going to be, Pears. Well, maybe the village will grow. But not much else around here will, I bet. The interior of Anatolia is all desert. You’ve got this little green part we’re at, and the edges along the coast, but the rest is . . . sand. Sort of like I’ve read about Australia, kinda.”

To this, McGrew had no comment. He had not read about Australia, and could not point it out on a map of Old Earth if he had to.

“Anyways . . . we got a place at the Dalmonts. We’ve got food. There’s even some women out here.”

He waved at the farmer’s wife off in the distance. The pair stood there, seemingly stunned to see a weapon of war out in the middle of nowhere.

“So long as the towns owing us fealty continue to make deposits back in League City, we’ve got it made.”

“This is kinda unexpected, Boss. You been talking about it forever, but I didn’t expect you to be wantin’ to actually retire so soon.”

Ever shrugged.

“We can still send raiding parties out. Put a promising young man in charge of them. They can go back and convince those townships that stop paying, urge them to continue, that sort of thing.”

“And if the military, whenever it gets pulled together, goes after the raiding party?”

“They’ll be goin’ after the young fellas. Not us. Not me.”

The men milled around on their horses. One of them suggested they go and run down the farmer right now, and take turns with the wife. Two or three agreed that might be a good idea after they finished with the boss’s assignments this morning.

Ever smiled, listening to the banter between his men.

He said, “First we got some scores to settle. Let’s meet with those lesbians. Then let’s pay a visit to that farm boy and his girl with the fancy gun. I want that gun, Pears. You can’t obtain them anymore. It’s practically a relic.”

“Well, Boss,” McGrew said, returning the grin. “They should all be easy to take now that you got this thing.”

He slapped the side of the tank.

Ever smiled back.

He said, “And they got no idea we’re comin’.”

2.25

“They’re coming!”

One of the younger girls ran back to the camp, darting between the trees to carry the news.

“Alright, everybody! Listen up! The Ever Riders are approaching! Everyone take their positions!”

Women scattered, leaving what remained of breakfast on the picnic tables. They rushed to their tents and grabbed rifles, knives and other weapons.

Haley directed traffic, sending another young girl to check on their horses, penned deeper in the woods.

“Em, I’ll take the front line. You stay here at camp as the last line.”

“Forget that, Haley. I want first crack at those jerks.”

She called out six women to go with her. Haley smiled, but did not countermand her second-in-command.

“Everybody wants a crack at these guys,” she said softly.

Then, louder: “The rest of you, take up positions here around the camp! Do not shoot each other! Make sure you know where everybody else is!”

“Make sure it’s a man when you squeeze the trigger!” one of them said.

The women smiled. Most took to the trees, with a couple staying on the ground, including Haley.

She grabbed Em by the arm before the woman could join the others at the wood's edge.

“Shout if you get in trouble, Em. We'll hear you.”

Em smiled. Her pointy ears poked out of her thick red hair. They bobbed up and down in a quick nod.

Then she turned and jogged after the others.

-+-

Em climbed one of the trees facing the green space between the woods and the road. Their lookout heard the horses a couple kilometers away, so they had time to move into position.

She noted the young women to her right and her left, already in place. They nodded at one another, staying silent, even though the men were at the crossroads and couldn't hear them yet.

The Fae Phalanx was nothing if not cautious.

She could hear the men talking amongst themselves while riding. Mostly cursing, spitting, and crude humor.

“... almost subhuman. Who does that to their body ...”

“I'm gonna grab those pointy ears and ...”

“... if there's anything left after ...”

Em squinted, eyes fixed on the road. The horses and riders were still out of sight but ...

She saw something floating in the air. It turned into the pasture.

“What is *that*?”

The other Fae saw it, too. They watched as a gunmetal-gray teardrop in the sky headed their way . . .

“Uh, Em? I think that’s a tank.”

“What? No way. How would anybody get a tank all the way out here?”

“I dunno, but I’m pretty sure that’s the kind of weapon the League used in the last war. I’ve seen the holos.”

The tank seemed to grow larger just as the Ever Riders rounded a bend and burst into sight on the road. As one, they turned off into the pasture, following the tank above.

Em heard the men’s voices clearer now.

“Can’t wait to see what Mr. Ever does to their precious campsite with that thing . . .”

“It is a tank,” she said. “And it’s with them.”

Em yelled over her shoulder.

“Haley! We’ve got trouble! They’ve got a—”

She never finished the sentence.

James Ever fired off a shot into the woods. The blast ripped into the middle of Em’s tree, blowing her body out of the branches. The green canopy burst into flames.

He fired again and again, blowing up trees as if they were matchsticks.

-+-

Haley heard the blast and ran for the edge of the woods. The roar of flames told her the forest was on fire before she got there.

“Em! Em! Anybody?”

No one responded over the crackle of fire.

“What did they *do*?”

As if in answer, another bolt sliced through the trees, the largest blast she had ever seen. It slammed into the top of the tree directly in front of her, incinerating branches and leaves in an instant.

Through the rush of burning timber, she could barely make out the sound of charging hoofbeats. At ground level the heat felt intense, but she could still see out through the trunks into the field beyond.

A mass of a dozen or more riders headed straight for her.

There, floating in the sky 30 meters up, a battle tank's turret swiveled, the cannon on top turning toward her.

BOOM!

The tree on her right exploded, sending her sprawling face-first into the dirt.

Haley scrambled to her feet. She felt her skin burn all down her right side, red, raw and tender.

She darted to the left, then zigged right again as another explosion sounded behind her.

She burst into the open clearing. Girls came out from behind trees with looks of alarm.

“Haley, what’s going on?”

“Everybody run away! Now! They’ve got a battle tank! Grab your horses and go! Head back for town! Run!”

To their credit, everyone scrambled. No one doubted her, or stopped to ask questions. They scattered as massive bolts slammed into the woods behind them.

2.26

The Ever Riders whooped in delight at the cannon blasts lighting up the woods. James Ever aimed high, taking out sniper perches and blowing away much of the cover the trees provided.

He also started a forest fire, and their horses were none too keen about going near the flames, despite their best efforts.

“Alright,” McGrew said, coming to a decision. “Everyone dismount. Except for you, Baisley. You and Harkov go wide and gun down anyone running out the other side of the woods.”

The two men in question nodded and took off at a canter. One headed north, the other south.

Everyone else dismounted and tried soothing their nervous mounts.

“Who’s got a grav stake? If you got one, set it up. Everyone tie off. We’ll advance on foot. I don’t think it’s burning down low as much. The lesbo camp has to be in there somewhere. Let’s see if we can find it before Mr. Ever blows it up.”

The men chuckled, despite the dangers they were about to face. Lust overrode the rational parts of their brains.

Stakes were quickly produced and the horses secured. Rifles came out of saddle holsters and cases. Within a couple minutes, a dozen men were ready for war.

“I don’t think we got to worry about their snipers,” McGrew said.

A few more chuckles greeted this statement.

“So let’s try to make our way though the burning trees, or around them if it’s too hot. Their camp is somewhere back there. I bet Mr. Ever’s already found it.”

Together, with eagerness and expectation, the outlaws moved out on foot, leaving the horses behind.

The fire indeed raged in the forest canopy, but the trees were green and healthy, not dry. Their leaves were large, almost fern-like to capture as much ambient light as possible in the normally hazy conditions.

They did not burn easy.

A few men ventured off between the thick trunks. With heat rising, they risked running *under* the burning leaves.

McGrew and the others headed to the southern edge, unscathed as yet by fire.

“Keep an eye on the branches,” McGrew said above the crackle of flames. “If you see anything move, shoot it!”

The men nodded, but they saw nothing living as they approached the boundary of the woods. Small animals, even birds fled the fire.

Within minutes they walked out of the rare bright sunlight and into the cool shade of the forest, albeit filled with smoke and the sounds of fire nearby.

“Head back thataways. We’re pretty sure their camp is behind where the fire is burnin’.”

The men picked up the pace, weaving in and out of the trees, staying in sight of one another.

Ever discovered a setting on the tank's control panel called "ground strafe mode." Activating it, he found the tank tilting down but still floating.

He ascended to 50 meters to give him plenty of height above the forest. Now he floated slowly forward with a full view of the scenery below him. The forward holo had a firing circle that moved with his eyes. A swipe of a button on the console would cause the turret to pivot and home in where he stared.

Ever found himself grinning like a little boy.

"That kid was right. It's dead-easy to operate."

A clearing slowly drifted into view on the holo. Looking down, he saw picnic tables and other clutter indicating a long-term campsite.

"So this is where them bitches been hidin'."

His finger hovered over the "Fire" button, but he held off. He could see no one.

He chuckled and said, "Where'd everybody go? Scared of the big ol' battle tank? Not so bad ass right now, are ya?"

The holo lit up in a flash of red.

An alarm beeped and a flashing yellow circle led his eye down to the top of a tree. The outline of a woman aiming a gun up at him showed briefly on the holo.

Another flash lit up the entire cabin for a split second.

"We're gonna try out the smaller guns on you, my dear. No sense wasting a cannon shot."

Ever made an adjustment on the control panel, and the rifle array mounted on the turret pivoted, locking on the leafy target.

Thuppathuppathuppa!

The tank spat out a long burst of bolts on full auto from its four synchronized heavy guns, burning a hole in the green canopy.

Below, a woman screamed and fell from her perch.

2.27

Haley heard Margarita scream, then the snapping of branches before a thump to the ground.

I told her not to try. A heavy rifle isn't big enough to take that thing down.

She continued heading west, racing for the horse pen.

Behind her, she detected the sound of distant footsteps crunching leaves on the forest floor.

She picked up her speed, running faster.

She heard the distant yell of a man, and the crunching stopped.

Thoop!

She ducked as the bolt sailed overhead. It hit a tree trunk meters away and the bark exploded.

Haley dodged right, putting trees between herself and the gunman's line of sight.

The trees are old. Widely spaced. Nothing can grow between the trunks . . .

These thoughts were random. But they felt rational. She stopped running and pushed her back against a wide trunk, breathing hard.

“There’s another one!”

Thoop! Thoop!

A girl screamed.

“I got one, boys!”

The running stopped, turning into the sounds of several men walking at an angle from her.

Haley picked up a few soft chuckles and some ribald remarks.

“... about to get some ...”

“Lookin’ forward to this ...”

“... be likin’ men by the time we get done ...”

The sounds of crying drifted up. Then another scream, filled with pain and rage.

A primal scream, Haley thought. From someone with nothing left to lose.

Thoop! Thoopah!

“She’s got a gun!”

“She got Gary!”

“Shoot that bitch!”

Dozens of shots followed ... then silence.

Haley held her breath, listening.

“Dang it! They’re all gonna be armed like that. It’s no use, boys. We may as well shoot to kill.”

“Ain’t nobody gettin’ nothin’ ... unless you want to do a corpse.”

“I saw some more headin’ thatta way! Let’s get ’em!”

Haley took a deep breath and held it, willing her heart rate to go down.

She kept listening.

The men stopped talking, but she could hear footsteps as they drew near.

She drew her gun and held it with both hands. Waiting.

This is a disaster. How many of my girls are dead? Can't think about that right now. Focus!

Two walked more or less straight toward her.

The gunmen had spread out, and she could make out six leaving trails through the forest.

She held her breath, concentrating.

Haley never felt more grateful for her enhanced hearing.

In her mind's eye, she translated the sounds of walking into a three dimensional map. She could place each man as he advanced toward her position.

She waited, listening as the sounds came closer . . . closer . . .

“You see anything?”

“Nah. I think their horses gotta be back here, somewhere. That's probably where they all went. Baisley and Harkov can nab 'em if they ride out the back. Or Mr. Ever can, with his new toy.”

A toy?

Haley snorted softly. The men were still too far away. They quieted down, though. Somewhere up ahead they heard the sounds of shouting, and shooting.

“Think that's where the horses are, Mr. McGrew?”

“Yeah. We should go that way.”

She heard the two shift in direction. The other four men altered course as well.

Haley held her breath . . .

As the closest man came within a meter of her tree, she calmly stepped out from behind the trunk and shot him point blank in the face.

His body slumped, the head popping open like a water balloon.

In one smooth motion, she took another step through the trees and shot his companion at three meters away, this time in the chest.

The look of surprise froze on his face as he fell backward, a hole blown through his middle.

She knelt, almost in slow motion, and leaned left, firing off another round. This one clipped a third outlaw at ten meters, blasting away a chunk of his right upper arm.

He screamed and shot back, but right-handed. The shots flew wild.

She lined up carefully on his center mass and squeezed the trigger again, taking him out. Then she turned and focused on the other three, but she had lost the element of surprise. They were farther away and dove for cover, ducking behind trees.

Haley's first instinct was to run, but she knew that would just get her shot. Instead, she stepped behind the same tree as before and stood still.

Listening.

The last man, farther back than the others, ran forward.

“Where is she? What happened?”

Haley stuck the gun out from behind the tree and squeezed the trigger. It slipped between four tree trunks and traveled across 18 meters in a split second.

Thoop!

He stumbled and fell, chest cavity caved in. The outlaw squirmed on the ground for a moment, gurgling blood.

Then he stopped moving.

“Everybody stay put. She's got that fancy hearin'.”

“Mr. McGrew. I thought I recognized that voice,” Haley said from behind her tree.

A pause.

“You’re the leader, aintcha?”

“Throw your guns down and you might get out of this alive.”

He chuckled, hiding behind his own tree.

“You got some cheeks on ya, I’ll give you that. I take you saw our boss’s new toy up in the sky. I think you’re the one who needs to worry about gettin’ out alive.”

His voice changed ever so slightly the last three words. Haley realized he had moved his head while talking.

She heard footsteps approaching, ever so quietly. Another man very carefully moved forward, staying on the balls of his feet.

Classic distraction and flanking maneuver, she thought.

“Why don’t you come on out and talk to us peaceful-like, little lady? I promise, no guns. We won’t hurtcha.”

Haley smiled at this.

The audacity . . .

“Yeah, pardon me if I don’t completely trust you, Mr. McGrew.”

The man flanking her moved while she spoke, taking several steps.

Smart.

“Aw, come on. We can be reasonable about this.”

Haley had a perfect aural map of the area, mentally drawn while she had been shooting. She knew the man trying to move to her side was behind a tree right now, about three meters away.

Maybe he’ll move again if I start talking again.

Haley steeled herself. She took a deep breath. Then another.

“I don’t think there ever will be an opportunity to be ‘reasonable’ about this Mr. McGrew. You and your men made an unprovoked attack—”

She stepped out from behind the tree and fired at the man midsentence, then slipped behind another one.

He fell over, surprised, trying to hold the blood in. But his neck was gone. He slumped to the ground.

Quietly, softly, Haley retreated. While the remaining men stared down in shock at the dead man, she slipped behind another tree.

Then another.

2.28

Haley managed to slip away in the confusion after her last shot.

Confusion, and the fear she had placed in the hearts of the three remaining men, certainly helped. They remained uncertain how she had managed to kill half their number, and suddenly they became a lot more careful.

When she gained enough distance, she kept going, moving fast and leaving them behind. She dreaded hearing the sound of blaster shots behind her, but they never came.

She kept going.

Haley burst into the horse pen clearing, and ran into someone else. The young girl almost shot her when she rushed out from the trees.

“Get your horse. Let’s ride.”

“Where are the others?”

Lola, one of the youngest of their group, had a mixture of fear, worry and concern on her face. A recent recruit, she had just turned 16 and had been put in charge of the horses.

Because that’s the safest spot. At least, it was.

“Get him ready, Lo. We’ve got to leave. Now.”

The girl saw the look on Haley’s face and stopped asking questions. She hurried to retrieve her saddle, flicking off a waterproof electronic shield covering the group’s tack. She pulled a saddle and blanket off a wooden rack and hurried into the pen.

Haley looked back in the woods, but nobody followed.

Yet.

She rushed to grab her own saddle and followed Lola into the pen.

Minutes later, they rode out. Lola jumped off to shut the gate. Before she could climb back on they heard the sounds of men moving fast through the woods, tromping through leaves, snapping branches.

Then, up in the air, Haley caught a soft hum on the wind that could only mean one thing . . .

Lola scrambled back in her saddle. Both women dug their heels into the sides of their mounts.

“Hyah!”

The horses burst into a gallop, weaving through trees, wind pulling their hair and their horse’s tails out straight behind them.

The men caught sight of them and ran into the clearing, shooting.

Haley ducked, red bolts sizzling overhead.

The humming grew louder above the trees.

She guided her horse between the trunks with a tight grip on the reins, weaving left then right.

The humming came closer, almost oppressively loud now.

A string of blaster bolts pattered out, this time from overhead. The horse jerked left and poured on more speed without prompting.

More shots fired down on full auto, burning through leaves and slicing off branches.

Ahead, Haley could see daylight.

That might . . . not be the best thing right now.

Her horse had other thoughts, breaking hard for the open area. Haley's enhanced eyesight caught movement ahead . . . an Ever Rider!

She pulled out her pistol, taking care not to drop it. The horse moved so fast, his gait would throw off her aim, but she held onto the gun anyway, ready to shoot.

With a final rush they burst from the trees, surprising the man. His horse reared.

Loud humming . . .

Haley yanked hard on her reins, jerking her horse left before they collided with Ever's man . . .

And a string of blasts peppered the ground in a straight line.

But Haley turned in time. The shots sliced into the Ever Rider instead.

His horse screamed, bolts cutting it down the middle.

The man's face, chest and neck were gone, or he would have screamed, too.

-+-

Ever bit off a curse as he watched the tank's smaller guns take out his own man.

"Friendly fire! Friendly fire! Aw, dude. I'm so sorry. That was a good horse, too."

The tank still hovered in the air at an angle, facing down and floating motionless now. He grimaced at all the blood, turning the green grass red.

The horse looked almost completely severed in half, and nothing recognizable remained of the man's body.

Ever tore his eyes away from the liters of spilled blood, and watched the female galloping away.

He briefly considered going after her. He was in a tank, after all, and she was on horseback . . .

But behind him, he knew the Fae Phalanx's camp was still there. True, it might be in disarray. But surely there were easier pickings back in the woods.

He pivoted neatly in the air, turning the machine's wheel, and slowly drifted back over the woods, scouring the ground for more targets.

-+-

Haley pulled her horse to a stop, breathing almost as hard as the animal. She halted, precariously perhaps, on a ridge half a klick from the woods.

She could still see the tank hovering at an angle, nose pointed down. The smaller guns spat out bolts, slicing through the treetops.

Smaller, she snorted, thinking of the Ever Rider who got shot in front of her.

Well, it's the lesser of two weapons, I guess.

She tensed, hearing the clip-clop of hooves behind her. But it was only Lola, moving out from a small copse of trees.

Her face showed streaks from tears. She rode up beside Haley on the ridge and looked back at the distant battle tank.

There seemed little to worry about it turning toward them. Ever seemed hyper-focused on finding their campsite.

"How many died?" Lola said, softly.

Haley shook her head.

“I don’t know.”

“How many did we get?”

This time, Lola’s voice sounded a little firmer.

Haley nodded, appreciating the resolve shining through.

“Not enough.”

The tank seemed to circle in place, firing down with the smaller gun again and again. Then it finally leveled out, and floated back toward the field on the other side of the woods, and the North Road.

Both women used their enhanced sight, watching as the war machine turned slowly, moving about the speed of a horse. It dipped low, apparently landing in the green space outside town.

Either that, Haley thought, or it’s back at normal height.

They stayed out there for a while, watching. The forest fire smoldered, putting out a lot of smoke, but the trees seemed resistant to the flames, and reluctant to burn more.

Lola looked up and blinked, seeing the rare blue sky. Phaethon’s sun shined down, making for a cloud-free, bright day.

“It’s beautiful.”

Haley glanced up for a second, then refocused on the distant line of trees.

“Don’t get used to it. A blue sky on Phaethon means a bad storm’s coming.”

2.29

Ever landed the tank in the field where his men first charged in, between the burning woods and the road. Far fewer Riders straggled out of the trees to meet him than went in.

He popped the top and stared at the first two approaching on foot. Privately, he felt relieved to see that Pearson McGrew was one of them.

McGrew was his right hand man and handled a lot of administrivia, especially with the outlaw group's finances and contacts back in League City.

Basically, he took care of all the things Ever did not want to fool with. In Ever's mind, that made the man practically indispensable.

Or at least, really hard to replace.

"How many did we lose?"

"I'm not sure, Mr. Ever. More than we wanted. Riker here is the only one in my group that made it back with me. That leader of theirs, she's a real Jezebel. She took out a lot of us in one fight, all by herself."

"I dunno how she did it," Riker said, eyes wide.

He stood shorter than McGrew, and still had a haunted look on his face.

“She’d shoot without lookin’ and still kill us. I ain’t never seen anything like it!”

“It’s the enhanced hearing,” McGrew said, his voice revealing he remained less impressed. “It gives them an edge in the woods and elsewhere.”

Ever frowned, unsure if this leader the men mentioned had been one of the women running away he gave up on.

If so, that was another mistake, he thought.

McGrew said, “Do you know how Baisley and Harkov did, Boss?”

Ever continued frowning, thinking of the horse and rider he accidentally shot.

“One of them bought the farm for sure. I don’t know which one.”

His own mother wouldn’t be able to ID him, he thought.

McGrew flinched, clearly upset with their KIA tally.

“Looky there, Mr. McGrew, Mr. Ever!”

Off in the distance, rounding some trees, the men could see what Riker noticed. A lone horseman trotted toward them.

“Looks like Baisley,” McGrew said.

“Yup.”

When the man drew close, everyone could tell by the look on his face he had no good news for them.

“I’m sorry, Mr. Ever. I didn’t get nobody. They all came out of the woods too fast and too far away, those that I saw.”

He glanced nervously at Ever, and the man realized that Baisley knew.

He must have seen me gun down the other fella by mistake.

Ever’s eyes narrowed.

Baisley gulped, clearly nervous.

“I didn’t see nothin’ else.”

McGrew frowned, uncertain as to why the man added this seemingly superfluous detail.

But when he said nothing else, Ever decided to break things up.

He said, “Mount up. Leave behind the horses for now, in case somebody’s back there and makes their way out. We can pick them up later on the way back.”

“Where we goin’, Boss?”

“It’s time to take on that cute couple with the supergun.”

McGrew glanced at the tank.

“Will this thing be able to take a blast from a Whillicker, you think?”

“I don’t see why not,” Ever said, patting the hull affectionately. “There ain’t nothin’ on this planet that can take me down right now.”

By the look on his face, it seemed McGrew was inclined to agree.

“Besides, as soon as that bitch opens up on me, the tank will get a lock on her. And then I’ll take her out.”

“Wouldn’t you, ah, also blow up the gun if you fired at her with the cannon, Boss?”

“Ha! You should see the heavy rifles on this thing. It’s like four of them on full auto. No, I’ll take her and that boy out with the small guns. I’ll save the big one for any tents or whatever they have set up at their precious little homesite.”

More men straggled in and heard the last part. The looks on their faces indicated they would prefer just going home themselves instead of riding out to fight some more. Especially after meeting the Fae in battle.

But nobody said anything.

The men mounted up. Ever frowned to see half the horses remained staked.

He counted seven altogether, plus himself.

Is that all I'm down to? Those conniving twats . . .

“Alright. We’re gonna ride out to that boy’s spread. It’s about 20 klicks north, from what I understand. I’ll follow along above, but don’t dilly-dally. I want to kill him, get the gun, and get home before nightfall.”

A few men mumbled, “Yes, sir.”

McGrew said, “You got it, Boss.”

Ever climbed in and closed the top with a clank. The tank started humming, then rose 30 meters in the air.

McGrew frowned. But he rode out toward the pasture with the others following. When they reached the road, they all turned north with the tank above and behind them.

On a distant ridge beyond the trees, two tiny figures watched the tank fly north.

2.30

“**T**hey’re coming.”

With the sun beating down on Tom’s farm for a change, the temperature slowly rose along with the height of the sun.

It was not unbearable, yet, but Tom found himself missing the haze, which blocked so much of the direct rays.

Right now he deliberately ignored the bare sun and rare blue sky. So did Gwen and Silas. All three stood on the front porch of his house. Gwen and Tom wore their sand dragon armor, the blaster-resistant leather hides Tailor Chan made for them.

“I’m going on the other side of the river. I’ll stop as many as I can before they get here. Silas, I want you nearby. I’m thinking top of the stables might be the best place, with the widest field of view. From there you can cover our western flank and help Gwen with anybody approaching from the south and north.”

The gunman looked down at the ground. Then he nodded and looked up with an apologetic expression.

“I only have a pistol.”

“I’ll give you a heavy rifle with a full power pack.”

Silas's eyebrows shot up. This was a big sign of trust, and the former outlaw knew it. He nodded.

"Thanks."

Tom reached into a pocket and pulled out two small black disks, each about the size of an old dime. He handed one to Gwen and one to Silas.

"I want you both to have these. Lisa is ready for them."

Gwen looked closely at the little circlet in the palm of her hand.

"Are these what I think they are?"

"Yep. They're the latest implants. They're tied into Lisa, and when she has a connection in orbit, they'll let us link up with LuteNet as well. For right now, this will give us a comlink, which we're going to need to coordinate against a mass attack, especially if they come at us scattered like Silas thinks they will."

"Do I need a knife or a scalpel to get it inside me?"

"No. Just hold it up to your skin under your right ear. Like this. It's a subdermal molecular implant. Like I said, the latest thing."

"Some of us haven't been off this frontier planet the last couple years, dear. We're not familiar with 'the latest thing.'"

Gwen and Silas shared a brief glance of solidarity.

"Just do this."

Tom held an index finger below his ear. Gwen copied the motion, holding the tiny disk in place with the tip of her finger.

She winced as it dug into her skin without a knife and disappeared. Then her eyes went blank as the neural network came online in her brain.

"Oh, this is nice. Look at all those entertainment options. You didn't tell me Lisa had this many holos and movies in storage. I mean, it's not like PLAIR's, but it's a lot more than I expected for a small network."

"We watched one the other night together."

“Yeah, but . . . Oh, look! Lisa has all the seasons of Moon Love. That’s where viewers can vote couples off one of Italia’s moons. There’s this big luxury resort there . . .”

“Focus. You can watch Moon Love after we take care of the bad guys.”

“Right.”

Gwen’s eyes cleared, and they both turned to look at Silas.

He shrugged and said, “Here goes nothin’.”

Silas held the little black disk up to his neck and flinched as it dug into his skin. Then his entire face went slack as Lisa’s network booted up in his mind.

“It’s been a while since I . . . Oh, hey! She’s got Lucky Lou and all the sequels!”

Gwen made a face.

“That would be the first thing you’d look for.”

Silas’s eyes cleared and he came back to the real world quickly. Like Gwen, he had the look of someone with lots to explore later.

Next, Tom gave them a heavy medallion on a short chain.

“These are miner’s masks. Activate them by pressing in the center. When the dust storm blows in, you’ll need it. Should help you breathe, and I’m pretty sure it’ll keep the dust out of your eyes, too.”

Gwen and Silas dutifully slipped the necklaces over their heads, the medallions resting above their collarbones. Tom followed suit with one of his own.

He said, “Okay, let’s get to our spots. I’m going out there with Timmy. You two go to the roofs. Everyone ready? Lisa says they just passed the five-klick mark at a fast trot, so they’ll be here soon.”

Gwen and Silas nodded.

Gwen patted the big gun strapped over her shoulder.

She said, “Ready as we’ll ever be.”

Tom smiled at both of them and said, “Take your positions, then. And good hunting.”

He glanced over his shoulder to the north, where the horizon disappeared in a line of yellow. There, rising above the ground, a line of brown grew thicker, stealing away more of the sky by the second.

2.31

“Now, look here. This kid . . . and he is a kid. He’s what, twenty, twenty-one? This kid has zero fighting experience. We’re all veterans here, right? Well except for Lenin. And Bowser.”

Ever still floated above the men, about 20 meters up. He was not part of this final conversation before they went in.

McGrew had turned his horse around and faced the others. Their steeds stood at the end of the trail. Beyond this point, the way degraded into a mere footpath that stretched over some ridges and through a lightly wooded area.

One of the men, the one known as Lenin, held a map holo up. The strip of transparent plastic in his palm displayed it like a floating apparition hovering above his hand. It showed the square kilometers surveyed off for homesteads nearby. Only one had been claimed this far out from Little York. Outlined in red on the map, the Little River ran along its southern border and the beginnings of the Skoni Desert began half a klick away.

“He must be a kid,” McGrew said, staring at the holo, “because he chose the absolute worst homestead I’ve ever seen. Half of it’s completely unusable.”

The others chuckled in agreement.

“Alright, listen up,” McGrew said, pulling their attention away from the map and back to him. “We’re going to spread out and come at his camp separately. I don’t want any of you clumped together in case that wench with the Firedog sees you. That’s how she kills multiple Ever Riders in one fell swoop.”

Everyone nodded. They all had recent firsthand experience facing that awful gun.

“There ain’t enough of us left to take that risk. So we come in separate and converge on his campsite, or whatever he’s got put up out here. Heck, he’s only been here, what? A week? Less than that? We charge in and shoot whatever’s movin’, then pick up the pieces once the smoke clears. Mr. Ever will likely want a piece of the place, too.”

Lenin raised his other hand, the one not holding the map.

He looked tall and skinny, the stirrups hanging low off his saddle. A hooked nose and pointy chin gave him the sinister look of some old fairy tale villain, despite his relative youth. He was in his mid-20s, or roughly half the age of the older men.

“What is it, Lenny?”

“Can I have the girl?”

The others hooted and hollered at him. One of the riders slapped his shoulder, making the map holow go wobbly for a moment.

“We’ll *all* have the girl if she doesn’t get too shot up, Lenny. Now, move out.”

The men scattered. They all headed north, but most turned off the trail, save for McGrew. He stayed on the footpath, with Ever floating above and following. They would be the only ones making a full frontal approach.

Lenin frowned, watching everybody go. Finally, he urged his horse to the left, off the trail. He followed three others going that way, but he looked determined to separate from the pack at the first opportunity.

He frowned and spoke quietly, convinced no one could hear him now.

“I meant . . . for myself.”

A breeze picked up from the north, hitting him and the animal in the face.

Lenin blinked as the first few grains of sand flicked into his eyes.

“What? It’s been such a beautiful day.”

His horse whickered. More granules popped the animal’s sensitive nose.

Lenin frowned again. But he hunkered his shoulders against the wind and urged his horse on.

Somewhere in the distance, a horse screamed. He stopped and listened, but heard nothing more. The wind picked up, blocking out other sounds. He kept going.

The farther Lenin rode, the worse the dust became. It streamed in off the desert like a living thing. He broke through the last of the trees and stared at a ridge. He knew the Little River flowed on the other side of that ridge, in the valley below. On the other side of the water would be that boy’s homestead.

Up ahead, he saw Alan Bowser riding. The wind picked up stronger and Bowser held his hat down tight on his head as the horse climbed the slope up to the top of the ridge.

A wave of fine brown dust crested the peak before his horse reached it. It came over the top like a living thing.

Bowser’s horse reared and pivoted, heading back down the slope. But the dust wave rolled over rider and horse, swallowing them whole.

Lenin felt dust on his tongue, and realized he stared at the oncoming brown cloud with his mouth open.

He closed it and looked over his shoulder. Behind him, to the south, the air looked clear and he could see everything. Ahead, a solid wall of dust roared toward him, blocking everything in sight.

His horse whickered again. He pulled on the reins and faced her the other way so both their backs would meet the wall of dust coming.

“Steady, girl. Steady . . .”

He pulled the mare to a halt and reach down to pat her on the neck.

Dust billowed over them, snuffing out the light of the sun.

2.32

“**A**ll but one has left the road, Thomas. I cannot track them and do not see them.”

“Thanks, Lisa. I think I’ll be alright.”

Tom wore his blaster-resistant vest made out of Big Ugly’s friends. As far as he knew, based on the firefight at the Dalmont family compound, Ever’s men did not have much in the way of heavy weapons. He remained unconcerned about getting shot.

Still, he had his back up against the sawmill, holding a heavy rifle, ready to use it.

He had left sensors along the path here, and Lisa could track any movement. She would not be able to follow someone going off trail, but he remained unconcerned.

“We should have thought about that, actually. It makes sense for them to break up and come in from different angles. Silas said they would. Just let me know when that one guy walks over the ridge.”

The first prickles of dust hit him, the vanguard of the oncoming dust storm.

“Great. That’s not gonna help the sensors any.”

Everything had been sealed and filtered by the MicaBots. The house, the barn and the stables were as ready for the dust storm as they could be, he thought.

Tom leaned back against the side of the sawmill and tried to relax, feeling glad that he did not have to worry about Lucas at the moment. He and the other two horses were safely sequestered in their stalls.

As if thinking about horses conjured one, he heard the dull thud of a hoof on the ground.

He looked up. There, several meters off the road, an Ever Rider emerged from the woods. Even at this distance, Tom sensed his eyes growing round in surprise to see a fully formed man-made structure out here in the middle of nowhere, much less an armed man leaning up against it.

Tom whipped his rifle around and took aim.

Thup!

A huge bolt sailed out as the man broke for it at the same time. He turned the horse and dug his heels in just as the big bolt struck, slapping against the animals hind quarters.

The horse screamed in pain and stumbled, taking its rider down with it in a flurry of cussing.

Tom fired again but the bolt flew high, passing over both.

The horse kept screaming. Tom aimed for its head and his next shot put it out of its misery.

He felt terrible about the horse. But the rider did not stop to look after his animal. He climbed over the bloody corpse and flattened himself, putting mass between himself and Tom.

Tom kept his gun pointed at the downed mount, waiting.

The dust flew in stronger now, prickling against his back. Particulates filled the air, bringing back the hazy sky, only at ground level now.

Tom risked a quick glance behind his shoulder, and it became his turn to grow wide-eyed. A wall of brown dust, a hundred meters high, rolled toward him like a tidal wave, blanketing everything in its path.

He turned back to the downed horse, and the gunman behind it, and started shooting.

Thuppathuppathuppa!

The corpse exploded in blood and bones, pushed back by the onslaught.

He heard a yell, and finally the man moved from cover as the horse disintegrated.

Tom followed him, his finger squeezing the trigger, bolts crossing the distance in a flash.

The man whipped his gun out and fired off a shot at Tom.

Then one of the heavy bolts hit him, and he went down.

Tom stared at the body, unable to see it well. He wished at that moment he had Gwen's enhanced vision.

"Thomas, the rider remaining on the trail is approaching."

He tore his eyes away from the dead man and stared at the road. First, a man's head appeared, followed by his chest, then the horse.

Tom heard a distant humming and looked up.

"What is *that*?"

A huge teardrop floated above the horseman, a cannon jutting out from a rounded turret.

Tom's heart sank.

"Is that a tank?"

"I do not sense anything, Thomas, other than the horse and rider in question."

Tom's eyes narrowed as he studied the floating weapon of war.

“No, it’s too high for your sensors to pick up. We’re dealing with a League battle tank, Lisa. It looks to be a relic from the war. Grab a visual through my eyes.”

The haze grew worse. Tom let the AI get a good look at the tank, then he glanced to the north.

The wave of dust rolled over him, blanketing out everything.

2.33

The first Ever Rider exited the trees and crossed the last ridge before the river. He tilted up the hat on his head for a better view, and stared down at the distant house on the other side of the river.

It looked like something from an old postcard, a picture-perfect scene.

The house seemed well built, sitting in the middle of a verdant field of grass. A small but apparently sturdy wooden bridge spanned the river, leading to a walking trail that would eventually grow into the North Road a couple kilometers from here. Already there looked to be a footpath extending on the other side of the river, between the bridge and the house.

Nearby stood a barn and stables, and it appeared that some sort of pre-fab storage sheds had been erected out back. They even had a corral in front of the stables for the horses.

All told, it looked amazing for a settlement that was supposedly only a week old. If he didn't know any better, he'd say all this had been in place at least a year. Maybe more.

He swore softly, drinking in the sight of the beautiful little homestead.

To his left and right, two more horsemen appeared. They too looked in awe down at the homesite. Then they glanced at each other in amazement.

A distant rumbling sound grabbed their attention. They stopped looking at each other, and the homestead, and focused on what was going on behind the house.

From the desert, a huge cloud of brown dust quickly rolled toward them, like an unstoppable force. A wave of natural smog, it covered everything in its path.

It grew larger as they watched.

The three men nodded at one another. Mr. Ever, they knew, would not be accepting something like the weather as an excuse for not following orders.

No, this would inconvenience things, surely. But . . . it was just dust, after all. They were used to dust on this planet.

Separately, they urged their horses forward. They came down the ridge and headed out toward the river, each man taking a different path.

The dust cloud was deceptive, though. It rolled in far faster than it looked. Within seconds it towered over the house, blanketing the fields and enveloping everything in monochromatic brown.

The closest man to the homestead urged his steed to pick up the pace despite the oncoming disturbance. His path through the trees took him out at the nearest angle to the house.

He clicked his tongue, urging the horse forward, and headed for the river, intent on crossing it first.

The place looked deserted, although he could barely make out something, or someone on the roof . . .

PHLABAM!

A giant bolt of energy from the house reached out across the distance and blew away both man and horse. They flew up a meter, one out of the saddle, one off the ground.

The other two riders stopped, their blood turning to ice. They stared at the dead bodies, smoke drifting up from the charred flesh.

Uneasily, the other two turned to look at the distant house. But the meters-high cloud rolled over the homestead at that moment, engulfing everything. The house, barns . . . they all disappeared, completely blocked from sight.

Then the cloud of dust rolled over the river and the riders, and they could no longer see much of anything.

Wind roared in their ears, tiny particles pelting faces, eyes and lips. The horses hated it and stopped, refusing to move any further. They turned around to face away from the blowing dust, but there was no way to ride out of it now that the storm was upon them.

So the horses stood in place, particles pattering their rear ends. The riders hunched over, feeling the same dust hitting their backs, like small pellets of sleet.

One of them pulled his shirt up over his face so he could breathe easier. For a moment, nobody thought about moving forward, no matter what Mr. Ever wanted . . .

2.34

James Ever did not notice the coming dust cloud until it smothered his tank.

He was focused on his men, scattering below so they wouldn't all get killed by a single shot from that supergun.

His eyes drifted back to McGrew. He tried to float slightly behind the man as McGrew approached the homestead by following the trail. Ever was lost in thought, thinking about how he'd like to personally kill the boy and rape the girl.

When he finally looked up and saw the distant . . . house? What was a house doing out here? And a barn?

When he finally paid attention to what was out there, he saw the massive brown cloud rolling in, spreading across his entire front holo.

“Aw, man . . .”

Ever gave a final look down, at McGrew riding on the trail, and he pulled up on the wheel, bringing the tank to its maximum height.

“Maybe I can ride it out from above.”

The tank reached 80 meters before a flashing light on the dash indicated he could rise no further. Ever watched as a brown haze grew denser and darker

on his front holo, blocking out the blue sky.

Then it covered everything. He flicked a finger, putting all his view holos in the front. Everywhere he looked, brown dust blanked everything out.

“Great. How long is this gonna last?”

-+-

On the ground, McGrew pulled out a handkerchief and wrapped it around his face.

This is why cowboys of old wore bandanas, he thought. It's a makeshift dust mask.

He felt bad about his horse, who had to breathe unfiltered air. But there was nothing he could do about it at the moment.

He pulled on the reins and the animal stopped as the dust blew in, swirling around them. McGrew looked up, catching a last glimpse of the tank. Ever had taken it higher, probably in an effort to avoid most of the storm. As he watched, the dust blew in hard, and everything turned brown.

The worst part, as far as McGrew was concerned, included the noise from the wind. McGrew could hardly hear himself think in the midst of the swirling maelstrom.

How long is this gonna last?

-+-

“I got one. But I saw two more coming down the ridge.”

Tom heard Gwen's comment over the open comlink. Then Silas joined in.

“Yeah they broke up so they wouldn't all get killed in one shot, like I said. Can't see nothin' right now, though.”

“Silas is right, Tom. It's a total whiteout. Or, brownout. Whatever. Thank God for these mining helmets. I'm glad *somebody's* parents thought to send

them along.”

“I’ve heard about this continent’s dust storms, but *yeesh!* I ain’t never experienced nothin’ like this. She’s right, the helmets are a lifesaver, Mr. Savage.”

“We’ve got problems, you two.”

Silas and Gwen clammed up.

Tom chewed on his lip. The mining helmets did help, and his mother indeed did throw several in that last shipment. They covered a person’s head with a thin electronic shield, filtering out dust and gas. They proved perfect for conditions underground, or a dust storm.

He flicked through the images of the tank he had stored in his implant’s memory and sent one to both of them.

“Looks like Ever has a new mobile gun.”

“That’s a battle tank,” Gwen said. “How’d he get one of those out here?”

“Silas? Do you know anything about this?”

“No, sir. I ain’t never seen that before. I dunno where he got it.”

“Well, obviously it’s new,” Gwen said. “If he had it back when we attacked the Dalmont place, he would have used it then.”

Tom said, “That makes sense. I’m sure those things are just as good on defense as they are on offense. Still, that leaves us with a big problem. We don’t have anything that can take it down.”

“It can’t see any better than we can in this mess.”

“No. But I don’t think this dust storm will last forever.”

Tom’s statement of fact was met with uncomfortable silence.

Silas finally broke it.

“What are we gonna do?”

“I don’t know about you two, but I’m going hunting. Lisa’s effective range is limited right now. But I bet I can see better than the average outlaw at the moment.”

2.35

The wind abated slightly. For that, McGrew felt grateful.

Then it died off completely, but the dust lingered.

It reminded him of fog, only it felt dry instead of wet. And the particulates were nasty. They clung to the dampness in his eyes and nostrils, and his throat felt parched.

His poor horse suffered even more.

With the wind gone, blessed silence remained. The dust seemed to blanket out noise as well as the sunlight. He could no longer hear the humming of the battle tank, or much of anything else.

Carefully, he turned the horse around. The dust made gaining his bearings difficult. But he could see for a couple meters, and McGrew could make out the trail ahead on the ground.

He squeezed his heels, and the horse begrudgingly moved forward.

“At least nobody will see us approaching the homesite in this mess.”

The horse stopped.

McGrew cursed it.

“Come on. I can see the trail. That means you can too.”

He squeezed his heels against the horse's sides, and it took another couple of reluctant steps.

Thup!

A heavy bolt slammed into his middle, knocking him out of the saddle.

Startled, his horse jumped forward, riderless.

McGrew stared up at the sky, but the swirling mass of dust blocked out everything.

His last thought idly wondered who shot him.

Then his eyes closed forever.

-+-

"Saved the horse that time," Tom said with a note of satisfaction.

Lisa had shown him a graphical representation of McGrew on the trail through the implant. Even with dust playing havoc with her sensors, the man had been within a couple meters of one Tom left near the trail.

She could "see" him perfectly, and augmented Tom's vision as he moved closer to the road. He used that virtual image to line up his shot.

"That's better than I could do," Gwen said, her voice flowing over his implant. "I think I'll name my gun Horse Bane."

"I thought you called it Big Bertha."

"That's what the Fae call it. Haley gave it that nickname. I hope they're doing okay."

"Any idea how many Ever Riders are left?" Silas interjected. "Y'all got three, right?"

"That means there's four left," Tom said. "Plus that tank in the sky. Lisa can't track it while it's floating too high for her sensors."

Gwen said, “I don’t think we have to worry about that tank in this pea soup. But let’s hope those others don’t stumble across us or something.”

-+-

Alan Bowser decided not to move.

He had hoped staying behind the ridge might shield him from the dust storm, but that proved to be a vain effort. At least the wind died down.

He remained mounted, but he did not encourage his horse to go anywhere.

He just sat there. Waiting.

His horse let out a low, nervous grunt, and shuffled forward a few steps on his own accord.

Bowser scrunched his eyebrows together, wondering what might have spooked the animal.

Nervously, he glanced over his shoulder.

The swirling dust looked brown and featureless, but he could make things out for about two meters around him, enough to see blades of grass but not much more.

The horse snorted, blowing out dust from its nostrils, and took another few steps forward.

“Somethin’ botherin’ you, fella?”

Bowser heard the slightest of thumps, and a light rustle in the grass.

He turned around and looked again.

A brown claw gripped the ground, just at the edge of his circle of clear sight. He would not have noticed it, blending with the dust in the air, had it not been for the noise.

“What the . . .?”

He looked up.

One eye seemed to materialize, at the same height as his.

Reptilian.

Yellow.

Slitted.

A thousand kilos of flesh jumped on the rider and his horse, massive jaws ripping out flesh.

The horse managed to stumble forward a few steps before the flurry of claws and snapping jaws brought it down.

Big Ugly's head came up, blood dripping from its mouth, listening . . .

In the distance, another horse whickered softly.

The sand dragon moved quickly and quietly toward its next victim.

,

2.36

Two riders approaching from the east made it close to the river before the sand storm hit. They saw it rolling in from the desert and braced themselves, fully prepared to meet it.

They had a different opinion about the phenomenon. Unlike the others, they decided to keep going, using the storm as an opportunity to draw near to the house undetected.

Veterans of the war, they liked this idea and came to the same conclusion separately. In their minds, the dust storm provided a golden opportunity. So while neither discussed it with the other, they both kept moving rather than remaining still.

At the river, the first rider's horse balked at crossing with limited visibility. In many ways, animals had more sense than humans. In the horse's mind, a body of water should be avoided in times like this.

The Ever Rider had other ideas.

He pulled out a leather crop and slapped the steed's flanks until it reluctantly jumped into the water.

The river was not very deep, and the horse did not have to actually swim. It could walk across.

The rider remained relatively dry. He lifted his boots out of the stirrups and avoided most of the water.

Moments later, his horse climbed out on the other side, and he urged it forward through the swirling dust, quickly collecting on the wet spots.

The rider had seen the house, and he navigated on dead reckoning. The horse picked a careful path through the grass.

Meters away, his partner crossed over as well. This horse, at least, seemed less reluctant to traverse through water in the middle of a dust storm.

The first rider did not wait for his companion. He let his horse pick a path across the field, hoping they were headed more or less in the right direction.

Then his horse stopped.

“Come on. Git!”

He squeezed his heels, then tapped them to urge the horse forward.

He was about ready to kick harder, when the horse finally took another step.

A metallic hand reached out of the dust and grabbed the horse’s face, thumb and forefinger just below the eyes.

The hand applied pressure, but not too much.

The horse could not go any further.

It stopped.

The Ever Rider stared at the gunmetal-gray disembodied hand, trying to process what he was seeing.

He heard the heavy *thunk* of a robotic footstep.

Timmy’s whole body swam into view as the robot stepped forward, around the horse. His vertical rectangular sensor head appeared out of the dusty mist at the same height as the rider’s.

The man’s lips compressed, about to spit out a curse, when the robot’s other hand blurred and twisted off his head with a quick snap of bones and sinew.

The rider's body fell to the ground, loose fingers letting go of the reins.

Timmy dropped the head on top of the body.

The horse snorted, disliking the sudden smell of blood. But he still could not move, held in place by the metallic hand.

Very gently, the battle bot let go of the horse's face. His fingers stretched out and the hand patted the top of the animal's head, once . . . twice.

Timmy turned and stomped through the swirling dust toward the other rider as the second horse moved away from the river.

This horse smelled the blood carried on the desert wind, though. It decided to move away from the house, and angled off to the northeast at a trot, without direction from its rider.

The rider could not see where they were going, anyway.

Timmy sped up.

When the horse heard him running, it broke into a gallop despite all the dust.

The rider held on, trying to regain control.

“Whoa! Whoa!”

In a burst of speed, Timmy caught up with the horse and pulled the rider out of the saddle.

He fell roughly to the ground.

He sat up, then pulled out his sidearm and started shooting blind.

Thoop! Thoop! Thoopah!

He waited . . . listening. He could hear the sound of his horse vacating the area, hoofbeats growing faint.

Then he heard a closer step, this one much heavier.

Timmy loomed out of the dust, his rectangular head angled down at the man on the ground.

The gunman screamed in horror.

He switched to full auto and shot up at the vertical rectangle point blank.

Both the screaming and the shooting stopped abruptly.

2.37

At last the dust storm faded.

James Ever waited it out in the battle tank, keeping an eye on the holos. He lost track of time. Maybe he had been up here half an hour? An hour?

At some point he could start making details out in the landscape. The mountains off to the west grew visible, first as a dark jagged line on the horizon. Then he could make out the peaks in greater detail.

Fifteen minutes later, he could see the ground clearly. Across the river, he discovered a house with a barn, corral and stables. Even some other little buildings.

“That kid’s been busy.”

He scanned through the holos, looking for his men to see if they were ready to attack.

That’s when he saw the first dead horse, lying broken and bloody on this side of the river.

More searching brought up more bodies. Not all of the horses were killed, though. He found McGrew shot down on the trail, but his horse was nowhere in sight. And the two riders to the east were likewise in a bloody

mess, but both their horses were within a hundred meters, grazing on the lush grass growing near the water.

“They’re all gone.”

He checked the bodies on the holo again, and started counting.

“Not a single man is left down there.”

They were indeed all dead. Some had apparently gone quietly. Some violently. But no one remained alive.

For a moment, Ever felt a bit of remorse. A few of the men down there, like McGrew, had been with him from the beginning.

“McGrew stepped off the same ship I did, when League City was nothing more than a handful of tents and a concrete landing pad.”

Now he was gone, and so were the others who had joined his outfit.

“Every single one.”

Then his grief turned into anger. He shifted his attention to the distant house on the other side of the river.

Unlike the others seeing it for the first time, he did not notice the picturesque scene. He did not appreciate the beauty of a home in this pristine setting.

All he saw was a chance for revenge.

He took the wheel and swooped down, heading over the river.

Ever closed in fast, wanting a good shot. His targeting system zoomed in on the house, a big red circle flashing right in the middle.

He pulled to a stop, in midair above the river, his finger hovering over the firing button. Then he noticed someone on the roof.

A young woman raised an exceptionally large rifle and pointed it right at him.

PHLABAM!

The battle tank rocked in the explosion, and Ever tensed, checking his readouts.

But he remained airborne. No alarms sounded.

He smiled, looking at Gwen's image on the holo.

"That's probably the biggest thing to ever hit this tank. Let's see how that house of yours handles a real gun."

He kept the target circle on the building. In his heart of hearts, he still wanted to grab the Firedog 3W, if it all possible. So he did not aim directly at Gwen.

The tank's cannon belched out a huge red bolt of energy.

It slammed into the house and exploded.

Gwen and her gun went flying. He lost her in all the smoke and flames.

"What else you got? Hm?"

He chuckled, watching the house burn, and moved the tank forward a bit, lowering his altitude to 20 meters.

The forward holo lit up in red, and he realized the tank was taking fire.

"Small arms . . . heavy rifle, looks like."

The onboard system flashed a yellow circle over the roof of the stables. He zoomed in on the figure up there.

"Silas Vick. You traitorous son of a bitch."

He made the turret swivel from the house to the barn, but he hesitated, thinking about horses that might be in there.

"I think my heavy guns are better than yours, Mr. Vick. Plus, you don't have a big metal tank around you like I do."

His hand went to the controls for the gun array. But Silas was already on the move, seeing the turret pivot. A flurry of smaller red bolts peppered the roof of the stables, following Silas as he ran for it.

Silas jumped off the gable when a bolt finally found him, knocking him off the roof. He landed flat on the ground in a clump.

“Serves you right. Now where is that girl? Where’s the boy for that matter?”

Ever moved lower, going back to the standard floating altitude of one meter as he drew closer to the burning house.

“I think maybe I’ll just grab that supergun and go.”

A loud clang rang out in the cabin as something large and metallic jumped on top of the tank.

For the first time since Ever took ownership, the tank’s alarm klaxon sounded, indicating a serious threat.

2.38

The one major engagement during the war in which Republican Marine battle bots faced off against League tanks occurred in the second great struggle for control of Epsilon.

The former hub of the League's tetrarchy, that planet's loss grieved Julius Thrall, and later Jade Thrall, the most.

When Jade took over the Lead Tetrarchy from her father, she engaged his plans to try and retake Epsilon by force.

And that plan involved a *lot* of battle tanks.

But the Marines facing her forces, comprised of only a handful of humans by that time, proved equal to the task. They showed that battle bots could take on and beat the mighty tanks.

Standard doctrine developed from that engagement involved jumping, or dropping, on top of the machines.

Timmy "knew" this. For one, he was there at the Second Battle of Epsilon. Or, as the popular press back on Diego dubbed it, "Epsilon Redux."

He had not been involved in actually fighting against tanks, but he had observed his robotic colleagues engaging them.

But also, before Timmy was decommissioned, he had received all the updates for modern battle tactics at the time. Those included all known ways to take out a League tank and other weapons of war a bot might face.

Somehow . . . perhaps through an extensive diplomatic initiative between LuteNet and PLAIR, wherein the Republican AI would have been reminded that the privateers involved in this transaction were extraordinarily helpful during certain key battles during the war . . . Somehow, when Timmy was sold to the Ultima Mule Company, his battle tactics were left intact. They were not scrubbed as many others were when old battle bots were sold as surplus.

Priority one, Timmy knew, when engaging with a tank involved getting on top of it.

Fortunately, James Ever had no battle tank experience. A LEAF soldier who had operated tanks during the war would have maintained altitude, making it more difficult for bots or anyone else to mount them topside.

But at one meter, Timmy had no trouble jumping on top.

The tank's onboard system recognized this as a credible threat, even more so than being fired upon by a Firedog Whillicker Wildcat Weapon.

The topside holo displayed the battle bot to Ever, klaxon blaring. The sudden appearance of the robot surprised him more than the new house did.

“Get off me! Get off!”

He sped up and gained altitude, too late. Timmy held on, crawling toward the turret.

The second priority in taking on League battle tanks involved placing an explosive device somewhere inside the vehicle.

Timmy did not have egg grenades or any other ordnance.

He could, however, attack the round door below the turret. If he could open it . . .

Ever streaked through the sky, jerking the wheel to the right and left in a vain attempt to shake the bot off.

Inside, he heard the clunk of metallic hands and feet scrambling for purchase, moving to the front of the tank . . . and the round portal above his head.

Ever turned sharp, trying to knock off the bot with centrifugal force.

Timmy hung onto the cannon with one hand, his body swinging out horizontally. When Ever straightened, he clunked back to the top of the tank, and kept heading for the round door.

Ever felt desperate now. He raced across the grass at two meters above the ground, the bot banging on the top.

Timmy finally reached the door and grabbed the circular handle. He pulled, and metal groaned under the pressure.

“Ha!”

The burning house came into view on the front holo, flames rising high.

Ever aimed right for it . . .

The tank crashed into the house.

Timmy flew off the top, burning timbers knocking him from his perch.

The tank streaked out the other side, crashing through the wall, trailing fire.

Ever pulled up on the wheel, gaining altitude . . .

Victorious.

2.39

Tom ran in from the field, breathless but in time to see the tank crashing through the house.

He ignored it.

He didn't care about the house right now.

"Gwen! Gwen do you read me?"

Silence over the implants.

"Silas! Are you there?"

At last, he heard a groan in answer. But it was a deeper, male voice on the comlink.

The stables, Tom noted, were not on fire. At least, not yet.

The tank flew up and over the river, then made a long, lazy U-turn in the air.

Tom kept running. He made it to the bridge and stopped, watching the war machine.

When it looped back around, Ever must have seen him because the tank altered course and headed toward him.

Tom picked up speed, running for the burning house.

Rather than fire right away, Ever moved back into strafe mode. The tank slowed and tilted, so it faced the ground at an angle. It advanced toward the house at the speed of a horse trotting.

The four gun array below the main cannon spun into action, slinging out heavy bolts. They followed Tom as he ran, exploding into the ground, slowly catching up.

In a final burst of speed, Tom neared the house. The shooting stopped as Ever locked onto him.

Tom drew closer . . . closer . . . he could feel the heat from the fire . . .

Inside the tank the red circle flashed on Tom's back.

Ever thumbed the holo button.

Timmy jumped from the burning house, sailing over Tom as he ran.

It was simple geometry. The bot made a snap calculation. Lines intersected.

Four bolts slammed into Timmy, knocking him out of the air.

-+-

Inside the tank, Ever let out a string of profanity.

The bot, he could see, did not move.

“Good. I hope that put you out of commission, you lousy bucket of bolts. Now, where's that boy?”

He advanced cautiously, still in strafing mode, the burning house before him.

“Come out, come out wherever you are . . .”

-+-

Tom stopped behind the burning house, gasping for breath. He stood with his hands on his knees, the fire shielding him from the tank temporarily.

There on the ground, he saw a woman sprawled out, unconscious.

“Gwen!”

He hurried to her and bent down, feeling her neck for a pulse.

He let out a huge breath when he felt one. He reached into a pocket and grabbed a pneumatic syringe and jabbed it into her arm.

“Just stay put for a bit, Gwen.”

Above, he heard humming. He turned and watched as the tank floated through the smoke.

It remained tilted, the heavy gun array and cannon both aiming down at an angle.

Tom touched his implant.

“Lisa I need you to do something. This is an emergency, override whatever you need to.”

“What can I do for you, Thomas?”

The tank paused, hanging in the air at an angle. The gun array swiveled, aiming at him.

“I need you to port the remnant of Particle Two to the top back of that battle tank.”

“You realize this will result in the destruction of—”

“Do it, Lisa! Do it now!”

-+-

Out in the desert, less than a kilometer away, the remnant of Particle Two popped out of the Solar Containment Unit. The black cube holding it imploded, crunching up like a crushed soda can from the sudden loss of gravitational balance.

A tiny bright dot appeared behind the turret, right above the tank's engine bay.

It dropped, weighing far more than it looked.

One gram of super-hot solar plasma fell onto the tank's outer surface.

Inside, the warning klaxon sounded. Ever scrambled, trying to find the cause for the alarm. But his external monitors only showed a very bright . . . spark?

The plasma rested on the outer shell of the tank for a moment, before burning a hole. It dropped inside and rested on top of the power pack.

The klaxon continued inside the cabin, louder now.

The message "External breach! External breach!" flashed repeatedly on the front holo.

"What is it? I don't see nothin'!"

The plasma burned through the outer casing and dropped inside the power pack.

For a moment, a thin trickle of smoke drifted up through the tiny hole.

Then the tank exploded.

Shrapnel flew out in a burst of energy.

Tom threw himself on top of Gwen, but nothing hit them.

The wreckage fell like a rock in front of the burning house. Grass caught on fire where it landed.

Timmy stood up, four meters away from the wrecked tank, black streaks from the heavy gunfire on his chest. He looked at the destroyed tank and the smaller fire burning around it.

He blurred in speed, stomping the flames out. In seconds, only the tank burned, along with the house.

2.40

“Welcome home, Pulsar. You are free to remain in your slot.”

“Thanks, Control. We’re glad to be here, as always.”

Wink leaned back in his captain’s chair on the bridge and smiled at Jinxie.

“It’s good to be home.”

“Yeah, about that, Pulsar . . .”

Wink and Jinxie turned their attention back to the disembodied voice from Petra Roe’s Orbital Control.

“I’m afraid there’s been a slight change to your docking fees. It will be 25,000 credits this time, please.”

“What?”

They stared at one another again, in astonishment this time.

“Yes. It appears you had some sort of kerfuffle on Sporades a few hours ago? Our diplomats have been on it, but it turns out you might have violated that planet’s airspace, or some such. The embassy will send you a complete report soon. You know how touchy those Republicans can be about their regulations and so forth.”

“Um, yeah . . .”

“So, to cover all your fines, and probably to grease the right palms, the embassy asked us to pass along those fees by tacking them to your docking rights. Please transfer the funds, now.”

Jinxie cut the connection so they could talk without anyone on the ground overhearing.

“This is totally bogus, Wink!”

“Yeah, but he’s right. If the embassy can smooth things over, we’ll have gotten away with not one but two battle tanks. Even losing 25 grand, we’re still coming out ahead. And, we’ve got one more battle tank we’ve yet to sell.”

“This still sucks.”

He agreed, but Wink said, “Where else are we gonna go? This is home. We need to maintain ties to someplace that won’t try to jail us just for making a profit.”

He reopened the connection.

“I believe you have our account linked, OC. Please make the transfer.”

“Right. It is done. Welcome home. Oh, and uh, the embassy suggests you avoid Republican space for a while. Maybe just stick with the League and Lutian Alliance for right now, yeah?”

Wink disconnected again, and he shared another glance with Jinxie.

“Well, I guess we’re *persona non grata* over there. That’s too bad. I was hoping to pick up some really cheap candy and packaged snacks to take back to Phaethon.”

“You can buy candy and snack food anywhere, Wink.”

“I know. But the bulk wholesalers on Diego are where real profits could be made.”

“Nah, we can do just as well at Clarion.”

As they left the bridge, they argued back and forth, but in a good-natured way.

What had passed for a few hours in real time had been about two months for them, and they both looked forward to going home for a while.

-+-

Silas Vick opened his eyes and took a moment to remember where he was.

The door to the space capsule dilated open and Tom stuck his head in.

“Oh, good. You’re awake. Had a rough go of it, didn’t we?”

Silas patted his shoulders gently, where bolts had seared into his body.

“I, uh . . . I’m surprised to be alive, to be honest with you.”

“Yeah, you got winged by the small guns on that tank. Then you fell off the roof. But like I said, these nanobots are mil-spec. Welcome back to the land of the living.”

Silas sat up in bed and flexed his arms and legs. Everything seemed to work.

“Thanks.”

They locked eyes, and Tom realized the man was trying to be sincere.

“No problem. Well, we did lose the house. Fortunately, there wasn’t too much in it that was valuable. I think Timmy might have saved some things before he started playing ‘dodge bolt’ with that tank. Anyway, it’ll all have to be rebuilt. So good news for you. We’ll get to use that sawmill again. Maybe you can see it in action.”

“About that, Mr. Savage . . .”

“Tom.”

“Yeah. About that. I noticed comin’ in that some of the trees we passed are a type of maple variant.”

“Maple?”

“Yeah. Sort of. Not exactly, because this is a warmer climate, I think. But the important thing is, they’re sap-bearing. And the sap is edible.”

“You’re saying we’ve got maple syrup out there?”

“Yeah. I mean, yes sir. At least some of the trees are sap-producing. They might be worth trying to harvest for a few extra credits, you know. Everybody loves maple syrup. Or, its variants.”

“Let’s take a walk, Silas. You can show me which trees to use and tell me how we can extract the sap.”

Silas walked outside with Tom and they heard a rumble of thunder.

Both men looked up. The sky was not hazy at the moment, especially now that the dust storm had passed. But low dark clouds barreled across the sky.

Lightning flashed.

The first few fat drops of rain splattered down on them.

“On second thought,” Tom said, “We’ll wait until this thunderstorm passes. Then we’ll go out and take a look. Gwen and I will be in the other space capsule if you need anything.”

Silas nodded, and they both hurried back inside.

-+-

“You ruined another SCU?”

Gwen stood beside Tom as he addressed the holos of his parents.

Neither Christopher Raleigh nor his wife Jillian looked very happy with their son at the moment.

Tom smiled at them.

“Not only that, Dad. We lost the house, too. Burned down to the foundation. It’ll have to be totally rebuilt. On the next transport, I’m going to need windows, pipes, wires . . . all those things the MicaBots can’t handle. Plus, maybe send two or three SCUs this time. You know, just in case.”

“Do you know how much those things cost, son?”

“Um . . . a million credits?”

Christopher Raleigh blinked.

“I don’t actually know, myself. I don’t think they’re that much. But, they’re expensive, I know that.”

“It was worth it, Dad. I was being shot at by a League battle tank at the time.”

Gwen covered her mouth and choked down a laugh. Both older Raleighs turned to look at her.

“Sorry. The look on your faces . . . but he’s telling the truth. I would include more mil-spec nanobots, while you’re at it. They saved my life after the tank blew up our home. I was sort of on top of the house at the time.”

Tom said, “And they saved our farm hand, too.”

“Farmhand?” his mother said.

“Farm *hand*. That’s a joke. I’ll explain later. Look, please restock everything and send it over. I’m extracting some gold from the mines, and while I don’t have enough to pay for it all, I’m convinced this entire effort will eventually become profitable.”

“It better, son,” Raleigh said. “I’m not usually in the habit of just throwing money at things like this.”

Gwen said, “And send some sugar, please. And, maybe some real cream. For coffee. That’s . . . that’s important.”

Tom nodded and said, “Yeah. And more poshbird. Turns out the locals haven’t had poshbird in years, and they’re willing to trade almost anything for it.”

Raleigh’s eyebrows rose.

“Well, we’ve got poshbird. That’s cheap, at least.”

“We’ll send everything, dear,” his mother said. “But . . . maybe next time find another way to destroy your enemies besides using the experimental solar chunks? And ruining everything again?”

-+-

A few days later, Silas and Tom dismounted in the trees near the sawmill.

They approached one with a metal tap implanted about a meter off the ground. It had a bucket attached underneath the tap, covered to prevent insects or animals from feeding off the bounty slowly dripping from the tree.

Silas took the bucket and gently dipped a finger in the thick, sugary liquid. He offered the bucket to Tom, who likewise dipped his finger in. Both men popped the sap in their mouths.

Tom said, “Hm. That’s pretty good.”

Silas nodded and said, “Boil this stuff down, and you’ve got yourself some syrup.”

“How much does syrup sell for around here?”

Silas shrugged.

“Dunno. I’m not sure anybody’s made it yet. We’ll be the first. I don’t think they import much of it, if any. It’s not exactly a necessity. More like a luxury item.”

He waved a hand in the general direction of hundreds of trees, all with taps and buckets.

When Tom described what he wanted, based on Silas’s description, Lisa searched her databanks for the appropriate blueprints. She then transmitted those to the MicaBots’ CPU.

Silas was delighted to discover that Tom had a “source,” who could procure as many taps as they needed. And buckets. The forge out in the desert had been very busy lately.

“We should probably see about claiming this homestead before anyone else finds out about this,” Tom said. “I think we should put it in your name, since the Courthouse only awards one per person.”

“Well, thanks, Mr. Savage, but, uh . . .”

“Tom.”

“The thing is, by the time you pay the sky train fare to go to League City and back, it’ll take that much longer to turn a profit. Also, you got to figure League City is where you could sell the syrup for the most profit. And again, to get there and back takes a mighty large amount.”

“What if I were to tell you we might soon have a way to get to League City and back for free?”

Silas rubbed his chin in thought.

“I’d say you’d stand to increase your profit substantially, if that were the case.”

They turned away from the tree tap and headed back toward their horses.

Tom slapped the older man on the shoulder and smiled.

“I think it’s time to let you in on a few secrets, Silas . . .”

End of Book 2

FARM HAND

3.1

A tiny bot the size and shape of a large black army ant stopped in front of a tree, about two kilometers from Tom Savage's homestead.

Tiny sensors examined the bark and found this tree to match the maple variant indigenous to the continent of Anatolia, on the planet Phaethon.

It quickly scurried up the trunk to the one-meter mark, and waited patiently, marking the spot for others.

Several meters away a metal tap, looking like a little stainless steel spigot, seemed to crawl along the ground held up by four more tiny bots. They headed straight toward the tree.

When they reached the trunk, the ant bots worked in unison to push and pull the spigot up to the meter mark, where the first one waited for them.

Once there, they swung the spigot out horizontally and the bots worked together to drive it into the wood.

A stainless steel two-liter bucket seemed to crawl along the ground. It too climbed up the side of the tree with help from more ants. From a distance, it looked like it levitated, if one could not see the little black dots holding it up.

The bucket's handle draped over the spigot, ready to catch sap.

A light mesh covering climbed up next, and was promptly fixed in place to keep out bugs and other critters.

Their work done, a score of ants scurried back toward the distant home site, and the forge further out in the desert. Unburdened now, they moved faster.

The scout picked its way down to the ground last, and turned to look for more trees.

But here, the trees ended. A grassy prairie stretched out to the west, toward ever-rockier soil before running into foothills. These in turn led eventually to mountains, several more kilometers away.

The ant bot turned east, toward the lightly wooded arboreal habitat. Over 1,000 maple trees were now tapped. In fact, the bot and its partners had tapped 1,121 trees, counting this one.

There were, of course, many other trees in these two square kilometers. But the sap-producing variants were all tapped.

And this one, the MicaBots' central processing unit knew, was the last one. They had all been tapped.

She called her scout back home, having successfully concluded this part of the project.

-+-

"That's a pretty sight," Tom Savage said, strolling among the trees.

Beside him walked Silas Vick, his employee. They gazed at widely spaced woods, a sight that continued for hectares and hectares. Stainless steel taps gleamed in some of the trees' trunks, with covered buckets hanging off them.

Silas nodded and said, "Yes, sir. We're fortunate to have a ready supply in place. It would take at least a few years to grow our own groves. Which is somethin' we'll probably want to do anyway."

"Yeah. Another thing we will need to do is claim these two homestead sites at the Courthouse back in League City. Are you ready for your first

terrestrial teleportation on this planet, Silas?”

The older man winced and rubbed his wrist where Lisa, Tom’s portable AI system, had teleported his hand away.

Of course, Silas had been holding a gun at the time, pointing it at the youngest Asa daughter, recently kidnapped by the Ever Riders. The gun was the real threat Lisa ported away, but her refinement parameters were not yet finalized, and Silas’s hand went along with the gun after Tom overrode her safety protocols.

That was all water under the bridge now. In the days since, Silas had taken a keen interest in the tapping of sap-producing trees that grew in such abundance on this side of the Little River. He had a background in the arbor industry, having spent time as a younger man on the heavily wooded planet of Mondor.

In a way, he seemed to have found his calling again, after losing it for a while when riding around with outlaws on Phaethon’s frontier.

“I don’t fancy teleportation, but I know how expensive a round trip on the sky trains would be. So, I’m ready as I’m ever gonna be, Mr. Savage.”

“Call me Tom. Good deal, we’ll let Gwen claim the settlement next to this one. That will give us two square kilometers of tree country, and everything that the MicaBots have tapped for us. We won’t have to worry about anyone swiping it out from under us that way.”

“I think I’m supposed to build a house on a homestead, Mr. Savage.”

Tom noted the man’s voice had a hint of awe, wonder and expectation all rolled up in one. Silas apparently had never seriously entertained the idea of a homestead before this.

“Yeah, we’ll build you one. It might be more comfortable than sleeping in a space capsule. In fact, the MicaBots have been stockpiling foundation stones for our next structure, so it’ll go faster than my first one did. I’ll still need you to show up for work over at my place, of course. I’m sure the trees can handle themselves most of the time, except when we’re processing the sap. You’ll have help for that, too, by the way. Don’t forget we’ve got Timmy.”

Silas shuddered involuntarily, thinking about the old Republican battle bot.

He had not seen the machine in action, having been knocked out during most of the battle after James Ever shot him off the roof of the stables. But Silas certainly saw the results after the dust settled. Two men trying to flank Tom's house from the east were plucked off their mounts and beheaded in the middle of a blinding dust storm.

It was safe to say, Silas thought, those two never knew what hit them.

When he mentioned something about it to Tom while helping to clean up in the aftermath, the young man smiled and said, "They just didn't have a head for battle."

It took Silas a few minutes to realize Mr. Savage had made another terrible pun.

These thoughts flashed through his mind as the two men walked past the sawmill the MicaBots used. It had recently produced enough lumber to rebuild Tom's house. Fresh sawdust coated the ground all around it.

They stopped and watched a downed tree, stripped of bark and branches, seem to pull itself off a pile near the big kiln and crawl toward the far side of the mill. Looking closer, they could see a black carpet of army ants handling the dried wood.

"In fact, it looks like we're starting on your house right now."

A terrible buzzing sounded as the tree moved steadily through the mill's interior. Moments later, several boards crawled out the end closest to the two men, sanded and symmetrical.

Tom smiled at Silas and said, "Wouldn't you know it."

The two men kept walking.

They reached the trail comprising the remainder of the North Road, stretching 20 kilometers to the town of Little York, the nearest settlement. The trail turned into a footpath extending to the Little River, where a sturdy wooden bridge spanned the banks.

Beyond that, a brand new house stood, basking in ambient light under a hazy sky.

“That was another pun, wasn’t it?”

“Yup.”

“I’m a little slow with wordplay. But I’m still findin’ it amazin’ that these little swarms of robots can tap a thousand trees for us in a couple days and make somethin’ like a house so fast.”

“Well, my new house went faster this time since they did not have to rebuild the foundation. I’m hoping that new fireproof shellac from home will help prevent another fire. It won’t stop a cannon blast, if that happens again, but at least the whole place won’t burn down next time. We’ll put it on yours, too. They sent enough.”

Silas nodded. A third space capsule now stood in place behind the other two, revealing another secret. Its arrival helped explain Mr. Savage’s success in building so quickly. He was obviously funded and supplied by outside sources. The new space capsule contained all the materials for houses that could not be locally sourced.

It also contained kilotons of foodstuff that was probably worth its weight in gold out here. Silas had eaten better this week than he had his last two years on Phaethon. That alone would have been worth undivided love and loyalty for his new employer.

The last few days had been busy. He helped Mr. Savage and Ms. Wilder clean up. All the dead bodies were looted then ported by Lisa into the sun. That included the horses and the wreckage of James Ever’s battle tank.

Timmy rounded up the horses that survived. The battle bot was fast enough to catch them even at full gallop. Their tack was stored in the barn and Tom had Timmy bring them into the stables every night.

The dust storm passed, ending with a thunderstorm brought in by the cyclone from Aqua Minor. During the dust storm, some of Ever’s men and their horses had apparently been killed by a sand dragon, as evidenced by all the slashes and bite marks left behind.

Tom did not wish an untimely death on any of the remaining horses, should the monsters from the desert return.

“Timmy can take on Big Ugly, no doubt,” he said when explaining his reasoning to Silas. “Unless one of them wanders too far away or something. But the horses need to get used to sleeping in the stalls anyway. It’s safer there, and it’ll be warmer in the winter.”

Privately, Silas was grateful the battle bot cleaned the stalls out, and he did not have to do it. Tom had Timmy store the manure in a pile several meters from the house, and discussed the possibility of using it for fertilizer later. He had plans for a garden.

As they walked up to the front door of the house, it opened suddenly and Gwen Wilder stepped out, carrying an empty backpack.

Young, beautiful and blonde, she smiled at the men and said, “I’m ready to go shopping!”

“You know our main purposes for going to League City is so you two can claim homesteads at the Courthouse,” Tom said, smiling back.

“Yeah, yeah, whatever. Then we go shopping!”

3.2

Under a manhole cover in League City, a loud pop of air filled the tight space.

Tom Savage appeared . . . and fell.

He reached out with his arms and swore, bumping down a couple rungs of the metal ladder leading to the sewer before he caught himself and arrested his fall.

“Okay. That was a bad idea,” he grumbled.

The shaft, as well as the drainage tunnel below, remained shrouded in darkness. Tom looked up and saw a tiny circle of light from the keyhole in the cover above. He started climbing, ignoring his new bruises.

Near the top, he came across the sensor he had left here, in what felt like a long time ago. While walking out to the sky trains at the edge of town, Tom found himself in the middle of a firefight. Ducking into the sewer seemed like a good idea at the time, and he left his sensor for Lisa tied to the ladder under the manhole cover.

“I didn’t think about materializing in a vertical shaft. Yeah, I did not think that one through all the way, at all.”

At the top of the ladder, he carefully pushed the cover up and stared out at street level to make sure no vehicles came his way.

Seeing none, he pushed the heavy metal lid all the way off and shoved it to one side, scraping pavement. He pulled himself out of the shaft and pushed the lid back in place.

“Alright. Well, we’re here.”

He walked down the middle of the street, mindful of the local hoodlums on the sidewalk. Some leered at him out of windows, others from open doorways.

Tenement housing in League City sheltered those souls who managed to buy a ticket out to the newest frontier planet, but then had no money left to go anywhere once they arrived.

Crime in this impoverished neighborhood remained high, and Tom had been jumped here by the local gangs shortly after getting off the ship. In the ensuing firefight, though, Captain Isidore Montaigne and his men shot it out with the thugs, hoping to score Tom as another lucrative passenger for the Jet Stream, Montaigne’s sky train.

Tom remembered the encounter as he walked toward the Courthouse and the nicer parts of town.

He kept an eye on the tenements and their more feral occupants. This time, however, he wore a gun at his side. The locals saw it, and left him alone. People stared at him as he marched past, but nobody moved to intercept him like last time.

“Going unarmed apparently marks you as a newcomer around here,” he murmured to himself. “Or vulnerable. I guess what they say is true. ‘An armed society is a polite society.’”

Soon he made his way closer to the Courthouse in the center of the city. He approached from the back and walked around to the front, the direction of the spaceport.

There, in block letters chiseled in rock, the word “COVRTHOVSE” advertised the building’s name and purpose.

“Lisa? Why are there V’s in that word instead of U’s?”

“It is modeled after the Roman style, Thomas. The Roman alphabet did not have a U. The V served as a marker for both sounds in Latin.”

“Aha. Well, you learn something new every day.”

He marched up large white steps to the big double wooden doors where a uniformed peace officer stood guard.

The deputy held out his hand, palm up.

“No guns inside the Courthouse.”

“Oh. Uh . . .”

“I know, I know. It’s a new policy from my boss, Sheriff DeLorenzo. You can place your weapon in a holding locker over there.”

The deputy pointed to a series of lockers, newly installed along the front of the building, and watched Tom carefully as he placed his weapon in one.

Tom palmed the panel, and transferred one-quarter credit from his bank account to activate the lock.

When he finished, the deputy looked satisfied and made no further efforts to hinder his entrance.

Tom walked inside.

The same young lady sat behind the front desk. She smiled at him in recognition.

“How is your homestead? Have you been out there yet? Is it everything you expected?”

“Yes, it is. I have some friends who want to claim their own nearby.”

“Send them my way whenever they’re ready.”

He nodded and headed deeper into the lobby. Toward the back he spotted the restrooms.

“Nope. I’ve used too many of those. Besides, it would be embarrassing for Gwen to show up in the men’s room.”

He continued searching and finally found some doors along the far wall that looked like conference rooms, where people could meet and discuss legal matters or other things.

He glanced inside one and found a long table with leather chairs. Tom nodded and stepped inside, closing the hinged door behind him.

“Okay, Lisa. Please bring in the others.”

Silas appeared with a pop. He looked tense, hands held in fists out front, eyes closed tight.

He opened one eye and looked around. Then he flexed the hand that Tom had reattached, as if making sure it was still there after the teleportation.

“You might want to tuck your sidearm under your shirt or something,” Tom said. “We’re not supposed to have weapons in the Courthouse now, apparently.”

“Oh. That’s a change. But then, it’s been a while since I’ve been here.”

While Silas hid his gun, Gwen popped into place on the other side of the room.

She looked around and smiled at Tom.

“Obviously, Lisa has all her parameter matrices resolved. I didn’t appear in the middle of this table or anything.”

Lisa spoke in her implant.

“I do indeed, Gwendolyn. I can safely port objects down to ten nanometers of differentiation.”

“I’m just glad you didn’t mess us up.”

“I have performed 1,000 tests and calibrations before this moment. I would never put you or any human in harm’s way—”

“Right, right.”

She turned to the men and said, “C’mon, let’s get this over with so I can go shopping!”

3.3

“Before we go, I should leave a sensor here in case we ever need to port back inside the Courthouse,” Tom said.

He looked for a good place to hide one of Lisa’s coin-sized devices in the meeting room.

“There’s very little furniture in here,” Gwen said, looking around with him. “Eight chairs and a table. They don’t even have any artwork on the walls.”

“Yeah. Chairs could be moved out of the room, I suppose. Same with artwork, if they had any. Okay, table it is.”

He dropped down to his knees and took a look along the edges. Then he moved further under the table and toward the middle, where wooden legs in the center supported the long, rectangular frame.

“I wish they had a crevice or something I could slide this into. You know how some dining tables have leaves you can slide in? That would be perfect.”

“It’s a conference table, not a kitchen table.”

“I bet somebody eats in here anyway. Wherever there’s a table, people are gonna eat on it.”

“Maybe you could cut a notch in the wood and slide it in?” Silas said, pulling out a pocketknife and offering it to Tom.

“Hm. No, I think we’ll just do this the old fashioned way. Hold on, I brought some adhesive for this very purpose.”

Tom pulled a tiny tube out of his front pocket. He carefully put a drop of glue on the sensor, then climbed back under the table. He pressed it up under the table’s surface for a minute, letting the glue set.

“I think it kinda looks like maybe it belongs there,” Tom said, crawling back out. “Hopefully, if anyone ever finds it, they’ll think it’s just part of the furniture or something,”

He smiled at the other two.

“Okay. Are we ready to go claim some homesteads?”

Gwen nodded and smiled.

Silas nodded, but he seemed more nervous. Tom decided this was probably a big deal for the older man. He opened the door for them.

Out in the lobby, Tom pointed to the large globe holo, slowly rotating in place, displaying available homesteads on Phaethon’s three continents.

They walked over and quickly picked out their respective sites, directly to the south of Tom’s.

“I wish I could get one of the homesteads on either side of ours,” Gwen grumbled. “I don’t like that our flanks aren’t covered.”

Inwardly, Tom smiled at her use of the word “our.” He liked hearing that.

Out loud he said, “I seriously doubt anyone is going to want land that is fifty percent desert. Right now we really need to claim those woods. Especially if they’re going to be as lucrative as we think they’re going to be.”

Gwen nodded and walked with the two men to the receptionist after she and Silas copied their respective coordinates.

“Oh! Well, hello. I did not see you two come in.”

Gwen flashed a grin at the surprised young woman behind the desk and said, “We’re sneaky that way.”

“They’d like to claim homesteads,” Tom said, trying to divert the receptionist’s attention away from the fact that Gwen and Silas did not come through the front door with him. “If you have the forms, they can go ahead and give you their coordinates.”

The distraction worked. She produced two holosheets, then pushed them through the air across the counter. Silas and Gwen dutifully pasted in their coordinates and personal information.

“That will be 200 credits each, please.”

Tom dug into his pocket for some tokens.

“Oh, no, Mr. Savage. I couldn’t. If it’s gonna be in my name, I’ve got the money right here.”

Silas handed over the appropriate amount in an open transaction window floating above the counter, dragging 200 credits from his bank account to the Courthouse’s coffers. The receptionist smiled and filed a copy of the form. His holosheet flashed green.

“It’s all yours.”

Gwen looked at Tom and held her hand out.

“I’ve got no such compunctions. Gimme.”

He smiled and handed over two tokens worth a hundred each. She turned and gave them to the receptionist.

“Congratulations!”

Silas and Gwen pushed the copies of the deeds into their implants, storing the electronic documents. They smiled at the receptionist and turned to follow Tom out the large double doors.

The law enforcement officer on duty nodded at Tom, recognizing him when they stepped out. But his eyebrows scrunched up in confusion at the sight of Silas and Gwen.

He opened his mouth to say something about not seeing them before, when blaster shots cracked out from the street.

Bolts spattered against the Courthouse walls and everybody hit the deck.

3.4

A car raced around the corner and crashed into another one parked out front on the street.

Four gang members tumbled out, hitting the pavement and waving guns.

Another car chasing them slid to a stop, turning sideways. Two guns stuck out the windows and peppered the wrecked vehicle with red bolts. Some sailed over the car, slamming into the front of the Courthouse.

The first four gangsters scattered, taking cover and firing back.

Streaks of energy littered the air, popping into cars and the sides of buildings.

The deputy on the Courthouse steps pulled out his duty weapon and returned fire from a prone position. A bolt sailed out and hit a car one of the gunmen used for cover. He turned and returned fire at the officer before diving behind a trash canister.

Someone leaned out the window of the second car with a bigger rifle, clicking over to full auto. A hail of bolts surged from the back seat, flooding the air with energy as the weapon waggled back and forth.

Everyone else stopped shooting for a moment while the heavy onslaught continued for several seconds.

A bird flew into the path of the one of the big bolts and disappeared in a puff. Burnt feathers drifted to the ground.

The gunman finally let his finger off the trigger and barked out a nasty laugh. Smoke drifted up from dozens of impacts on the street, the cars, and the sides of buildings.

Everyone returned fire at once.

Dozens of bolts found the rear window of the car, blasting in from all directions.

A body slumped, half in and half out while the rifle clattered to the street.

Screams wailed out from the front of the vehicle, and a woman stepped out of the passenger side holding two pistols. She sprayed the parked cars, making the four on foot duck for cover again. Then she glared up at the Courthouse steps.

“Pig!”

She turned to fire on the officer, but he had already lined up on her. Their bolts crossed mid-air. Both missed.

She screamed in anger and ducked out of sight.

But the cop had the high ground. He fired down on the four, now. They hid behind vehicles shielding them from the woman, but remained wide open to the front of the courthouse.

All four ducked or rolled, then came up firing back at the Courthouse steps, popping the door and walls with bolts.

Silas grunted as red streaks sailed scant centimeters above his head.

He pulled out the gun from under his shirt and carefully squeezed off a shot from his prone position.

Someone screamed and stopped returning fire.

Gwen unzipped her backpack, cursing. She pulled out a pistol too, with a look on her face betraying the fact she missed Big Bertha right about now.

When she, Silas and the officer returned fire simultaneously, most of the incoming blasts aimed at the Courthouse stopped. The deputy found the driver's hiding spot near a lamppost and shifted his gun's sights toward her.

The woman from the car gave up. Unable to take out any of the gunmen in the wrecked vehicle, and now receiving fire from the Courthouse, she jumped back behind the wheel. The car made a U-turn in the middle of the street, a dead body hanging out the back window, and raced back to the projects.

The remaining three ran for it, abandoning the fight and their dead comrade. Silas and Gwen both shot at the fleeing perps, but missed.

In seconds, it was all over.

"Everybody alright?" the officer said, looking over at the trio receding in the distance and regaining his feet.

"I could have helped, if someone hadn't made me lock up my gun," Tom said, smiling.

He stood up and dusted off his clothes.

"I know. That sheriff and his stupid rules! We only got three deputies and someone has to stand here all day and enforce it. Listen, I'm sorry about all this. Glad you folks had guns, though. I'll cover for you on the paperwork that stiff down there is going to take. Besides, that way I can claim credit for putting a stop to all this."

Silas had a look on his face that indicated he thought that was a great idea. No fan of police paperwork, the former outlaw holstered his weapon and looked ready to leave right then and there.

Tom made them wait until he retrieved his own pistol from the lockers, then they walked down the steps together. The sound of sirens in the distance indicated backup was on the way.

"I'm glad y'all were here," the officer said, following them out to the street. "That was kinda hairy. The extra guns sure helped."

He shook their hands near the body of the gangster Silas killed and they parted ways.

“I think under the circumstances we should take a cab,” Tom said, leading them toward a line of black cars along the street on the other side of the Courthouse.

Pedestrians and other bystanders came out of hiding now that shooting stopped.

“That’d be nice, Mr. Savage,” Silas said as the first police car jerked to a halt near the wrecked vehicle. Two deputies came out, waving guns.

A driver waited outside the first black cab in line on the street, and his eyes lit up when he realized the trio were headed his way. He quickly opened the back door and the passenger door.

“Where to, folks?”

“Shopping district,” Gwen said, piling into the back with Tom. Silas climbed in up front. The driver closed the doors and happily ran around to the other side. Seconds later, they merged into light traffic.

3.5

League City, Tom realized, defined itself by the Courthouse (always capitalized, he knew) in its center and the major features along its edges. People lived in between. It worked for now, at the city's current population. But if a new influx of colonists decided to stay in the capital rather than settle the frontiers, the city's geography would likely change along with the population.

For now, though, everything seemed to fit.

The spaceport lay to the south, primarily consisting of a giant reinforced concrete landing pad. It would be some time before the planet claimed an allegiance with one of the major governmental systems. Until then, no planetary AI could bring in humans and cargo from orbit via teleportation.

At least, not easily.

Technically, freighters and other ships under the control of StarCen, PLAIR or LuteNet could teleport something in, but that would require an aligned sensor planetside. Sensors typically required maintenance, AI cores, and personnel to tend to them.

Since Phaethon had not aligned with anyone yet, no system wished to invest the needed resources for a planet-wide sensor system. Not without a firm commitment.

So for now, ships landed to unload people and goods.

To the north, grassy fields served as a combination fairground, souvenir market and intercity tradeway, with lots of open space for sky train cars delivering people and goods to the outer settlements and back to League City.

Tom made his way from the spaceport, when he first arrived, to the Courthouse where he claimed his homestead, then out to the sky train landing grounds in a relatively easy walk.

Of course, the resident gangs had assaulted him along the way because he strolled into the projects with his backpack and no gun, looking like he literally just got off the ship.

That left the other two sides of town as yet unexplored by Tom. The cabbie navigated his way through a much nicer neighborhood on the west side of town.

Here, evidently, the well-to-do lived. The *hoi aristoi* instead of the *hoi polloi*, he thought.

Buildings were built nicer. And while there were still no individual houses, sturdy apartments stretched up as high as five stories. Local materials were used, as elsewhere, but he could tell that time and effort had been put into these structures.

In a few years, he thought, as they were better able to work materials and could afford to import some stuff they did not have, even nicer buildings would sprout up.

For right now, the higher end part of town looked . . . nice. He even noticed modern sliding doors with palm panels, something he had not seen anywhere else on Phaethon.

At last they reached the western extremity of the city, and the cabbie pulled to the curb, gliding to a stop.

“There you are, folks! The shopping district. Our bazaar is here. The nicer shops, too. You should be able to find everything you want here.”

The nicer apartment buildings gave way to a wide U-shaped area, with higher-end shops in storefronts along the edges. In the center, an open-air vending arena held court, with spaces reserved for merchants of various means and products.

The entire area looked about half a klick wide. They could not, as of yet, see how far out of the city it stretched.

The merchants holding court this close to the end of Commerce Boulevard, Tom noted, retailed from booths made of what looked to be imported plywood. Paint and cloth and decorations hid the underpinnings for most of these. Each one looked to be the same size, 500 square meters.

Some of the booths were quite lavishly decorated, the merchants having decked them out extensively. Some even had covered interiors, making them similar to the more expensive retail facilities in actual storefronts, though smaller.

“There’s a sales trick,” Tom said, as they stepped out of the vehicle.

He paid the cabbie, then turned back to face the many rows of booths and all the aisles leading between them. It looked like a gigantic outdoor marketing free-for-all, he thought.

Merchants in less prominent spots behind the front row yelled out their goods and prices, trying to compensate for their less visible locations. People crowded the aisles, browsing what each stall had to offer. Families happily traded for food, clothes, gadgets and other items.

Tom noticed very few transaction windows hovering overhead. But he saw a few. If a merchant had a direct line to a local bank, which almost certainly they all had, he or she could conduct an electronic transaction even without a local AI, provided the customer likewise had an account. But most of the sales were conducted with credit tokens.

“What’s the sale trick, Mr. Savage? I don’t see it.”

Tom smiled at the older man. The outlaw had years of age and experience on him, but Tom had been raised by two very savvy individuals. His mother and father had spent a lot of time with him growing up discussing finances, how to run companies and how to deal with employees.

“Well, it’s psychology. I picked up a thing or two as a kid. My parents wanted to drill practical experience in me, so they had me run a small storefront in Port Ryan when I turned 13, the legal age of adulthood in the Alliance.”

“It’s the legal age everywhere,” Gwen interjected. “Not just the Alliance.”

“Anyway, that’s where I started, in a little storefront all by myself. And I learned a lot that year. Many successful sales involve providing a conducive atmosphere to conducting transactions. In stores, you might find that setting to include pleasant visuals and music to help set the mood. You’ll find pleasant colors and arrangements. The place might even smell a certain way to help get customers more receptive to parting with their money. You’ll see this in online storefronts as well as in the real world, by the way.”

He waved at the plywood booths before them, all decorated, hiding the cheap materials used to build them.

“These people want to convey success. Because success begets success in retail. So, they want you to believe they are rich and prosperous merchants. Which, they probably are. I bet these booths up here near the front rent out for a lot more than the ones in the back. They want to advertise the fact they are successful, so they put on a show to reassure you they are. Everyone else has bought from them. Why not you? That’s the trick.”

Silas raised his eyebrows.

“I ain’t never thought much about sellin’ and what all’s involved with it.”

“Yeah, speaking of that,” Gwen interjected again, “the cabbie said we could buy practically everything here. I’m going to go scope out the furniture stores for our house. I saw a sign in one of the storefronts over there. The *real* stores. So, hand over some credits, please.”

She held her palm out to Tom.

He frowned at it and said, “Aren’t you rich?”

“Do I look like I have access to everything out here? All my funds are tied up in Diego. Now gimme. This is for you too, you know.”

Tom sighed and dug into his pockets, handing over several tokens.

She smiled, stood on tiptoes and gave him a kiss on the cheek. Then she was gone, slipping into the crowd.

Silas chuckled and said, “She’s got you wrapped around her little finger, Mr. Savage. I imagine there’s some psychology in that, too. That kind, I’m a little more familiar with.”

“You’re probably right, Silas. You’re probably right. Now let’s go find what we came here for. I imagine the agricultural stuff is in the back, out on the edges where there’s more space.”

Silas nodded, and they set off together into the bazaar’s interior, heading toward the outer edge.

“Maybe won’t nobody start shootin’ at us in here,” Silas said in an optimistic tone.

“Silas, my friend,” Tom said, putting a hand on his shoulder. “Don’t say things like that out loud.”

3.6

The large square booths eventually gave way to tables. Lots and lots of tables. They were two meters long by half a meter wide. Apparently merchants could rent out one or ten or however many they needed, and pile up their goods. Here, they saw more food for sale, and the bazaar took on the atmosphere of a farmers' market.

One old fellow sat on a stool behind his single table piled high with jars of honey. He seemed to be doing a brisk business, with a line formed.

"That gives me hope for our syrup, seeing that guy," Tom said.

Other merchants were not peddling homegrown fare, but items imported from elsewhere and marked up for a profit. Tom saw one man with three tables selling candy bars, of all things. He drifted closer out of curiosity, only to discover the asking price was an astonishing two credits each . . . and already the man had almost sold out of his entire inventory.

"That guy's making bank."

"Uh, 'scuse me, Mr. Savage . . ."

Silas broke away and purchased one of the remaining candy bars while Tom waited. Silas returned, his eyes half closed in culinary delight, munching down on the treat.

“Mm. Haven’t had one of these in years.”

Suddenly his eyes grew big.

“Oh. Did you want one, Mr. Savage? I can go back.”

“Nah, don’t worry about it. I wonder how poshbird ready-to-eat packs would do here?”

“Poshbird? Prolly get ten per, I bet. At least.”

Tom filed that thought away for later examination.

“Well, I know where to go if we need some more money.”

He stopped at the next table where a young farmer and his wife sold fresh vegetables.

“Excuse me. I’m just curious how much you have to spend for the tables.”

The young woman smiled, happy to chat while her husband filled orders for their customers.

“It’s five credits a table, per day. The fee goes to the city, this is one of their major fundraisers. You can reserve your spot, or show up and take what’s left. We just come in when we have a load to sell.”

“How far away is your place?”

“It’s about six clicks out. We make enough selling here in the city to live on.”

“Do farmers further out sell here too?”

“Not if it’s too far to bring in produce. But there’s usually some kind of settlement nearby you can sell at. There’s also the merchants on the fairgrounds who will buy big lots to load on the sky trains. They’ll take a cut of your profits, though, if you sell in bulk. We generally make more selling to individuals, although it’s slower.”

Tom thanked her profusely. He and Silas continued making their way out toward the edge.

They walked past the tables and found themselves in an even more agrarian marketplace. Here, livestock of all kind were penned up and for sale. Farm equipment, machinery and other implements were scattered across the open ground. Instead of tables, the city evidently rented square spaces here. They were marked off in tape, a large geometrically aligned pattern stretching out for meters and meters in all directions.

Men in overalls, and a few women as well, looked around at far fewer customers interested in their goods. But those who were here appeared very serious. They spoke in quiet tones with the merchants, each one giving the other knowing looks and appreciative nods.

“This ain’t a place for city slickers,” Silas said, summing up his impression of the scene.

“Good. We’re looking for seeds and ways to plant them.”

“I think that fella over there might be able to help us, Mr. Savage.”

Amidst several potted plants with old-fashioned wooden and painted signs, stood a tall man with a rotund belly. He wore blue jeans, a bright red and white plaid cotton shirt, and a wide-brimmed yellow straw hat. Olive skinned, he looked quite tan, despite the hazy sunlight.

A larger wooden sign, standing above all else, announced the name of his business: “Phoenician Gardens.”

When Tom and Silas approached, he sized them up with piercing blue eyes.

“You boys looking to plant crops? Or a garden?”

Tom said, “I’m admiring your sign. Why ‘Phoenician?’”

“I was on the first ship out of Pearl heading here almost three years ago. I stopped in to order this sign at a company there, and came back just before porting aboard with all my stuff. Evidently the proprietor misheard me. I asked for ‘Phaethon Gardens.’ But this is what I got. It was too late to change it, so . . . here I am.”

He smiled, all irritation at the sign maker long gone. Then he stuck his hand out.

“Dudley Prideaux. French ancestry, mainly. My ancestors grew grapes. I help others grow food out here, keeping the family tradition alive. Now, are you boys interested in growing crops? Cash crops? Food crops? Or do you just need a sustenance garden?”

“Well, we think we’ve got the cash crops covered. And our homesteads are, uh, probably not best suited for large food yields. But we’re really interested in gardening.”

Dudley smiled.

“I’m your man. Happy to educate you both all about gardening on Phaethon. The ‘shrouded sun’ causes a few issues that folks need to be aware of when starting out. Especially when trying to grow the kind of food we humans like to eat.”

-+-

An hour later, Silas and Tom staggered away from Phoenician Gardens carrying kilos of seeds, an old-fashioned paper book on Phaethon gardening written by Dudley Prideaux, and a basket of basic gardening tools including shovels, rakes and hand trowels.

Dudley also sold them leather gloves, straw hats, hand shears, weed pullers and half a dozen other accouterments.

A young boy, about ten, came by pulling a rickshaw with a flat bed in back. After some negotiation, Tom handed over a couple credits and hired him. They loaded their merchandise from Dudley onto the rickshaw and kept going.

Next they picked up a plow from a fellow selling them. Tom asked for explicit instructions on how to hook a horse up to this particular implement, and the salesman was only too happy to oblige. Finally convinced he understood everything, Tom bought it and Silas helped him load it onto the rickshaw.

At last they ventured out into the livestock and large equipment area. Horses, cattle, sheep, goats and all their variants bleated, lowed, and brayed.

“You know . . . steaks sound mighty good, Mr. Savage. I know it’d be some work, but there’s plenty grass out there.”

Tom shook his head.

“Big Ugly would kill everything we put out there. And I’ve only got one battle bot to guard stuff.”

Silas gave him a perplexed look.

Tom said, “Oh, that’s right. You haven’t met Big Ugly yet. Imagine a sand dragon with an even worse temper than usual. We have a history. He slashed my throat, and I shot out one of his eyes. I’m pretty sure he’s the one who killed a couple Ever Riders during that sand storm. Anyway, nope. No livestock. That’s just throwing money away. It’ll be hard enough keeping all our horses safe from him.”

He talked while they walked. They approached a salesman with a large makeshift pen, the little force field marking its boundaries around his rented space. Inside, dozens of yellow chicks milled about, pecking at the ground and cheeping.

“There’s a source of eggs, Mr. Savage. Good protein. We can always kill the non-producers and have some fresh meat.”

“Those things wouldn’t last two nights out there, Silas.”

“Worried about predators, are we?”

The poultry monger smiled at them, twirling a handlebar mustache. Tom thought he would look creepy in almost any other setting besides this one.

“I’ve got just the thing for you, my good man. The Chicken Coop 1000, straight from Pearl. It’s the newest thing for poultry management. Made from a titanium steel alloy patented at Pearl Polytechnic. Gentlemen let me tell you, this thing is nigh indestructible. It is guaranteed predator-proof, or your money back.”

He pointed at a large sturdy metal enclosure. It looked shiny, with gleaming metal slats, complete with a roof, nesting boxes, feeding and watering units, and an automated door for the chickens.

The men heard orchestra music in the background, and the entire contraption seemed to light up in an almost heavenly glow from some hidden source of illumination.

“What is that?” Silas said. “What’s with the music? Is that one of them psychological sales tricks?”

Tom smiled at Silas before turning back to the salesman.

He said, “Guaranteed, huh? And that’s in writing? Does that include *every* predator on this planet?”

“I assure you, my good man, it does. The CC 1000 holds up even against the dreaded sand dragon on Anatolia in the midst of the Skoni Desert (provided you have the force field add-on, which is extra). If you take delivery today, I’ll throw in this here rooster as well, to help protect against anything else that might be out there. (A sonic nullifier, if you don’t want to hear him crowing all the time, is only slightly extra.) Believe me, the rooster is almost as effective as the chicken coop in keeping things away from your beloved hens.”

He pointed to a giant red and green avian specimen, locked in a wooden box nearby with only its head poking out the top.

The bird glared at Tom with murder in its eyes.

It jerked its head to give Silas, the salesman and other people nearby a baleful glance as well, a brilliant red comb shaking with every movement.

“That thing looks like it wants to kill everyone here, if it could.”

“That thing, my good man, will gladly fight any predator that comes near your chicken coop *to the death*. And that’s just what you need out there. Now, do we have a deal? What will it take to send you home with a brand new CC 1000 today?”

3.7

The poor kid could hardly pull the rickshaw now, so Tom hired another one and split the load between them. He picked up a mower drone and a hay baler drone. Both were small and light enough to fit on the back of the second rickshaw. They finally made their way out to the far edge of the bazaar, loaded down with stuff.

“Just, uh, wait here for a minute,” Tom said to the two boys when they reached the road snaking around the bazaar’s periphery.

Since he paid five credits to them each for their trouble, the boys looked very happy to wait. Both expressed their gratitude to Tom multiple times all the way out. Apparently they rarely made this much in a single day, let alone with one customer. The going rate was a quarter credit per ride.

Tom walked some distance away, leaving them with Silas. He touched the implant under his ear.

“Gwen? Where are you?”

“Right behind you.”

He turned and noticed a large flatbed truck drifting down the road toward them. When it stopped, Gwen hopped out of the passenger side smiling.

“Oh, you rented rickshaws? That’s nice. I had to get a truck.”

Cautiously, and with a bit of trepidation, Tom walked around back to see what she had bought. The truck's bed was piled high, mostly with furniture boxes. Lamps, throw rugs and other home accessories were piled on as well.

"I even got some things for Silas's place," she said, sliding a hand into the crook of his arm.

"Okay. That's a lot of stuff to bring home. We need to go back to the spaceport side of town and find someplace private."

"Before we go, there's someone else I want you to meet."

Gwen skipped back to the front of the truck and opened the passenger door, carefully reaching inside. She returned holding a squirming black kitten with white feet.

"Tom, this is Mr. Biddles."

"You can't take that back home."

"I've thought about this a lot ever since I met Mr. Biddles, and fell in love with him. Aren't you the cutest thing, Mr. Biddles? Yes you are! I've thought about it, and I made an executive decision. He's coming home with us."

The kitten mewed as she held it close to her face, locking eyes with it. Mr. Biddles stretched his fuzzy little neck out and licked her nose.

"That thing's gonna get eaten up in a day or two. A week max. No way it lasts longer than a week. It's a bad idea, Gwen. We have birds out there that will eat him for breakfast."

"Mr. Biddles is an inside cat. And Timmy will have strict orders to guard him with his life when Mr. Biddles goes outside. Isn't that right, Mr. Biddles?"

Tom shared a pained glance with Silas as the older man walked up, but found no mercy in the farmhand's face. Only mirth. Silas made a circle motion with his little finger while smiling at him.

Tom sighed and gave up.

“Whatever. Just don’t get too upset when he gets eaten up by Big Ugly or one of a dozen other predators.”

“He won’t. I bought kitty litter. Mr. Biddles will stay inside where it’s safe. Won’t you, Mr. Biddles? Yes you will!”

The kitten purred and rubbed his little head up against Gwen’s face.

Tom sighed again, and turned to go talk with the truck driver.

-+-

They needed a place large enough for Lisa to teleport all their stuff home, but isolated so that nobody could see them when everything disappeared. Tom still felt keeping their teleportation secret would be a good idea.

He had given the issue quite a bit of thought throughout the day, and decided the huge concrete tarmac at the spaceport might work, if he could get all this stuff past the guard at the gate. He thought if he told the man they were awaiting a pickup or something, he might be able to talk his way through.

Barring that, he figured they could go around outside the spaceport. It was surrounded by a tall concrete wall, ostensibly there to stop backblasts from ships landing and taking off. In reality, it probably had been placed there to help contain explosions from wrecked landings.

Tom figured that traipsing around behind the wall would eventually lead to an isolated spot no one could see, and they could teleport from there. But the driver of the truck presented him with a much more elegant solution.

“Do you need to store this stuff before you transport it? You’ll want to rent a warehouse near the spaceport. It’s not that expensive. The city manages them.”

He slowly drove the truck along the outer road looping around the city, the rickshaw boys panting to keep up. Eventually, they came to what Tom could only think of as a warehouse district, between the bazaar and the spaceport.

“All the big merchants rent these. They’ll buy cargo off the ships that land and store it here, then take it to the market or sell it in their shops. There’s the man who runs it.”

He pointed at a fellow sitting on a cheap chair near the entrance to a series of blocks with rows upon rows of warehouses.

Tom thanked the driver and stepped out, leaving Gwen and Mr. Biddles in the cabin. He glanced back at the rickshaws. The boys looked winded, and glad for the break. Silas waved at him from the passenger seat of the one in front.

Tom walked up to the warehouse district guard, who stood as he approached, and shook the man’s hand.

“I need a place to store all this stuff.”

The guard cast a speculative eye at the truck and two rickshaws, then nodded.

He said, “Number 14 is available. A thousand square meters, a hundred credits a month. Two months up front. Prices are set by the city. No negotiation.”

Tom nodded. He pulled out the appropriate tokens and handed them over. The guard produced a holoforn, which floated in the air between them. Tom tapped it to fill in his information, then pressed his palm on the form.

He called Gwen and Silas over and had them press their palms into the form, too.

When he returned to the truck and climbed back in with Gwen, he said to the driver, “We’re in Number Fourteen.”

The driver nodded and edged forward, past the guard.

With the layout of the district, the smaller warehouses were placed up front. Larger ones remained further back. They quickly found Warehouse 14 and Tom jumped out to palm the large door open. The truck moved inside and the driver parked in the middle of a large concrete space, lit up with bright overhead diodes.

The rickshaw boys jogged in behind the truck and stopped. The boys collapsed on the floor dramatically, sweating and panting.

The four adults met at the back of the truck, looking at all the stuff Gwen had bought.

“That’s going to take some work to unload,” Tom said, raising an eyebrow at the two boys.

They were both on their backs now, still breathing hard. He smiled at their dramatics, suspecting they were fishing for more credits.

“I’ll sell you the truck if you want, and you can just leave the stuff on there until you need to move it somewhere else,” the driver said. “That’ll save you some labor.”

“Why would you sell your truck?” Tom said, genuinely curious.

“Well you see, the power pack is almost depleted. It’s got about a week left if I don’t drive it much. And power packs are precious around here. No way to recharge them. And they want an arm and a leg for what few are imported here. A new power pack costs more than a new truck, so . . .”

The driver shrugged and smiled.

“Five hundred credits, and she’s all yours.”

-+-

Between the six of them, they managed to unload the rickshaws quickly. The driver took a ride back from one of the boys, who happily accepted another token to haul him home.

Tom stood at the warehouse entrance and watched the boys depart while the door slowly slid down, blocking out all chances of being seen from the outside.

He turned back to Silas, Gwen, Mr. Biddles, and a boxed rooster that looked like he wanted to kill them all in no uncertain terms.

“You know, I think there’s a lot of moneymaking opportunities in League City.”

3.8

Tom distributed the rest of his mini sensors around the warehouse.

He wanted Lisa to have full coverage of the entire facility. He needed to be able to teleport in and be assured no one was watching before he got there. For the first time, he felt frustration at the limitations of the smaller devices.

The warehouse floor stretched 50 meters wide and 100 meters long. Each mini sensor covered a radius of 30 meters. He had to use three to fully cover the front, including the door and the street.

Of his remaining six, he could not cover the entire floor. Grumbling, he spaced them out down the middle, consoling himself that there was only the one big entrance and smaller door in the back.

He supposed someone could cut through a wall, if they were really determined. But an intruder would not know where the sensors were, and if they walked around inside they would eventually fall into the radius of one of the middle placements.

So he laid three down the center of the floor, and the last two along the far wall.

Satisfied his exercise in geometrical apportionment was sufficient for now, he stepped back and looked at the truck and the piles of stuff next to it from

the rickshaws.

The chicks, in their travel coop, chirped. He knew they would need food and water soon. Mr. Biddles seemed quite fascinated with them, patting his little paw against the force field surrounding their cage.

The rooster glared at him in hatred. The kitten finally noticed the bird's angry eyes on him and walked over to the box to investigate. Biddles jumped on top, intent on taking a closer look, when the rooster pecked at him. Hard.

The kitten yowled and leaped off the box, scampering all the way to the other side of the warehouse floor.

"Biddles! Oh, baby, did that mean ol' rooster peck at you?" Gwen ran off to comfort the frightened kitten, cowering now in the far corner.

Tom rolled his eyes.

He locked eyes with the bird, who still looked like it wanted to kill someone.

"Behave, Robert."

"What did you call him?" Gwen said, walking back and holding the kitten with both hands.

"He's Robert the Rooster."

"You can't name him that."

"Why not?"

"Because it's stupid. 'Robert the Rooster?'"

"It's no more stupid than 'Mr. Biddles.'"

"Biddles is a fine name for a cat."

"Robert is a good name for a rooster. It's got some alliteration there."

Gwen snorted but stopped arguing.

"Lisa? Are you ready to start teleporting our stuff?"

“Yes I am, Thomas.”

“Good. Start with the truck and everything that’s on it. Place it behind the landing modules.”

“Very well. Please stand back.”

The truck disappeared with a loud **POP!** of displaced air in the enclosed space.

The kitten howled and scratched Gwen’s arm, scrambling to jump down and run away again. She bit off several curses, rubbing the scratches on her arm.

“We can leave it here,” Tom said in a reasonable tone. “It should be able to find plenty to eat in the city.”

She glared at him. He glanced at Robert the Rooster, who in turn glared back at Gwen.

If looks could kill, she would not be standing, Tom thought.

He sighed, crossing his arms.

“Well, let’s see if we can all get home in one piece.”

-+-

Hours later, all new furniture graced Tom’s new house. Sofas and a love seat, a big easy chair, a table and chairs, several modern kitchen appliances and a big throw rug all graced the downstairs. Upstairs, beds, night tables, chairs and a full-length mirror rounded out the house’s furnishings.

Gwen looked happy, moving around and rearranging things slightly, here and there. The kitten followed her, poking his nose in every corner and gradually exploring this new domain.

Tom walked outside to see how the other projects were going. The hazy sun had already slipped behind the mountains, and the sky grew dimmer as night approached.

The plow, mower and hay baler were sitting in the same place Lisa had ported them. While the plow was designed to be horse-powered, the mower and baler were two specialty drones. They were the most expensive items Tom bought.

Relatively small, the units were both boxy and about the size of a golf cart. Tom hoped to use them to bale up the lush grass growing beside the river before winter set in, so he would not be completely reliant on Farmer Asa's oats to feed the horses.

The salesman assured him these were virtually indestructible (a common sales pitch in the bazaar, Tom discovered). But if they did break or needed some work, the dealership in League City could handle it. Both drones had new, three-year power packs.

Tom kept walking by the parked truck, with only Silas's furniture remaining on it, then past the space capsules where they had stored seeds for the garden, then the barn and corral.

Out in front of the home site, off to one side, stood the newly assembled CC 1000. It gleamed in the fading light, shiny despite the waning sun.

Flat ten-centimeter wide metal slats stood at an angle to one another, a five-centimeter gap between them. At night, Tom knew, the slats would pivot, forming a solid wall behind which the chickens should be safe.

Or at least safer, he thought.

While the contraption looked plenty strong enough to handle a large marked owl, he had his doubts it could survive an assault by Big Ugly fully intact. He had paid extra for the force dome protection, with the sand lizard in mind.

Then he turned his attention to the drama about to unfold outside the CC 1000.

Silas stood several meters away while Timmy towered over the wooden box holding the rooster.

Silas smiled at Tom as he approached.

“You’re just in time. We’re about to let Robert loose. Uh, maybe we should step back a little further.”

They retreated to the front steps of the house and watched, ready to run inside if Robert headed their way.

The bird glared up from the box at the faceless battle bot before him, sizing up his next intended victim.

Timmy’s vertical rectangular sensor tilted down slightly, as if he too were regarding an opponent.

The bot squatted and reached out for the latches that would pull away the sides and collapse the container holding the bird.

Click.

In an explosion of feathers, the bird launched himself at Timmy, pecking and slashing with razor-sharp spurs.

But all fowl murder efforts were in vain against the metal bot. Timmy stood, slowly, while Robert shifted his attack to the bot’s legs, swirling around and striking out, slashing and pecking.

Very carefully, Timmy took a step backward. Then another. He turned and walked away from the very angry rooster.

Robert watched Timmy leave, slightly confused at the bot’s complete lack of reaction, breathing hard from all the exertion.

“I’ve never heard of a rooster panting before,” Tom remarked from the porch.

“I guess like any animal, they gots to breathe. Did you see that? I sure am glad we had a bot handy to let him out of that box. I’d hate to be the one havin’ to do that.”

Robert jerked his head toward the house at the sound of the men talking. Then he heard the cheeps of the chicks nearby. They wandered aimlessly around the entrance to the CC 1000. A couple of them explored inside the coop.

A chime sounded and a feeder sprayed out a cloud of dried corn kernels. The chicks fortunate enough to be inside happily started eating them. The others streamed in to partake in the meal.

Robert jerked his head again, making his glorious red comb waggle back and forth. He could smell water in there, too. The rooster chased after a couple of stragglers, herding them inside the big metal box.

When they all went through, the door slid down gently, securing the birds inside. Then the slats pivoted, blocking them off from the outside world as darkness crept across the dusty sky.

Tom turned to Silas and slapped him on the shoulder.

“Lisa says your house is finished, over by the sawmill. Why don’t you take the truck home? Timmy can go along with you and unload the furniture Gwen bought. No sense breaking your back.”

Silas nodded, watching Timmy approach. Then he gazed at the secured chicken coop, now looking like a solid metal box.

He turned back to face Tom with a serious expression.

“I can’t thank you enough for all this, Mr. Savage.”

“Tom.”

“I mean, I could afford the homesteader’s fee no problem. But gettin’ a house up this quick? Especially this nice . . . as nice as yours? And gettin’ a thousand trees tapped in just a few days? I never could have done that.”

“Well, good,” Tom said, grinning. “You won’t mind splitting the profits from syrup sales with me.”

“Not at all. Not at all. I got a house and you’re payin’ me in gold. I’ll still come out ahead, even if you take all the profits.”

“Ha! Well, we’ll have to see just how profitable our syrup is, anyway. I’m not sure it’s the most lucrative cash crop we could have chosen. But, it’s what was available.”

“You’d be surprised, Mr. Savage. Lots of people are gonna want our syrup when they find out about it.”

Silas walked down the steps and turned to head toward the truck.

He stopped and looked at Tom with an earnest expression on his face.

“This is like a dream come true, Mr. Savage. I forgot how much I like workin’ with trees.”

“Call me Tom.”

Silas looked at him, but did not nod or say anything. He made no acknowledgement of the directive.

He continued walking to the truck as the sky grew darker and nighttime covered the land, marking the end of another day.

3.9

“Welcome back to Phaethon orbit, Petra Roe flagged ship Pulsar. Are you in trouble? You were here a few days ago. What’s your status, Pulsar?”

“We’re fine, Control. We’re using a Machro-drive, and we just couldn’t wait to return to your lovely planet.”

This statement was met with a pause. Wink McKelway and Jinxie Malone locked eyes with one another as they stood on the bridge . . . and held their breaths.

The voice came back over the comlink with a little chuckle.

“Ah, that explains it then. It’s unusual for a merchant ship of your size to have one of those. Your financial backers must be . . . well, we’re not supposed to engage in personal conversation. You are welcome to remain in your docking position for as long as you like. There are no other ships in orbit at the moment. Come on down whenever you want. It is nighttime in Little York at the moment, but if you wait until about 10:00 am local time, we will have a nice crowd of buyers waiting to browse your goods at the spaceport. Landing fees remain the same, 250 credits.”

“Understood, Control. That sounds good. We will see you in the morning.”

After signing off, Wink and Jinxie relaxed a little.

“Think they’ll demand a manifest or something?” Jinxie said, pulling a strand of blue hair out of her face.

“Nah. They’re desperate for goods. They’ll ask about as many questions as they did last time. Which is to say, zero.”

She nodded and leaned back in her seat.

“So. Looks like we’ve got a few hours to kill.”

He nodded.

“Yup.”

“Antigravity room?”

“Antigravity room!”

They smiled and left the bridge holding hands.

-+-

The Courthouse opened at 8:00 in the morning, and people waiting outside streamed in the doors. Employees of the provisional government filed in along with city employees and citizens wishing to do business with one or both of the entities.

A tall skinny man of Asian descent waited inside near the wooden double doors, eyeing those walking through. His eyes lit up when he saw someone he recognized entering with everyone else. He pulled the other man out of the crowd and guided him to the back of the lobby, then into a conference room.

“Come in here, Mr. Berris. I’m afraid my office is a little cramped at the moment.”

“Your office is a broom closet, Mr. Xu. Let’s be honest.”

They both chuckled as Joachim Xu closed the door behind them. He waved at the table and Anton Berris took a black leather chair on one side. Xu sat opposite, neither one opting to sit at the head of the table.

“I’ll come right to the point, Mr. Xu. I wanted the mayor to know the same merchant ship that landed a few days ago is back already. Seeing as how nobody can get through to see Hizzoner, I figured you, as his plenipotentiary, would amount to the same thing. And maybe you could, you know, relay the message for us.”

“Thank you, yes,” Xu said, steepling his fingers under his chin. “This is the same ship that unloaded all those candy bars, correct? What’s left of them are selling for extortionate prices in the bazaar right now.”

“That’s the one,” Berris said. “The Pulsar.”

He dressed like a farmer, with a plaid shirt, blue jeans and brown boots. But Xu was not fooled. Anton Berris headed up the powerful XO Society, the community organization dominating the tenement dwellings on the north side.

Pro-socialist, and thus pro-League, the XO Society had their fingers in many pies, with income streams both legit and illicit.

Mostly illicit.

“Well, good. Maybe the price of candy bars will come down, hm? I think Hizzoner would agree that is a good thing.”

“You’re missing the point, Mr. Xu.”

Xu tilted his head at the other man with a quizzical expression.

“And what point is that, Mr. Berris?”

“That boy captaining that ship has a *Machro-drive* on it. It’s the only way he could go all the way home or wherever he went, and get back here in a matter of days. Heck, it could have been just a few hours of actual travel. He probably took a vacation on the other planet, and that’s the only reason it’s taken days to get back to Phaethon instead of minutes.”

Xu frowned in thought, trying to follow the other man’s line of reasoning.

“Perhaps he just came back prematurely? Maybe he had some trouble in space and returned to the nearest port?”

Berris shook his head.

“He has a full load of cargo. The merchants were alerted to a ship landing at ten this morning with items to sell. I’m telling you, Mr. Xu, that boy has a Machro-drive.”

Xu leaned back in the chair, the leather seat softly crinkling with the motion. His fingers remained steepled.

“And what do you intend for me, or rather Hizzoner, to do about it? So the young man has an advanced drive that allows him to speed up time aboard his ship. He probably has wealthy and influential backers on his home world, receiving shares of the profits from each run. That’s usually the way these things work, if I understand correctly. Most wealthy shipping companies use autonomous vessels with Machro-drives so that people onboard don’t lose too many years to hypertime. This young man’s ship must not be that advanced if he has to fly it himself from point to point. If he keeps that up, in a few months he’ll be as old as I am.”

Berris leaned back in his chair as well.

He smiled.

“Mr. Xu, think about what we could do with a Machro-drive equipped ship. We’re isolated, are we not? We’re the farthest colonized planet from Old Earth. It may be years before the probes find another goldilocks rock for humans to colonize. Think about how nice it would be if we could send a ship for supplies anywhere in the known galaxy, and have it return to us overnight instead of waiting a couple of months for it to show back up.”

“I see. Yes, I think Hizzoner would agree that having access to such a ship would be beneficial for the planet as a whole, not just League City. But . . . what do you want him to do about it? Such a ship must carry an exorbitant price. I don’t know what the going rate for a Machro-drive equipped ship is, but certainly it must be in the millions. League City does not have that kind of money in its coffers, I assure you.”

“We don’t want you to buy the Pulsar, Mr. Xu. We want you to impound it.”

“Hm. Yes, I see. Hmmm.”

Xu looked down at the table, then up at the ceiling.

“No, Mr. Berris. I don’t think Hizzoner would be interested in doing that. Snagging another planet’s ship could prove detrimental to future trade. It’s not diplomatic, you see.”

“But here’s the thing. It’s a Petra Roe flagged ship. Petra Roe is independent, and not aligned with one of the three major systems.”

“They are closely affiliated with the League. A protectorate, I believe.”

“Yes, but they’re still independent. And the League is the weakest of the three, even weaker than the Alliance, which holds the least territory. Everybody knows that.”

“I’m afraid Hizzoner would still not be interested in stirring up a diplomatic hornet’s nest, Mr. Berris.”

The other man’s eyes narrowed, and it was his turn to lean back in the chair.

“Okay, see, here’s the thing. Our organization delivered the votes for your man, last election.”

“Hizzoner appreciates—”

“We delivered the projects to you. Something like 90 percent of people on the north side voted for him.”

Xu nodded. This was true.

Berris leaned forward, making the chair creak. He put his elbows on the table and pointed a finger at Xu.

“You owe us. Hizzoner owes us.”

Xu nodded again, slowly. This too was true.

“Now . . . go out there and get us that ship. Figure something out, and grab it. Don’t worry, the XO Society will help Hizzoner find a use for our first municipal space ship. Oh, yes. We’ll put it to *good* use. And we *all* will stand to benefit from that.”

3.10

Tom stepped out on the front porch instead of the back one for a change, holding a fresh cup of steaming black coffee.

He sat down on a Holton outdoor chair, imported from Italia. He grunted, shifting in the sleek polyresin shape, trying to get comfortable.

“The Adirondack is better,” he grumbled.

But he kept his voice low. He decided to hold that opinion to himself for the sake of harmony.

He sat back and sipped as the sky grew brighter, keeping an eye on the CC 1000. When the ambient light reached a predetermined level, the metal slats pivoted, revealing the interior, and the chicken door slowly slid up.

Robert the Rooster squeezed through and surveyed his new domain, red comb jerking sharply above his head.

Satisfied, he took several more steps outside, ready to tear into anything non-poultry in the vicinity.

The yellow chicks followed him out, cheeping . . . and promptly scattered. They pecked in the short grass nearby, finding bugs.

Tom took another sip, watching.

A dark shape swooped from above as a marked owl reached out for one of the chicks, talons stretching down.

Suddenly, Robert had his first legitimate target. He burst into speed and jumped at the owl in an explosion of red and green feathers, pecking hard and slashing with his spurs.

The owl, taken by surprise, fought back. But Robert had murder in his heart, and hours of perceived mistreatment built up inside him. He took it all out on the poor owl, despite the creature being nearly twice his size.

The owl spread its enormous wings and flapped up and away, bloody and beaten.

Robert reared his head back and crowed, a loud victorious war cry echoing across the river and out toward the desert, a sonic herald announcing a new avian ruler of this domain.

Tom raised his eyebrows, nodding in approval. He took another sip of coffee.

“Maybe some of those chicks will actually live and grow large enough to give us some eggs.”

The front door opened and Gwen stepped out holding Mr. Biddles in one hand and a cup of coffee in another.

“What’s going on out here?”

She sat in the other Holton chair on the front porch and stretched her legs out, still dressed in the long t-shirt she had slept in. Biddles crawled up her chest to her shoulder.

“You missed it. Robert just fought off a marked owl.”

“Good. I hate those things.”

They watched as the truck came down off the ridge, following the North Road trail. It crossed their bridge and headed for the house.

Timmy left his spot out in the field and walked over to the stables as it approached, opening the gate to the corral. He disappeared inside for a bit,

then the horses trotted out and wandered off as a group into the fields of rivergrass.

Timmy came back out and grabbed a shovel and a wheelbarrow, then disappeared inside again as Silas parked the truck in front of the house and got out.

He approached the porch.

“Mornin’.”

“Mornin’, Silas.”

“I sure am glad to see your robot cleaning the stables. That’s one job I don’t care to have around here.”

“We’re developing quite a pile of fertilizer for the garden,” Tom said, agreeing with him. “Speaking of the garden, how about you tackle that job for us today?”

“Alrighty. Ms. Wilder, do you mind if I harness up Bessie to the plow? I think she’d be the best horse for it.”

“Be my guest. Do you know where you’re going to plant?”

“Mr. Savage showed me the spot he’s picked out, behind the space capsules. It’ll only be one hectare. But honestly, that should produce more than enough for us. We might even be able to sell our extra produce in Little York or even League City if we want to try and rent a table.”

“Thomas.”

The voice came over all three of their implants.

“Yes, Lisa?”

“I overheard a conspiracy this morning in the Courthouse conference room in which you left a sensor.”

“A conspiracy?”

“Yes. The city plans to confiscate a spaceship landing there later this morning on trumped up charges.”

“That’s a bad idea,” Tom said, trading a glance with Gwen. “If Phaethon gets a reputation for doing things like that, other merchant ships will start avoiding it. They could cut themselves off from galactic trade pulling a stunt like that.”

“The ship in question is the Pulsar. Apparently it has a Machro-drive installed. That is what the local gangsters are interested in acquiring.”

“Hm. Yeah, that makes sense. I suppose I could see how they’d risk a diplomatic incident for something really high-tech like that. It’s still a bad idea, though.”

“The ship is Petra Roe registered. They are convinced it will not result in a diplomatic incident of any merit. Or if it does, the result will be worth it.”

“I see. And because PR is aligned with the League, they’re thinking repercussions would be the least among the Big Three systems. I guess those idiots never want to get this planet on the zodiac route. Because this is how you end up never getting a League Zodiac-class ship to visit your planet.”

“I thought this planet leaned toward the League,” Gwen said. “I mean, after all, the first settlement is called League City.”

“Oh, that’s not necessarily for the League, Ms. Wilder.”

Tom and Gwen looked at Silas. He smiled back.

“The original settlers were of Texas ancestry. All the towns, at least the early ones, are named after suburbs, streets or landmarks in Houston.”

“Really? I never knew that.”

“Yup. Little York, Gessner, The Woodlands . . . all Houston-related. And so is League City. I guess they didn’t think through how that makes them look oriented to the League. Or maybe they did. I wasn’t there on the first colony ship, so I’m not sure how that all went down.”

Tom sighed and stared at his cup, now empty.

“I suppose I should go over there and warn the Captain. Maybe do something about it. Silas, you get busy on the garden today. Don’t forget to

set the force dome up after you plant everything. I'd hate for anything to come along and mess up your work."

"Yes, sir."

Tom smiled at Gwen.

"Feel like making another trip to League City? You'll have to leave the cat here."

"Only if we take the truck," Gwen said, gently stroking the kitten on her shoulder. "I don't feel like walking all the way from the warehouse to the spaceport."

Tom chuckled and said, "That's not a very far walk."

3.11

Jinxie expertly slowed the Pulsar as it raced over the fields outside League City. She followed the front holo, rapidly spinning down the kilometers to the spaceport. By the time she reached the north side of the city and the huge concrete pad waiting to receive the ship, she had slowed down to a crawl.

The Pulsar landed, heavy legs thumping down on the tarmac. Wink already stood in the back near the ramp door. He walked out as it too touched down on the off-white surface, pushing a floating platform stacked high with polyresin crates before him.

The first cargo trucks were allowed in the front gate now that the ship landed safely. A line drove slowly toward Wink, snaking in from the distant entrance. Other people walked behind the vehicles, all headed his way. He quickly arranged the crates and went back inside for more.

Minutes later he held his own bazaar, as merchants jostled for first rights to his goods, shouting out offers. He did have a First Galactic account. As a frontier planet, that bank dominated local commerce. Windows floated above the heads of big spenders, showing the amounts they were willing to transfer for the goods, or at least how much they had available.

Wink had lots of boxes full of candy bars and packaged snacks. Tens of thousands of credits changed hands in a matter of minutes as he sold crate

after crate of junk food, ensuring months of carb-laden diets for the young planet's population.

The last merchant walked away happy, having outbid the others for a final crate of potato chips. Trucks loaded with cargo trundled away, heading back for the gate.

Wink smiled, glancing up at his credit window before closing it. The entire trip, as expected, proved extraordinarily profitable, even if he did not pick up his merchandise from one of the bigger wholesalers in a major system. He and Jinxie made do with a supplier on Petra Roe.

The profits were not quite as high as what they could have made by obtaining the goods cheaper on Diego . . . but they weren't bad, he thought.

About that time, Wink noticed the first sign of trouble. Several men did not leave the area with the merchants. Instead, they lingered. Everyone continued staring at him. Nobody smiled. Nobody had the look of expectation retail sales usually brought to customers' faces.

He swallowed as the hairs on the back of his neck rose.

"Well guys, it's been fun. But, it's time for me to go."

He turned and headed for the ramp.

A dozen or so polyresin crates remained on the tarmac, and he knew those were not exactly cheap. His floating dolly would be left behind as well. But Wink was willing to leave everything on the tarmac if he could make it safely inside . . .

"*Mr. McKelway.*"

He stopped and turned at the sharp tone, ringing out with the proverbial voice of authority. A tall, skinny man of Asian descent addressed him, moving forward and separating from the crowd of unsmiling men.

Wink felt his dander going up.

"That's *Captain* McKelway, of the Petra Roe flagged ship Pulsar. Who are you?"

“I am Joachim Xu, plenipotentiary of League City. It turns out there is a warrant for your arrest from the Republic, Mr. McKelway. You have been involved in some sort of mischief on Sporades apparently.”

The crowd took a couple steps forward, following Xu’s lead. They squeezed in now, clustering around the open ramp.

Wink shook his head.

“We paid a fine to the Republic through the Petra Roe embassy. If there was a warrant out for my arrest, I would have heard about it. Besides, I would think the local sheriff would be involved in any sort of law enforcement action. Not the city’s plenipotentiary. Isn’t that like the mayor’s right hand man or something? Where is he? Or is it a she? Do they know about this, what you’re doing here?”

Every fiber in Wink’s being made him want to move, to step backward and draw closer to the open ramp. But he held his ground because he thought retreating right now would show weakness.

He tried to count and figured at least twenty men surrounded him. They were all big, fairly young, and . . . dirty. In all the hustle and bustle of selling his cargo off, he had not noticed them in the crowd. But they did not look like merchants at all, now that he had a good look at them.

He berated himself for not paying better attention.

“Why don’t you come down to the Courthouse with me and we’ll sort all this out. The men here will secure your ship while we put in a communiqué to your embassy.”

“Secure my ship? Oh. So that’s what this is about. You want the Machro-drive, don’t you?”

“I’m not sure I know what you’re talking about, Mr. McKelway. Now, if you please, come with me. I don’t think anybody wants any trouble.”

Xu smiled, like a card player holding the winning hand.

An old flatbed truck pulled up, gliding to a halt. Nobody had noticed it entering through the spaceport’s gate and approaching during this exchange.

Tom Savage opened the door and hopped down, feet hitting the tarmac with a loud thump, drawing all eyes to him.

He smiled and waved, approaching the ramp and the cluster of people.

“Hi there! Sorry I’m late. I was hoping to be able to buy some candy bars or something.”

He stopped a few meters away from the crowd. He put his fists on his hips and smiled, ear to ear.

No one said a word for a moment.

Finally, Xu decided to take the initiative.

“I’m afraid Mr. McKelway is under arrest and his ship is being impounded by League City personnel. There is no more merchandise to sell. Turn around and vacate the premises, please.”

He held his arm out and made a little push away motion with his fingers.

“Well, that’s kinda arrogant. And, don’t you mean *Captain* McKelway? I don’t care what system you’re in, or even if you’re somewhere independent like this planet, we hold Captains with the highest respect and honor. You know, the word itself is almost always capitalized. And yet here you are, denying him the honorific? What’s the matter with you people?”

“Stop talking now. You may leave.”

“I mean, my dad was a Captain. And I grew up around crews and ships and stuff. Granted, he was mostly retired by the time I came along, but still . . .”

Xu tilted his head at two men standing close to him. They got the message and advanced toward Tom, taking quick and deliberate steps, quickly covering the distance.

“Oh, good. For the record I just want to say, gentlemen . . . *you* initiated hostilities. I feel very threatened, for my life, and this is purely in self-defense.”

Tom pulled out his gun and shot the closest man in the chest.

3.12

The man went down, a surprised look on his face. His partner pulled out a gun and fired back, showing quick reflexes. A bolt slammed into Tom's chest, burning a hole in his white cotton shirt and knocking him back.

Tom ducked and rolled.

He came up smiling, the sand dragon armor visible underneath his shirt. He fired off two more bolts, knocking the other man down.

Now, his field of view was clear. He saw the open ramp, Wink taking some involuntary steps backwards and nearly two dozen thugs staring at him.

He chose the tallest target, the rude fellow who spoke to him, and squeezed off another shot.

Pandemonium broke out.

Xu dropped, and the bolt sailed over his back, hitting the ramp.

The men around him scattered, half drawing their own weapons, the others hitting the concrete and covering their heads.

Wink spun around and raced for the ramp.

But not everybody faced Tom. One of the gunmen saw Wink breaking for it and fired off a shot.

The Captain grunted and lost his balance. He tripped and fell on the concrete, gripping his shoulder and grimacing.

He heard Jinxie screaming over his implant.

“Wink!”

“I’m fine! I’m fine. Ouch.”

His hand came away from his shoulder with blood, but all in all he thought it was not too bad for a blaster shot. He heard they could be much worse.

“Can you get in here? Run up the ramp and I’ll take off!”

“I’m kinda trapped right now, Jinx. That crazy kid . . . whoever he is . . .”

Tom ducked behind a stack of crates Wink left behind. A score of guns fired on the containers, obliterating them all in miniature explosions. Shards of polyresin flew up. In seconds the flimsy barrier reduced to its particulates.

The shooting stopped.

Everyone expected to find the young man cowering behind what was left of the crates, or maybe lying face down on the concrete . . .

But as the dust settled, Tom was nowhere to be seen.

“Where’d he go?”

Five thugs moved cautiously forward, away from the spacecraft, guns held out and ready to blast anything moving.

In the distance they heard a faint, *Wheeeeeeeeeee!*

Xu shouted, “Sniper! On the wall!”

He could see a head sticking up, and the snout of a very big gun . . .

PHLABAM!

The massive bolt sailed in from 300 meters away, exploding in their midst.

The men sailed up in the air like bowling pins.

“Get down!”

Those still alive fell flat to the ground, everyone trying to find the sniper.

Wink took this opportunity to stand up and scramble toward the ramp.

“Wink! Get down!”

He ignored Jinxie, jogging toward the ship, holding his shoulder.

Tom Savage popped into existence between the ramp and the downed men, flicking his gun to full auto.

Wink yelled in alarm and hit the deck. Tom opened up, bolts flying over the Captain, slamming into men and concrete.

He took out three.

Four more decided to run for it . . .

PHLABAM!

Four more bodies flew up in the air.

A dozen men were left, including Xu. Several shot back at Tom, winging him a couple times. He made no effort to duck or take cover, he just kept returning fire on full auto.

Everyone else scattered. Gwen picked them off, slower now, in ones and twos as they ran across the wide-open concrete.

Xu threw his gun down and slowly climbed to his feet.

Looking around, most of the thugs from the projects were dead. A distant scream out on the tarmac and the loud explosion of a Whillicker Wildcat’s mighty blast foretold the likely fate of all those who ran.

He held up his hands and looked the young man in the eye, ignoring the gun aimed at him.

“I’m Joachim Xu, the mayor’s right hand man. Killing me would be a mistake.”

Tom smiled and holstered his gun.

“I’m not a murderer.”

Xu glanced down at the nearest body and raised his eyebrows.

“Are you sure?”

“They shot first. Are you saying these men would not have killed me, given the chance? Because it sure looked like they were trying to kill me. I do believe I was even shot a couple times.”

He looked down and pulled out the tail of his shirt. Holes the size of baseballs were burned into it.

“Yup. Sure enough. I was shot multiple times. Now, *that* would have been murder. But this . . .”

He waved a hand at all the dead bodies around Xu.

“This was self defense. I believe the Captain here can back me up on that.”

He turned and looked at Wink, who struggled to his feet, still holding his shoulder.

“Oh, look. Your guys shot the Captain, too. That doesn’t look good. Just what kind of city are you running here, Mr. Xu?”

The tips of Xu’s ears turned pink.

Before he could answer, the wail of a distant siren sounded. All three men looked up and out over the wall.

A lone black and white squad car sailed through the air toward them, red and blue lights flashing.

Tom said, “Oh, hey! I didn’t know y’all had a cop car. That’s neat. *Oops!*”

Heavy guns slid out of the car’s front and opened fire on Tom and Wink. Big red bolts chewed up the concrete, making two beelines for them.

“Into the ship!” Wink yelled, running full tilt for the ramp.

“Wink! Get in here, now!”

Already Jinxie had the ramp going up, servos whining. Wink jumped awkwardly, half a meter up. He fell and caught himself on the edge with

bloody hands.

Tom had farther to run.

The car tilted in the air, angling down for him, the gunshots following. Flecks of concrete hit the back of his legs, bolts tracing a line for him as he ran.

“Lisa! I need you to—”

The ramp stood two meters high and the Pulsar’s standard engines rumbled as it slowly lifted off the tarmac.

Tom jumped and caught the ramp’s lip, dangling as the ship lurched up. The ramp tilted quicker, closing faster now.

He scrambled, pulling himself over the top with all his upper body strength.

Wink reached up with his good arm and grabbed his sleeve, pulling him over.

Together they tumbled into the cargo hold as the ramp slammed shut, the ship rose higher, and heavy bolts from the squad car pummeled the hull.

The Pulsar disappeared.

3.14

Tom lay on the floor of the hold, breathing hard.

Next to him, the Captain stirred, a small pool of blood forming.

Tom said, “Thanks for the boost.”

“No problem.”

“Looks like they gotcha.”

“Yeah. Just a little.”

“Let’s see. Yeah that’s from a small gun, thank God. Probably something like an LE-42.”

Wink gave him a blank look.

Tom said, “You, ah . . . you don’t know guns?”

“No, I’m not a fan, to be honest.”

“Oh. Well you see, the LE-42 has a very low-powered blast. It spits out a little bitty bolt. It’ll still put a hole in you, but it’s only the size of an old dime, maybe. Not very lethal unless it hits something important. If you have to get shot, that’s the one to pick. Nobody wants them, so they’re cheap. I’m not surprised that street scum we were facing carried those, because LE-42s suck.”

“Wink!”

They both turned as Jinxie ran into the hold. She practically jumped on Wink, hugging him tight.

He winced and she pulled back.

“You’re hurt!”

“It’s, uh . . . nothing. Apparently I got shot by an ‘LE-42,’ which is practically harmless, from what this man is telling me.”

“You got shot? Let me see. Oh, baby! We need to get you medical attention! I’ve got some nanobots in sickbay.”

“Hey, don’t waste them. I’ll be willing to bet these are better.”

Tom reached into a pocket and pulled out a pneumatic syringe, handing it over to Jinxie. She took the top off and rolled up Wink’s sleeve before administering it.

“Oh yeah,” Wink said. “That’s starting to feel better already.”

“They’re milspec. Top of the line. You’re not gonna find anything better. Where are we, by the way? I don’t want to leave the planet.”

“We’re in orbit,” Jinxie said. “In hypertime. I wanted to get away from that cop car. I wasn’t sure what those heavy guns would do to the ship.”

“We’re in hypertime?”

“Yes. Is that a problem?”

Jinxie grew alarmed at the look of horror on Tom’s face.

“Get us out! Now! My girlfriend is still down there with that cop car!”

-+-

Bolts sailed up into the sky unobstructed, the spaceship no longer there.

The squad car turned and angled back down, skimming over the hectares of concrete.

The driver looked down at the debris field near where the ship had parked. Broken crates and scattered polyresin littered the area, along with dead bodies.

He flew over it, lights flashing while Xu watched from below.

In the distance, bodies lay scattered on the tarmac. Nearby, several lay close to one another. Farther away, more individuals were dead, gunned down at different locations.

The driver looked off in the distance, trying to figure out where the shooter might be . . .

From her spot up on the wall, Gwen's eyes grew big.

"Aw, come on!"

The car veered toward her and picked up speed, the double heavy guns sticking out front like the fangs of some metallic dragon.

She raised Big Bertha and sighted in the car, then squeezed the trigger.

Wheeeeeeeeeee!

PHLABAM!

The car jerked as a huge explosion of energy enveloped it. Cracks appeared in the windshield.

PHLABAM!

The front passenger-side gun malfunctioned. An alarm sounded inside the cabin.

PHLABAM!

The hood blew off and the drive froze up. The car's nose pointed down. More alarms sounded as emergency power kicked in. But not enough to maintain altitude.

The driver pulled up hard on the wheel, but the car headed down . . . down . . .

He crunched hard on the concrete, the reinforced body surviving the fall. It bounced once . . . twice . . . then skid to a rough halt out on the tarmac, smoke drifting up from the front.

On the wall, Gwen smiled.

“And that’s why they banned the Firedog 3W from civilian use, officer. Cop cars aren’t battle tanks.”

She touched the implant under her ear.

“Tom?”

“Thomas is not here, Gwendolyn.”

“What do you mean, ‘not here?’ Where is he?”

“He is aboard the Pulsar, but that ship is gone. I do not have a reading from his implant nor the sensor on his body.”

“Wait. Are they in orbit? Did they leave the system?”

“I did not see them enter orbit. Logic dictates the ship is currently in hypertime. The easiest way to avoid gunfire from the sheriff’s vehicle would be to slip into hypertime. It would also explain why I no longer sense him.”

“Well, that’s just great. When will he be back?”

“I do not know, Gwendolyn. But I will connect you with him when his implant and sensor come back online.”

“Okay.”

She sighed and watched with her enhanced vision as a man in uniform struggled out of the wrecked squad car. Xu jogged toward him from the distant landing site, evidently going to help the poor guy.

“Get me out of here, Lisa. Take me back home, I guess. Oh, and bring back our truck, too, when no one’s looking.”

Gwen popped away before anyone glanced at the wall, or thought to try and find her.

A few minutes later, the old truck popped away, too.

3.14

Gwen paced around the living room, holding the kitten and staring down at a new throw rug she had bought.

The kitten didn't seem to mind. Biddles snuggled in the crook of her arm and went along for the ride.

Silas broke into her thoughts over the implant.

"Ms. Wilder? The rows are plowed for the garden. I got seeds planted and signs up saying what row has what. I'm fixin' to turn on the force field to keep critters out, and I'm unhitching Bessie from the plow. I just wanted you to know."

"Thanks, Silas."

Gwen sighed, realizing she said that with a snap in her voice.

She stopped pacing.

Calmly and carefully she said, "Thank you. I appreciate everything you've done for us, Silas."

"Aw, it's my pleasure, Ms. Wilder. I just wish I could have been there when y'all faced down them city thugs. I coulda helped shoot some of 'em for you, maybe."

“Yes, I’m sure you could have. I still think Tom would have wound up in that spaceship, anyway.”

She had been replaying the events of the morning over in her mind all day, and there seemed little, within reason, she could have done differently. Any way she played it, Tom ended up needing to jump in the ship.

And the ship was gone, taking him with it.

“Don’t beat yourself up, Ms. Wilder. From what I know about Mr. Savage, he’s resilient if nothin’ else.”

“Yes. That’s true.”

“And if he’s just in hyperspace, it will seem to him like he’s just gone a couple minutes . . .”

“Gwen?”

Tom’s voice interrupted the conversation.

Mr. Biddles mewed as his new mama squeezed him a little too tight.

-+-

Tom resisted the urge to teleport back to the farm, and Gwen, right away. He gave the coordinates to Jinxie instead, and settled back for the flight after checking in with Gwen and Silas.

For one thing, he desired to continue keeping their teleportation capabilities under wraps for as long as possible. For another . . . a glint of gunmetal gray in the very back of the hold caught his eye.

“Wink, is that what I think it is?”

“That? Oh, yeah. Yet another trip I did not get to unload this thing.”

The Captain made a wave in the air and diodes lit up the hold. There, parked in the very back, a battle tank sat, its back to the two men.

“That looks like the twin of the one I destroyed recently.”

“What? What happened?”

“Somebody sold one of these to a very bad person, who then went out and used it to kill some friends of mine. Then they attacked my homestead with it. They shot my farmhand, almost killed my girlfriend, and burned my house down with it.”

A look of horror flooded Wink’s features.

“Oh, man. I am so sorry about that. I didn’t know when I sold it to that guy just how rotten he’d turn out to be. I mean, I kinda got a clue immediately afterwards, when he blew up a house with it on the test drive. Then he turned around and attacked the Pulsar, demanding this one, too. But Jinx and I skedaddled before he could damage the ship.”

The guy looked so mortified that part of Tom’s anger dissipated.

“We’re just trying to make it, you know? These were expensive, for us. They were the most expensive cargo I’ve ever invested in, and it wiped out our savings to get it. But with that one sale I made it all back. And I can double our money if I sell this other one.”

“Dude . . . they’re *battle tanks*. Of all the destructive weapons you could resell, this one tops the list. The only thing worse would be a . . .”

“I know, I know. A solar torpedo or something. Look, man. I am so sorry. I don’t know how to make it up to you. That guy burned down your house? That is so wrong. Was anybody killed?”

All of Tom’s anger dissipated.

He was not in the business of making solar torpedoes. But talking about them made him realize that his own work could be put to good or evil use, too. Just like the battle tanks.

“Did anybody die? Did your girlfriend make it okay?”

Tom shook slightly, as if shaking off water.

“It’s alright. Yes, we managed. Weapons aren’t evil, people are. I just wish you had found someone else to sell this particular weapon to. But you didn’t know. I don’t hold anything against you.”

Wink looked relieved. His shoulders slumped and he rubbed his forehead, staring down at the deck.

Tom said, “So anyway . . . you’re looking for a buyer for this one, I take it. Does it work as good as the other one did?”

“Yeah, far as I know. Why? Do you know someone who might be interested?”

Tom smiled and opened a bank window in the air between them.

“How much did you say you wanted for it? A hundred thousand credits?”

3.15

In the seconds before shifting into hypertime, Pulsar's onboard computer sent home an SOS with a long stream of data over the quantum matrix.

Hijackings, or other attempts by outside forces to take control of the vessel, resulted in certain security measures. Prearranged distress signals were relayed to Petra Roe's Department of Commerce, the bureaucracy in charge of overseeing domestic shipping for the planet, along with the last few seconds of holo recordings inside and outside the ship.

Isabella Espinoza, Petra Roe's Minister of Trade and one of the highest ranking persons in that planet's government, woke up to her implant's insistent buzzing.

She glanced at her internal clock showing 04:03 in her mind's eye, and sat up groggily in bed.

Her husband, a heavy sleeper, snored softly beside her, undisturbed by her movements.

She climbed out from under the covers and headed for the bathroom, swatting the implant under her ear.

"What is it? This better be good."

“Minister Espinoza, there has been an incident with one of Petra Roe’s flagged vessels.”

Her secretary, a virtual woman named Debbie, sounded wide-awake, of course. Controlled by StarCen, she never slept. Debbie ran on a subroutine, keeping track of the minister’s schedule and handling all the many requests on her time.

Isabella closed the door to the bathroom, mindful of her husband, and looked in the mirror. She had just turned 50 the week before. An older lady stared back at her, far from the youthful girl she remembered.

She frowned at the wrinkles on her face, causing yet more wrinkles to appear. With an effort, she stopped frowning, forcing a neutral expression.

“Which one?”

“Pulsar.”

Isabella sighed, still staring at her partially awake face and the wrinkles she would be liberally applying makeup to in a few hours before going out in public.

“Why can’t they stay out of trouble? What did they do this time?”

“It was not their fault this time, ma’am. I have reviewed the video and the messages from the ship’s computer. Pulsar landed on Phaethon at the spaceport and made a good delivery. After successfully offloading and selling their cargo, the locals tried to take the ship by force. A gunfight ensued, and in the effort to evacuate they were fired upon with heavy guns from a law enforcement vehicle. The ship’s pilot jumped into hypertime to escape. All aboard, including one passenger, are safe.”

A brief snippet of the squad car shooting at Pulsar flashed in Isabella’s inner eye.

She grunted.

“What was the pretext for trying to grab the ship?”

“The recent incident at Sporades.”

“That was taken care of. The Republicans are fully satisfied with the reparations Captain McKelway paid them. Our State Department made sure of it. There is no justifiable reason to impound the ship. Phaethon hasn’t even declared allegiance to the Republic. Or anyone, for that matter.”

“Indeed. I have determined the attempt at detaining Pulsar and the crew was unwarranted. The use of force by elements on the ground assisting Captain McKelway in his escape were fully justified.”

“Elements assisting? Wait, who assisted him? You mean the passenger?”

A picture of Tom appeared in her mind.

“Thomas Raleigh of Lute. Son of Christopher Raleigh and scion of the Ultima Mule Company.”

“Son of a bitch! Have you notified LuteNet about this?”

“Yes, Minister.”

“Of course you have. Phaethon will be lucky if the pirates don’t go in there and blow the whole planet up. He’s practically royalty over there! No one should ever mess with the Raleighs’ kid. Or anybody else associated with that company.”

“LuteNet suggested we call for a trade embargo against Phaethon until the situation is resolved. I have consulted with StarCen, and she agrees this is a prudent course of action. She will suspend all vessels from visiting, other than humanitarian efforts if needed. Also, her zodiac ships will avoid the sector for now.”

“Okay. Okay, that’s good. We can’t let this go unanswered, but we are certainly not big enough to do much on our own. I like the idea of forming a coalition. What does the Republic think?”

“I am in communication with PLAIR as we speak. She has informed me this has to be decided by their State Department, rather than at the AI level.”

“Of course. Stupid democracies always have to have everybody’s input.”

“That is correct, Minister.”

“They’re completely inefficient.”

“That is correct, Minister.”

“Okay.”

Isabella sighed again. The face staring back at her in the mirror looked miserable. She could not bring herself to try and smile or otherwise lighten up the look.

“The day is starting early. And bad. Let me know whenever the Republicans come to a decision. Please try and stress to them, or at least to PLAIR, that if those idiots on Phaethon tried to pull these shenanigans on one of our ships, they’re likely to try it on one of theirs, too.”

“That is the gist of our conversation, Minister.”

“Good.”

Isabella turned and headed for the shower.

“I may as well get going and start the day. I can’t go back to sleep after this.”

She stopped.

“Oh, and Debbie?”

“Yes, Minister?”

“Tell that boy to come home. I want an APB out for him and the Pulsar in case he doesn’t listen. I know the League, at least, will back me up on this. If that ship shows up in their space, tell them to bring it home. He’s caused us enough trouble. It’s time for him to cool his heels for a while. Maybe the Republicans will help us out, too. Mention it to Otieno, or whoever they have in charge for such things over there.”

“Yes, Minister.”

3.16

Pieter Otieno looked up from his desk . . . and his entire office transformed before his eyes.

Not really. But the surrounding certainly changed in his field of vision.

These new holo calls were ultra-realistic, he thought.

Prior to this, holograms would appear in a room, possibly with heads sticking up through tables, or partially embedded in walls. The new software created an identical room for everyone, overlaying reality.

Previously, of course, one could enter an online world and see all sorts of things. But to take a simple phone call, one made do with the other person's holo appearing in the room, in real time and in reality. Now, the VR came to his senses without "going under," or into a virtual reality world.

He no longer saw anything in his office beyond his own desk that was "real." Instead, he was in a mockup of "The Chamber," that private place for the secretive Foreign Relations Committee to gather and discuss things of importance.

In many ways, the Foreign Relations Committee ran the Republic. Or at least, a large and important part of it. Unelected, and replacements to its roster selected solely by existing members, who then decided who the

Chancellor should appoint as the Planetary Republic's Minister of State, the FRC held enormous power.

Or at least, they used to. After the Great League Reset, that time in which StarCen had been rebooted after the war, the League no longer posed the same threat it once did.

Yes, foreign relations were still important. The League, smaller since shedding so many planets to the Republic, remained strong in many ways. It still maintained a mighty fleet, and a shipping industry that supplied all the systems with steady cargo flows via giant Zodiac-class vessels.

But the League no longer required delicate diplomacy.

The Lutian Alliance now appeared ascendant, if not militant. More concern and attention had shifted their way in the two decades since the end of the war and the GLR, as the Great League Reset was commonly called.

As a relatively new Minister of State for the Planetary Republic, Otieno relied on the secretive committee for guidance and advice. He had no idea who all served on the committee, although he had some guesses. In every call, their features in the virtual environment remained blurred and their voices slightly altered.

Otieno had his suspicions about the identity of at least two members on the FRC. They were all older, past retirement age. The obfuscation software could not entirely hide that fact. But these two stuck out to him. They seemed even older than the others, by ten or so years if he guessed correctly.

And if they were older, they had no doubt served during the war. And the two biggest names in the State Department to have served in the war were Rolando Toppfer and Emily Ellison.

Ambassador Rolando Toppfer had faced down both Tetrarchs Thrall in his long and glorious service on Clarion, the League's capital after the fall of Epsilon. He remained a living legend in the diplomatic corps.

Ambassador Emily Ellison had served on Euripides when Julius Thrall sent the advanced android he stole from Verberger, the one he adopted as his "daughter," to take over the quadrant.

That story, and how agents on Euripides reinstated the previous tetrarch by cloning her, remained highly classified. When he first took this position, he found himself reading all the secret maneuvering that took place during and after the war. It was fascinating stuff, especially to one in his field.

Unfortunately, Republican Naval Intelligence did most of the dirty work, and some of their papers remained off limits even to the State Department thanks to bureaucratic silos. But Otieno had read enough to be impressed with all that happened. And Ellison worked through the thick of some of the most intriguing parts.

So Otieno suspected the older man and woman on the committee were in fact these two legendary figures. Cloaked in anonymity, they along with other members of the FRC, could opine on diplomatic matters and remain safe from political repercussions.

He envied them, able to speak their mind so freely. Even in this period in which the FRC and the State Department in general wielded far less power than before . . . they still mattered. Their opinions still carried weight with the Chancellor, and Parliament.

And of course the Minister of State, who they helped select.

Otieno breathed in deep, as he often did before beginning one of these meetings.

Black, of Kenyan descent, he stood at medium height with a sharply angled face and closely cropped hair. He knew that his virtual representation to the committee, unlike theirs, would remain unobscured.

Trying to relax, he spoke slowly and clearly.

“There’s been an incident on Phaethon that the Trade Commission has asked us to look into. It seems a Petra Roe flagged ship was detained, or at least an attempt was made to detain it, on rather specious grounds. In response, Petra Roe has declared a trade embargo with Phaethon. They have garnered support from the League, which is understandable since they’re League-aligned and they use StarCen as their AI. Interestingly, the Planetary Alliance has also expressed support for an embargo, with humanitarian exceptions. All three governments have reached out to us

requesting we join them in this maneuver. The ball is now in our court to decide if we wish to do so. The Chancellor is aware and waiting our recommendation.”

The members of the committee pondered this matter and discussed it at some length. Possibilities were explored that decades hence, Phaethon may turn into a major power and recall past slights.

Another point considered involved the eventual adoption of the planet into one of the major systems of government. Possibly, if the Republic maintained trade with the planet now, a grateful Phaethon populace would overwhelmingly vote to join the Republic at some future date.

Others felt the future was not so easy to predict, that many other things might occur over time. The prudent position now would be to remain uncompromising in supporting the other two systems. The League and the Alliance governments both felt this was the right thing to do, why not join them?

Finally, the older male member Otieno thought might be the great Rolando Toppfer spoke up for the first time, his voice slightly altered to disguise it.

“Look, one does not just grab a foreign ship. That’s grounds for war, or at least serious repercussions. And it tells us that planet is practically lawless right now. Let them figure it out and fight about it. Then they can come back to the civilized galaxy, hat in hand, and apologize. Then trade can resume. I say we join the Alliance and the League in suspending trade with Phaethon until this is resolved to the satisfaction of all.”

His comments were met with approval by the others. Something had to be done. A ship could not be waylaid like that without consequences. Consensus formed around the notion.

Otieno nodded at the obfuscated holos once conversation died down.

“Thank you, gentlemen. Ladies. I’ll relay our decision to the Chancellor immediately.”

As one, they dissolved, and his office reappeared.

Otieno touched his implant.

“PLAIR? Get me the Chancellor.”

3.17

The horses spotted Pulsar's arrival well before it neared the home site. Startled, they looked up as one, ears pointing to the east as a distant dot in the dusty sky grew larger.

Bessie, recently released from plow duties, bolted first. The others followed her, galloping along the river in the opposite direction of the incoming spacecraft.

The equine stampede roared past Timmy, standing out in front of the house. His tall rectangular head tilted slightly, following the horses as they rushed past. Reacquiring them if they strayed too far from the stables would fall on him. He tracked their progress as they fled the vicinity.

When the spacecraft's approach could be heard inside the house, Gwen carefully set Mr. Biddles down on the floor and rushed out the back door.

Silas left the barn, having cleaned off the plow and tidied up. He walked out back with Gwen and stood beside her as the Landing-class ship slowed to a crawl above the open field behind the house, standard drives roaring.

At 100 meters long, Pulsar was not a particularly large ship. Nonetheless, the sleek dark spacecraft dwarfed every other structure on the ground as it paused in the air then settled down to the surface.

Four huge landing legs sank into the soft soil and the standard engines wound down. Then the rear cargo ramp tilted open.

A man walked down the ramp, but it was not Tom. He saw Silas and Gwen, and waved before walking toward them.

When he drew closer he smiled and said, "I'm Wink McKelway. This is the Pulsar. We've got your guy, he'll be out in a minute."

Gwen gave him a skeptical stare, rather peeved that Tom had not yet materialized.

But then something bulbous backed down the ramp, catching her attention.

The tank pivoted, floating a meter above the ground, the front cannon pointing right at them. Both Gwen and Silas took an involuntary step backward.

As if sensing their discomfort, servos whined and the turret pivoted, aiming the gun at a right angle to them. Then the big weapon of war slowly floated forward.

A few meters away it stopped and gently sank to the ground. The circular door in front of the turret spun open and Tom popped his head out.

"Hi guys! Look what I bought."

Tom pulled himself up and out of the tank, then slid to the ground. He turned around and dusted himself off before walking toward the group.

Gwen went to him quickly, meeting him halfway. She threw herself into his arms, kissing him hard on the lips.

When she finally came up for air, she said, "Don't do that again."

He smiled, still holding her tight.

"I fussed at the pilot. But she did get us out of there safely, I gotta admit. Give credit where it's due. You took care of everything else?"

She nodded, her eyes never leaving his, as if blinking would let him disappear again somehow.

Tom turned his attention to Silas and Wink, standing together.

“How many more of them things are floatin’ around?” Silas said, staring at the battle tank.

“This is the last one,” Wink said. “Tom’s right, he bought this one from me. I, uh . . . I’m sitting pretty at the moment. We’ve got enough to settle all our outstanding debts. Thank you very much for that. No refunds, by the way. The tank is yours.”

Tom chuckled.

He said, “I think we’ll find a use for it, Captain. Better we have it than anybody else on this rock. The last guy went a little nuts with his.”

“Yeah.”

Wink turned to Silas and said, “Sorry about that. I heard you guys had some issues with my buyer.”

“Where did you get that thing?” Silas said, still staring at the tank.

“Well, I’d rather not say,” Wink said. “Trade secrets and all.”

“I bet there’s a lot of old surplus weapons still lying around,” Tom said. “The war hasn’t been over that long.”

“Where are you going to put it?” Gwen said, staring at it with hands on her hips. “That’s going to take up most of the room in the barn.”

Tom said, “I’ve been thinking about that, and I’ve got an idea. But I’m running out of sensors. I need to phone home and find out when our next shipment is coming in.”

Wink touched his implant and stepped away from the others, listening to an internal voice.

He turned back to them and said, “You were expecting shipments? Not so fast. Jinx tells me all three systems have declared a trade embargo with Phaethon based on our little escapade earlier.”

“Good,” Tom said, smiling.

“Why is that a good thing?” Gwen said, frowning. “Embargoes are bad. We won’t be able to import anything.”

“It’s good because any ship breaking the embargo can turn a tidy profit.”

Now Wink smiled, despite his close call earlier.

“The thought of a monopoly on running supplies here does sound good, I’ve got to say.”

Tom said, “I really need to call home. Wink, you and Jinx are welcome to visit a while. In fact, why don’t you stay for supper? We’ve got a lot to discuss.”

3.18

“I think Phaethon offers strong profit potential on food imports alone. But beyond that, there’s about to be a major shortage on power packs. At least, power packs that still work.”

“Yeah, about that. Your planet has just been placed under an embargo by all three systems.”

“So I heard.”

Tom spoke with his father in the living room. Or rather, he spoke with the holo of Christopher Raleigh over the quantum matrix. In the previous delivery, a commsat with a quantum matrix antenna was left in orbit, making calls home much easier.

His mother was out on some errand or other, so this made for a rare one-on-one session between father and son.

“Yeah, trying to impound the Pulsar on shaky legal grounds . . . that set off all sorts of alarm bells in the League. They consider Petra Roe one of theirs. Our government and the Republicans decided to help them send a message. So, no more ships are going over there, unless there’s some kind of humanitarian crisis. But honestly, no one expects you all to run out of food. The Pearl team provided ample seeds and terran-variant livestock. I checked the last agricultural report for Phaethon, and it doesn’t look like

there's anything to worry about. Heck, everybody could survive on fish and wildlife alone if you had to. There's not that many people there, yet."

"So . . . we're still on for the new SCUs, right?"

"Well, not officially, no. LuteNet is not going to send any of our ships over there. Every ship in the Ultima Mule Company is tied to her. Every freighter in orbit . . . every passenger ship for that matter . . . they're all tied to one of the Big Three AIs. And like I said, all three governments decided to form a united front to send your planet a message."

"I see."

Tom stared at the floor rubbing his chin.

Raleigh said, "I know it was justified, and I'm not complaining about that . . . but this is why we try not to destroy very expensive equipment, son."

"I know, I know."

"Because you never know when a multi-system embargo or something may go into place, limiting your replacement options . . ."

Raleigh paused when he noticed the miserable look on Tom's face.

"Okay. Your mother's not here to stop me, but I know when I've said enough. Anyway, you're stuck on your own over there until this whole thing blows over. I don't think Phaethon has a diplomatic corps or anything, so it might be a while before we can send a freighter your way. Whenever we do get to that point, we'll use one with a Machro-drive, of course. It'll get to you a few hours later."

Tom raised his eyebrows.

"What we need is a smuggler's ship, one not tied to an AI. One that could jump over and fetch stuff for us, and have it back here tomorrow."

His father smiled.

"Those don't exactly grow on trees, son. You have one in mind?"

"Yup. The same one in the middle of this international, intergalactic incident. Now . . . this is what I think we need. I'm going to want the next

SCU to be able to generate power, somehow. Or we need to figure out a way to get the plasma particle into something that will generate power for us. I'm thinking this planet is facing major energy shortages soon for the devices they're used to and that everyone takes for granted."

"Okay. We'll get our engineers on it and see what they come up with. Anything else?"

"I'm also really short on sensors. I need as many as you can get."

"Teleporting around the planet, are we?"

"Absolutely."

"What are you going to do when the locals figure out you have teleportation available to you?"

"Well, first of all I'm trying to keep it a secret for as long as possible. But yeah, it will likely come out at some point. More and more people know about it. Somebody will see me pop up someplace, or use deductive reasoning and figure it out. But when it does happen and everybody finds out, or whenever I reveal it, I hope to turn a profit with it."

Raleigh raised an eyebrow.

"That's going to devastate existing transportation networks. Tick off the wrong people, and you'll put a target on your back."

"I know, I know. I can't go that route anyway without power. Lisa's power pack is finite. Get me a way to produce energy from our solar chunks, and we can do all sorts of wonderful, profitable things over here."

Raleigh nodded at his son.

"Okay. First get us that ship, son. Then we will see what we can do."

3.19

Jinxie held Mr. Biddles tight, with both hands. Only a black furry head stuck out from the protective finger cage. She stood outside the front door of the house, the CC 1000 several steps away.

Biddles, Jinxie, Wink and Gwen watched the chicks, and a drama unfolding that involved poultry dynamics.

Gwen had advised Wink and Jinxie to keep plenty of distance between themselves and Robert before everyone went outside.

Biddles found a new friend, someone who adored him and cuddled with him. He decided that Jinxie was alright.

Gwen allowed Jinxie to take him outside because she had attached one of Tom's coin-sized sensors to the kitten's collar. Lisa was under strict orders to port the kitten back inside if he ran away. Lisa assured Gwen repeatedly that the AI would prevent any outside harm to befall Mr. Biddles.

So Gwen took it upon herself to show the couple around the farm. They started from the back porch where she waved at the space capsules and made some vague remarks about prefab storage buildings. She showed them the stables and waved at the horses grazing a couple hundred meters away.

Then they came to the CC 1000.

Robert the Rooster glared at them, slowly strutting near the chicks. He jerked his head in their direction several times, making his loose red comb shake.

“If looks could kill, we’d all be bleeding out right about now,” Jinxie said, laughing.

Gwen smiled.

Jinxie liked Mr. Biddles, and he liked her. So Gwen decided she liked Jinxie, too.

“Uh oh. I think your chickens are about to have company,” Wink said, pointing at a dark sinuous shape slithering in the grass.

A mottled brown snake, two and a half meters long, slowly advanced on the cluster of baby birds, drawing steadily closer.

“Well that’s not good,” Gwen said, reaching for the pistol at her side. “I wonder if I can hit that thing from this distance?”

About that time Robert jerked his head in the snake’s direction and noticed the intruder for the first time.

He crowed and charged, running full tilt.

The snake stopped and reared up, ready to strike.

The rooster struck first. Robert dove forward with talons outstretched.

The snake hissed and struck, head moving fast.

A flap of his wings pulled Robert up. The strike missed, fangs snapping air.

Robert thrust down, sinking one long talon into the base of the snake’s head.

Instantly, the snake grew limp, all bodily functions disabled.

Robert’s weight came down on top of his victim. He tilted back his head and let out a loud victorious crow that rolled out to the river and beyond.

Then he looked down at his prize and tore at the flesh, ripping strips of meat off with his beak.

“Ew. Oh that . . . that’s gross. Don’t look, Mr. Biddles.”

Jinxie turned her back to the carnage, making the kitten face the other way, too.

Wink said, “Wow. I had no idea roosters ate snakes. Are they . . . they’re not carnivorous, are they? That’s disgusting.”

“That is *not* my rooster. That *beast* belongs to Tom. Come on, let’s go see what Silas is doing with the garden.”

For his part, Silas looked delighted to have someone come look at his work. He glanced up at the three young people walking his way and stopped hoeing, leaning on the tool as they approached.

“This looks nice, Silas! All the rows are very straight. Bessie did this?”

“She sure did, Ms. Wilder. Didn’t give me no trouble. I hooked her up to the plow, and off we went. I’m finished planting, too. Ain’t nothin’ come up yet, of course, but here before too long we should see some sprouts comin’ up.”

“What exactly are you planting here?” Wink said, impressed with the neat and orderly rows.

“Well, I have signs for the different sections, see? Sometimes I go a full row or three. Other times, I just plant something on half a row. It’s all kinda experimental this go-round. After our first crops come in, I’ll know more. But this here is what I got.”

He waved a hand at the first section.

“From what the nice man at Phoenician Gardens in League City explained to us, the lack of direct sunlight would ordinarily limit us somewhat, to things like broccoli, cauliflower and kale. And I do have half a row each for those.”

Gwen made a gagging motion with her hand. She obviously did not care for any of those vegetables.

“But the folks from Pearl in this planet’s initial agricultural surveys were able to engineer other varieties that grow well. Sometimes, he said, they found a local variant. Other times they were able to use Old Earth strains that were modified for less light than usual. Anyhow, over here we’ve got carrots, beans (don’t ask me what kinda beans, I dunno yet; we’ll find out when they come in), a little spinach . . . don’t make that sound, Ms. Wilder, it’s only half a row. I got two rows here of modified corn. We’ll see how that works out. Mr. Prideaux, he runs Phoenician Gardens, he says this strain has been specially bioengineered for our climate, but he isn’t sure how good it’ll taste. But I bet the chickens like it. And then over here, I’ve got our ‘cash crops.’ Two rows of tomatoes, and four rows of potatoes. Again, both have been optimized for our low direct sunlight.”

“Cash crops?” Wink said. “Why do you say that?”

“‘Cause everybody around here loves tomatoes and potatoes. I reckon we can easily trade what we don’t eat for stuff the other farms have. And I understand Oma Ferguson, she and her old man run the public house in Little York, I understand she can’t get enough of them. Has to fly them in on the sky trains so she can feed folks. Yes, sir. I’m hoping our potatoes and tomatoes do *very* well.”

Wink’s face dropped.

“Oh. I’m an exporter, you see.”

“Smuggler.”

“Hush, Jinx. I’m an *exporter*. And I was thinking, you know, if you had something unique, something indigenous to Phaethon, something that no one could find anywhere else . . . well then we might be able to do some business together.”

Silas’s eyes lit up.

“Why don’t we all get in the truck and go for a ride?”

3.20

“It’s so peaceful out here!” Jinxie said.

Biddles made himself at home on her shoulder. All four sat squeezed together in the single seat cab of the old truck as Silas slowed down and gently drove among the widely spaced trees.

“And I love your house, Mr. Vick. It looks just like Tom and Gwen’s.”

Silas nodded, bringing the truck to a stop.

“Mr. Savage had it built using the same plans. It sure is big for just me, but I’m not complainin’ one bit. To be honest with ya, I ain’t never had a place of my own before. Not one that I owned, anyway. Well, here we are. Let’s get out and take a look.”

Both doors of the truck opened and they all climbed out. Three of the nearby trees had spigots and buckets, covered by fine wire mesh.

Wink said, “Oh, wow. I’ve seen this setup before. Or at least I’ve heard of it. They’re like maple trees, right?”

Silas beamed, proudly.

“Yup. Only they’re a variant that doesn’t need the same weather fluctuations Old Earth types do. They grow in a warmer climate, and

obviously don't need as much direct sunlight. But, they do produce a type of sap."

"That was actually Silas's discovery," Gwen said. "He figured out that we may have a cash crop growing right under our noses."

The older man's ears grew pink at this public recognition. He quickly brushed away the praise.

"Well come on. Let's give it a taste and see what you think. The final product will be more like a syrup, but this at least gives you an idea of what a true native product to Phaethon is like. You'll see how the raw form tastes. When we sugar it, it'll be even better."

He walked to the nearest tree and removed the mesh cloth, then the bucket. A dollop of sap perched precariously from the end of the exposed spigot. Silas ignored it, and offered the bucket to Wink and Jinxie.

"Go on, stick your finger in there and scoop up some."

Wink, the more adventurous of the two, put his hand in the bucket first. He pulled out a thick, viscous glob of sap with the tip of his finger.

He stared at it, bringing it close to his nose for a sniff. It looked dark purple, sticky and sweet.

He traded a glance with Jinxie, who clearly wanted him to go first.

"Other people have eaten this, right?"

"Why sure. I grab some all the time," Silas said. "It hasn't killed me yet."

Wink smiled at Jinxie and shrugged. Then he popped the finger in his mouth.

He chewed thoughtfully, working the lump around in his mouth.

"How's it taste?"

"It's not bad, actually. It's kind of sweet. You know, Mr. Vick . . . I think you're right. This is going to be a unique product. One that might be rather profitable."

“Well, we hope so. You know, it’s gonna take about 40 liters of sap just to make one liter of syrup. It’ll be a lot of work, but hopefully we can earn some decent coin out of the whole deal.”

“When do you think you’ll be ready to start making the syrup?”

“I give it a few more days to fill the buckets, then we’ll gather what we got and start boilin’ it down.”

“We’ll be sure and check back in,” Wink said, trading a glance with Jinxie. She felt emboldened to stick her finger in the bucket now, and pulled out a dollop of sap for herself. Chewing it, she met Wink’s eye and nodded.

“I’m surprised you can taste anything at all,” she said. “I thought sap was mostly water. That’s why you boil it off, leaving the syrup which is sweet.”

Silas nodded happily.

“Yeah. This is otherworldly stuff. I can’t wait to see what it boils down to.”

“Hey, Gwen.”

Gwen’s eyebrows shot up at the sound of Tom’s voice in her inner ear. She stepped away from the others and tapped her implant.

“Yes? What’s going on?”

“Where is everybody?”

“Silas is showing us his maple trees and we’re sampling the sap.”

“Okay. Look, I’m going to need a ride. Can you have him drive out to the desert?”

“Sure. Where in the desert?”

“By the smelter and the mine shaft. I’ll meet you there.”

3.21

“**Y**ou’ve got quite the geographical mix around here,” Wink said, gazing out the passenger window as the truck skimmed above the ground at 40 kilometers per hour. “I see mountains over that way. We just came from the woods and fields for the horses. And now desert? So much variety in a just a few kilometers.”

Silas nodded and waved a hand at the brown horizon in front of them, spreading across the windshield.

“This here’s the Skoni Desert. This is where all those fine dust particles get blown up into the upper atmosphere. It’s thousands of kilometers of the stuff. Most of this big ol’ continent is nothing but dust. High winds come in and whip it up. Take out this desert, and you’d change the ecology of the whole world.”

“Huh. It’s definitely different.”

Above them they heard a whooshing noise. Everyone looked up as the battle tank passed above them, about 30 meters up.

“Oh, so that’s what he wanted us to come out here for,” Gwen said. “I bet he parks it out here and will need a ride back home.”

“Why couldn’t he . . .”

Silas stopped before he finished the thought, suddenly aware he was not supposed to talk about certain things in front of others.

“You were going to say, why couldn’t he teleport home?” Wink said, smiling. “Yeah, I noticed that he just appeared during the firefight. Well, first he disappeared. I thought that was a neat trick. He hid behind some crates and when they shot everything to pieces, he was nowhere to be found. But then when Tom appeared behind the gunmen and started shooting, I thought at first I must have missed him. But the more I thought about it, the more certain I felt he was definitely not there beforehand. And I know I’m not going crazy.”

Jinxie gave him a look.

“Are you sure?”

“Yes. No matter what my girlfriend says. So, my only conclusion is that Tom teleported into that position. And that it happened despite this planet not having an AI. It’s why they have a spaceport consisting of a giant circle of concrete, so that ships like ours can land and unload.”

Gwen, sitting next to Silas, smiled back at Wink. But she said nothing.

Silas leaned back and said, “Is this one of them traps, Ms. Wilder? Where no matter what I say, they figure something out?”

“Yeah.”

“Okay. I better not say nothin’, then.”

Silas flexed his right hand, and quietly slipped it into a pocket, as if afraid of losing it again.

He followed the tank, which angled lower for a landing now. Up ahead the mini-forge sat, a small trickle of smoke coming out the top. The contraption may have drawn more attention from the visitors were it not for the tank.

Tom smoothly landed in front of the open mine shaft, slanting down and facing the gaping chasm leading into the ground. He twirled open the top and jumped out to greet them as the truck glided to a stop and everyone climbed out.

“Hey. Well, what do y’all think of the place? You pretty much saw our extremities, from sap-tapped trees in the south to the sandy desert up here in the north.”

“It’s a really nice spread,” Wink said. “I can see why somebody would want to settle down here.”

Jinxie seemed more reserved, and unwilling to accede that much. She nodded, though, as if agreeing with the niceties of the place.

“Well, I’m going to hide the tank I bought off you down here in the mineshaft. It’s going pretty deep, so I won’t have any comlinks or anything down there. I was hoping you guys could follow and drive down with me, then give me a ride home after I park it. It’ll save me a walk coming back from underground.”

“Oh.”

Gwen traded a glance with Silas. Now they both understood why Tom would not be able to simply port home. He would be deep underground, and Lisa would be unable to read any sensors.

“Sure,” Silas said. “We’ll follow you down, Mr. Savage. If you think that shaft is big enough for a truck?”

“Yeah. Are the tunnels big enough for both a truck and a tank? At the same time?” Wink said. He seemed genuinely curious.

“Yes. I’ve asked Lisa, who checked with the CPU for the bots who dug it out. And the main shaft is long, deep, and wide. We should be fine.”

Wink looked a little skeptical, but Silas seemed game to try.

“I’ll follow you down,” Silas said, heading back for the truck.

“You guys go ahead,” Gwen said. She held the kitten now, Mr. Biddles having crawled back into her arms. “I’d hate for Biddles to get lost down there or something.”

Absently, she fingered the sensor dangling from his collar. It would be useless deep underground.

“I’ll stay up here with her,” Jinxie said. “You boys go on ahead. Have fun.”

Tom climbed back up on the tank and dropped inside, closing the round door above him. Silas and Wink went back to the truck.

The women and Mr. Biddles watched as the tank gently nosed its way into the shaft, following the earthen ramp down and disappearing in the darkness. The truck followed seconds later.

“That is such a boy thing to do,” Gwen said, gently stroking Mr. Biddles behind the ears. “Oh, look! There’s a tunnel! Let’s go explore it!”

“Yeah, that’s not my idea of fun.”

Jinxie held out a finger to Biddles’s face and tapped his nose softly when he reached out to sniff.

She frowned, looking over Gwen’s shoulder, as she noticed the miniature smelter for the first time.

“What is *that*?”

3.22

The truck's headlights lit up the tunnel walls as Silas angled it down the ramp and under the surface of the ground. In moments, he and Wink found themselves engulfed in darkness.

"There's another reason he wanted us to follow him down here," Wink said.

"What's that?"

"I don't think those tanks have very good headlights."

"Well, they're little. About the size of an old coin. And they're nestled behind some sapphire that is supposed to be explosion-proof. But yeah, in comparison to real ones, like a groundcar's headlights? They're probably lacking."

Wink stared at him from the passenger seat for a moment.

"How do you know so much about League battle tanks?"

Silas looked mildly embarrassed, but he brushed it off.

"Ha! You pick up a thing or two, here and there."

They sat in silence for a while. The floor of the shaft still angled down sharply, and they could not see anything beyond their headlights. The rear of the tank filled the windshield. Rock and dirt slid slowly by the windows.

Wink said, “Well, I’m from Petra Roe. We were on the League’s side during the war. Still are, actually. We have a core for StarCen and everything. Of course, I was a little boy during the war. I don’t really have a lot of opinions about that conflict, either way. As far as I’m concerned, I go wherever I can flip a load of cargo and make some profit, you know? But my parents, that’s another story.”

“Diehard Leaguers, are they?”

“You bet. My mom . . . well. She still talks about the old days, before StarCen got reset. In her mind, things were better back then.”

“Really? She must be one of the elites, then. That kind of government, the only ones who liked it were the privileged and elites. Everybody else was kept under the thumb of SSI and forced to serve the elites, whether they knew it or not. That’s the way socialized systems usually end up workin’.”

They continued on in silence for a bit.

Silas glanced sideways at the younger man and realized he may have spoken too much. Politics could still be a touchy subject, even twenty years after the war. Even with people who were too young to have fought in it.

“No offense.”

“No, no. None taken. But yeah, my parents were . . . are part of the elite on PR. I’m . . . finding my way *off* Petra Roe. I’m out here to make some money.”

“I hear ya! I came to Phaethon for the chance at freedom. To roam the world and explore it without any worries.”

“So how’d you wind up working for Tom and Gwen?”

Silas reflexively stuck his right hand in his pocket.

“Well, I fell in with the wrong crowd. When I met them, Mr. Savage convinced me of the error of my ways. He offered a very persuasive employment opportunity.”

“I see.”

At last the angle of the passageway leveled out. Before them, a giant underground chamber opened up, still tall enough for the truck and tank, although barely.

Beams of wood were interspersed throughout the space, holding everything up. In other places the contours of the rocks were used for natural support. Stone columns occasionally reached up in the cavernous room.

Tom carefully picked his way between support beams, both natural and MicaBot-made. Plenty of wide open space allowed him to maneuver the tank through the maze.

Silas carefully followed in the truck.

“How far underground are we?” Wink said.

Silas glanced at the odometer on the truck’s dash.

“Looks like we came down about a kilometer and a half. I dunno how deep we are, but that’s how far we drove.”

On the sides off in the distance, they could see dark shafts leading elsewhere. The giant cavern apparently served as a hub of sorts, with different tunnels striking out in multiple directions. At the far limits of the vehicles’ lights, other passages loomed dark.

Then they passed by a hole, about half the width of the truck, going straight down.

“I’d hate to walk around here in the dark,” Wink said, eyeing the shaft with trepidation as they passed by it.

Silas nodded in agreement.

At last they reached the far side of the room, and here a shallow alcove had been carved out of the rock wall. It looked to Silas to be large enough for the tank and not much else.

Tom stopped and Silas brought the truck to a halt. Then Tom maneuvered the tank so its rear faced the entrance. Carefully, he backed the tank inside the alcove.

It settled down facing out, the big cannon aiming into the cavern. Then its headlights went out and the truck's provided the only illumination.

Tom exited the tank and swung the round door closed behind him. He crawled down and left it behind, opening the passenger door to the truck. Wink scooted over so he would have room to sit.

“Alright! Thanks for picking me up. You see now why I wanted a ride.”

Silas nodded. He slowly backed up, careful not to hit a support beam. Then he slowly made his way back through the labyrinthine cavern in the direction they came, seeking the large slanted shaft leading up and out.

-+-

Minutes later, as soon as the lights from the truck dimmed in the distance, thousands of tiny bots scurried from the shadows.

Black, about the size of large army ants, they remained unnoticed during the short time the men were present. Now that the visitors were gone, the bots went to work.

Slowly, stones large and small moved across the cavern floor and piled up in front of the alcove, sealing the tank inside. Layers of dirt, and natural-looking mortar followed, hiding the pattern of placed rocks.

It would take time, but in a few hours no one coming down here would be able tell the alcove ever existed.

3.23

“So, we have an issue.”

The four young people and the farmhand sat around Tom and Gwen’s dining table. Newly bought, six chairs lined it, so they had plenty of room.

Already Gwen had chatted up Jinxie what she thought about the idea of obtaining an even larger dining table, maybe one that could accommodate eight or even twelve people.

The conversation had remained light. Silas felt like the odd man out, a literal fifth wheel or at least a fifth person. But Tom had been mindful and included him in the conversations. They all ate from the stock of ready to eat platters, since that was the easiest and fastest way to prepare meals.

“Looks to me like you’ve got several issues,” Wink said, smiling.

He pushed away a platter that used to have poshbird, corn and mashed potatoes. Now, nothing was left. He wiped his lips and folded the napkin on top of the disposable tray.

“True. But I think you may be able to help us out with our biggest one. We are expecting another load of supplies that was supposed to come in soon via drone ship. They use Machro-drives on those things because nobody is onboard to grow old in transit.”

Wink and Jinxie shared a glance.

“Are we old?”

“You are,” Jinxie said. “I’m not yet.”

“Anyway,” Tom said, “thanks to somebody almost getting his ship unfairly impounded, all three systems have placed Phaethon on an embargo.”

“Right. And that means your drone ship can’t get here because they’re all controlled by your AI.”

“Correct. As are regular freighters, passenger ships, and anything else out there.”

“I would think a Lutian ship would still be able to make the trip. I mean, wasn’t she set up to help out pirates, initially?”

“LuteNet is abiding by the embargo. It’s not wartime. And she’s more of a rule follower these days. In return, if she asks for an embargo or something like that, the other two systems will remember her assistance this time, etc. etc. Machine diplomacy, I guess.”

“Right. So, you really are in a bind if you’re waiting on supplies.”

“Yes. However, I have it on good authority that *somebody* has a ship that can be used to skirt around pesky little rules that everybody else is abiding by, and could quickly bring us some much needed supplies.”

Wink smiled.

“I might be persuaded to make such a trip. Provided it was worth it. Therein lies the rub, as they say.”

Tom nodded. While Wink and Jinxie knew some of his secrets, they did not know everything. They had no idea of Tom’s real last name, for instance, or how much money he could draw upon if needed.

Although, by buying the battle tank they knew he had access to a *lot* of money.

“What’s your price for making the delivery by tomorrow our time?”

Wink rubbed his chin and looked down at the table in thought.

“Well, if I’m carrying a full hold worth of stuff, and I’m not going to be able to resell anything in League City, then I’d need to replace the profit I’m losing out on.”

Tom and Gwen shared a glance.

Wink would not be able to land in League City anyway, under the current circumstances. Neither one decided to bring that salient point up, just now.

Biddles jumped into Gwen’s lap and poked his head above the table, focused on her platter of poshbird. He made to crawl up onto the tabletop and sample the leftovers before Gwen picked him up with one hand and pulled him back.

“I think 50,000 is a reasonable price.”

Jinxie involuntarily raised her eyebrows. If this were poker, she would have just revealed that Wink did not hold a particularly good hand.

Silas noticed. So did Tom.

But he smiled and said, “Okay.”

Jinxie’s eyes bulged. Wink smiled and leaned back in his chair.

“I appreciate your hospitality. And I am very appreciative that you two helped save Pulsar. I really am. But . . . I hope you don’t take this the wrong way, but I’ll need at least half my fee up front before we head out to Lute. I know that to you it’ll seem like we’re gone only a few hours, but Jinx and I are looking at a two-month round trip, almost. We’d like to see money in the bank before we commit to that big of an undertaking.”

Continuing to display her lack of negotiating skills and obliviousness to poker faces, Jinxie shot him a look that said, “Are you crazy?”

Tom ignored that one, too. Instead, he opened a credit window over the table.

After a moment’s pause, staring at it, Wink opened his, too. Tom dragged 25,000 over with his finger to the other floating box. Both windows closed.

Tom pushed his chair back and stood up. Everyone else at the table followed suit.

“If you go into Lute’s solar system, there’s a space station orbiting the eighth planet. It belongs to the Ultima Mule Company. If you land inside the space bay there, our guys can load you up with everything so you don’t have to land on Lute or go through LuteNet to port up cargo or anything.”

“Okay.”

“Then when you get back here, you can just land in the same place you’re at now, and we’ll help you unload. And give you the other half of your fee.”

“Sounds good. We should be back early in the morning, your time.”

Tom smiled. He led the way to the back door. Gwen carried the kitten and they all went outside. There in the pasture Pulsar waited, four heavy legs pressing down in the ground.

“You know, if I take Mr. Biddles with me, he’ll be a much bigger cat in the morning. Would you like that, Mr. Biddles?”

Gwen protectively pulled the kitten away from Jinxie.

“I don’t want to miss a minute of him growing up.”

“I understand. I wouldn’t either if I were in your shoes. Goodbye, Mr. Biddles. I’ll see you in a little while.”

Jinxie reached out to scratch the kitten behind the ears. Gwen allowed this, but held the kitten with both hands the whole time.

Wink said, “We’ll see you in a little bit.”

He shook hands with Tom and Silas. Jinxie gave Gwen and Biddles a little hug. The couple turned and walked to the spacecraft together.

Moments later, Pulsar’s standard drives started up and the ship slowly levitated. At a hundred meters, it began moving forward, gradually picking up speed, heading west toward the mountains.

When it receded in the distance, the nose angled up sharply, and Pulsar shot up out of the atmosphere.

3.24

Night drifted over League City, and the south side projects hummed with activity.

Thugs lined the street holding guns, knives and broken chair legs. Children as young as ten carried bricks or rocks, even large slivers of glass that looked like transparent claws flashing in the streetlight.

The crowd appeared dirty and disheveled. Many had not bathed in days or even weeks. Grit and grime coated them. Holes in their pants revealed peeling skin. Many of the young walked around barefoot.

They lined the main street cutting through the projects, the thoroughfare from the Courthouse to the Fairgrounds.

The same street Tom Savage walked on his first day in League City.

At the head of the crowd, half a block from the Courthouse, a man named Reynard Gliph climbed up on a pile of trash and barrels, ascending a makeshift podium.

He roared, raising his fist high. The sound echoed off the walls of the tenement apartments, bouncing down to the crowd and back up again.

The crowd yelled back, screaming in approval.

It felt cathartic, this mass release of outrage.

When the noise died down, Reynard smiled at the motley assembly of humanity. He had gray hair, never combed. It stuck out at odd angles, unkempt . . . and a little greasy.

His weathered face appeared older than his mid-40s age would suggest. His eyes had a wild look to them, as if he were on some kind of drug that let him see things others could not.

All attention in the crowd focused on him, even those in the far back, blocks away and close to the open field where all the sky trains landed. They all pressed in to listen to what Gliph had to say.

He smiled with a wider mouth than most, thin cracked lips splitting apart his face.

“They think they can do what they want!”

A loud murmur of assent rose from the crowd.

“We asked them for ONE THING! And one thing only! And did they deliver that one thing to us?”

“NO!”

“No, they did not deliver the ship we asked them for! We sent our men to help them grab that ship, did we not? And did they deliver the ship?”

“NO!”

“No, they did not deliver that ship! And where are our men? Did our men come back to us?”

“NO!”

“No, they did not return our men. Except in *body bags*!”

An angry roar erupted from the crowd. Fists shook in anger.

“We need that ship! We are going to use it to take us all to settlements, empty settlements on the other side of this planet! And we can get there on that ship without paying the outrageous fare demanded by the sky trains!”

A roar of approval erupted this time.

“I say it’s time we did something about this. My friends, if we take this lying down, they will walk all over us. Are we going to take this lying down?”

“NO!”

“No, we are not! Follow me! Let’s lay waste to the west side and show them how the projects respond when they kill our men and take away our ship!”

The crowd’s roar rolled up and down the street, and out both ends.

Gliph turned and made a huge “Follow me” wave with his arm. He jumped off the pile of debris and marched toward the Courthouse, the crowd following in his wake.

-+-

The deputy on duty in front of the Courthouse door heard the roar of a crowd approaching.

His brows furrowed, and he walked away from the entrance to peek around the side of the building, just as Reynard Gliph marched into the Courthouse square with a huge mob behind him.

The deputy’s eyes grew round.

“Oh, shoot.”

He turned and ran back to the door, pushing his way inside. He made it to the reception desk, empty this time of the evening, and jumped over the top. He found the big red emergency button, neatly hidden out of view from the public but within easy reach of whoever manned the desk.

He slapped it, hard.

WAH-WAHHHH . . . WAH-WAHHHH . . . WAH-WAHHHH . . .

Metal slats quickly slammed down all around the building, covering the front door and the windows, even those higher up.

A comlink on the desk lit up, and Xu's face appeared, floating in the air.

“What's going on there? Who sounded the Courthouse alarm?”

“I did, Mr. Xu! The south side is rioting! A huge crowd is headed this way!”

The look on Xu's face changed to one of disgust.

“Hizzoner will not be pleased.”

3.25

Cabbies saw the mob flooding the square and jumped in, driving off fast. Pedestrians and a few drivers out this late turned and sped away.

Those vehicles parked along the street were not so lucky. The crowd pushed the first ones they came to, rocking them off their legs. The sound of shattering polyglass rang out as bricks and sticks and fists pounded against vehicles belonging to those who could afford them.

Someone produced a bottle filled with accelerant, and a lighter. In moments, half a dozen cars near the courthouse blazed away.

The crowd rushed like water into the square, filling up all the space. People bumped up against the Courthouse walls, and pounded on the metal slats.

But like a giant CC 1000, the Courthouse could withstand mere human efforts at penetration. The crowd swarmed past the imposing structure, destroying cars, knocking over lampposts and garbage bins, tearing up the grounds in front, ruining the landscaping.

Gliph cared not a wit about destroying the Courthouse or things around it. He remained laser-focused on the big street to the west, leading to the bazaar and shopping district.

Down that street, the first of much nicer apartment complexes waited . . .

And beyond that, the true prize . . . the merchant district itself, filled with all kinds of loot and goodies.

The crowd spilled into Commerce Street, following Gliph who urged them on with shouts and by waving his arms, beckoning them forward.

The first apartments loomed on the sides, five stories tall.

A window opened three floors up to the right, and a young woman leaned out to see what all the noise was about.

An enterprising young thug activated a pair of wall crawler boots. They probably cost more than everything else he wore, though they were no doubt stolen.

He jogged up the side of the building toward the open window.

She screamed at the sight and jerked back inside.

With a big smile, he slowed at the window and pulled himself inside the apartment.

Other young men laughed. A couple of them jumped on the wall, trying to climb up . . .

Thoop! Thoop!

Green lights flashed from the third floor, along with the sound of blaster bolts.

The thug fell out the open window, chest bloody, a surprised look on his face. His body slammed into the crowd below, knocking people down. Gasps of horror and outrage followed.

The young woman reappeared in the window, holding a pistol now and staring down at the crowd.

She looked down at her attacker, lying spread-eagled on the street below . . . and spat on the body.

The crowd screamed in outrage. A dozen people surged for the door of her building, pounding against it.

“Come on! Leave her! The merchants! The merchants!”

Gliph yelled above the noise, and some heard him. Many followed. But some stayed behind, a contingent intent on revenge.

Others surged past the first apartments and raced down the streets looking for more chances at easy riches or helpless women.

But the merchant district beckoned, and Reynard Gliph led the way.

-+-

Comlinks lit up the basic communications system used by League City, as alarmed residents phoned one another with the latest news.

Soon, the system grew overwhelmed and stopped connecting users. This occurred shortly after the mob entered the west side neighborhood.

One call did make its way through the telecom thicket, connecting the mayor’s office with a small room far back in the tenement dwellings.

Anton Berris smiled with no small amount of satisfaction as he answered the call.

“Good evening, Mr. Xu. How are we tonight? How is Hizzoner?”

“Call off your dogs, Berris. I’m serious. Hizzoner is very unhappy with these developments.”

“Oh, I’m so sorry, Mr. Xu. It doesn’t work that way. You see, once a riot has started it becomes *very* difficult to stop it.”

“Call them off, Berris. People are getting hurt.”

“Yes, that does happen in the middle of a riot, doesn’t it? Not to mention all the property that will be lost. Perhaps you should have thought about that before letting my men get shot up and allowing that spaceship to get away this morning.”

“As I explained earlier, the Captain of that ship had outside help.”

“Yes, yes, yes. Help that conveniently killed all my men and none of yours.”

“They shot down a squad car, Berris. The only one the sheriff’s department has. Do you know how much firepower is needed to knock one of those out of the sky?”

“You know what I think really happened, Xu? I think someone wrecked your squad car. Maybe a deputy got drunk, I don’t know. But I seriously doubt that someone shot it down. I do however think that somebody shot all my men. I had some of my top lieutenants on that team I sent over, Mr. Xu. I think you murdered them all, and let the spaceship go. And that is why our wonderfully unhinged Mr. Rey Gliph is leading his acolytes in a little rampage through your part of town right now. That’s just lovely, isn’t it?”

Xu disconnected in disgust. Berris tried to call back, but the system override only worked from the Mayor’s office, not to it.

He sat in his home office, the lights dim.

In the distance, he heard the mob as they filled the street, heading deeper into the nicer parts of town.

3.26

As the crowd surged for the commercial areas, merchants moved to counter them. Men and women, young and old ran toward the shops lining streets near the bazaar on the ground floors of buildings.

Those who owned or leased property on the edges of the bazaar and in the bazaar itself hurried to protect what they could.

It was too late to board up windows, and the oncoming crowd seemed determined to damage things anyway, so the merchants armed themselves with guns and took up positions on rooftops. They raced for the stairs and headed to the top, finding spots that covered the streets, aiming down with weapons brought from home.

The merchants waited, nervous. Sweating. Their rifles pointed at the street as the mob closed in with an angry roar.

Every parked car on Commerce Boulevard in the path of the mob was trashed as the people plowed on. Vehicles were tipped over and torched.

Apartment doors were rammed and pounded on . . . but most in this part of town remained secure, red lights stubbornly glowing on palm pads.

A few closer to the courthouse, and less prestigious, had old-style hinged doors. Some in the crowd had paused long enough to slam against these, or

try to break through ground floor windows, and a few buildings were ransacked.

But break-ins were rare, considering the circumstances. And most homeowners, even apartment dwellers, had guns. Several people got shot racing inside busted doorways or windows.

When gunshots popped, targets were abandoned. The crowd moved on to softer fare.

“The shops! The shops!”

The cry echoed back from the head of the mob, Gliph himself.

The shops would be empty of people this time of night, and ripe for looting. And what they didn’t steal, they would burn. Yes . . . the crowd cheered in approval.

People surged forward in expectation, thousands strong, streaming down the street. Angry. Screaming. Looking to steal and destroy.

Young men broke away from the others, weapons held high, filled with lust for loot and blood.

One broke away even from this testosterone-filled vanguard. He ran hard, racing toward the open air bazaar. At the last minute he swerved toward one of the storefronts on Commerce Street and its plate glass window, swinging a club.

He ran full tilt, intent on jumping through the glass.

Thoop!

A solitary shot from the shop’s owner, perched on top of the building, hit him at center mass.

His chest absorbed the energy and partly caved in, ribs snapping, heart stopping. The bolt left a hole the size of a tennis ball in his middle.

He managed two more awkward steps before falling face-down in the street.

The young men running up behind him stopped and stared down at his body. Then they looked up.

Merchants lined the rooftops. Each one held a gun aimed down at them.

As if on cue, they all started shooting at once.

The young men scattered, many falling before taking a step. But some managed to find cover behind cars. A few even managed to fire off shots of their own.

But the merchants had the high ground. Blaster bolts rained down hard on the street, and now the forward edge of the mob surged, running into the storm.

Several fell before those in front turned around and tried to fight their way back upstream, screaming in horror.

But the tide of humanity pressed forward, unrelenting, pushing them all into the path of the onslaught.

-+-

On a rooftop, the merchant who fired first ran out of charge in his gun after spraying the street on full auto for several minutes.

He grunted, tossing the useless weapon down.

Then he picked up another one from a pile of ten more lying beside him, and resumed firing at the mob below.

Gunfire continued throughout the night, as fires lit up the dark and dusty sky above League City.

3.27

As the sky gradually turned brighter over the continent of Anatolia the next morning, Silas drove the old flatbed truck across the wooden bridge. He stopped by the stables just as Timmy emerged.

The horses, now docile and used to a metallic man-thing letting them out each morning, followed Timmy into the corral. He opened the gate and they trotted out, led by Bessie.

Timmy returned to the stables, shovel in hand. His long rectangular “face” turned slightly toward Silas as the man climbed out of the truck, and nodded.

The CC 1000 detected light and its metal slats swiveled, letting in the morning and opening the coop to the outside world. The door in front slowly ascended. Robert the Rooster strutted out to survey his domain, followed by a score of yellow chicks.

He glared at the horses trotting past, but since they did not stop or pay the poultry any attention, he allowed them to continue on their journey toward the lush grass alongside the river.

Silas smiled at all this as he headed around back toward the garden. There, he paused to palm the unit controlling a force field dome that protected his cultivated hectare from insects and other pests. The controls rested on a meter-high column he had placed there earlier.

With the force dome off, Silas walked out among the rows, inspecting the ground.

Nothing peeked out of the soil yet. He did not expect anything, but thought he would check anyway, just in case some indigenous weeds decided to crop up overnight.

While he was out there looking, Timmy trundled a wheelbarrow up, full of last night's horse droppings. The battle bot wordlessly pushed them out into the garden, then spread things out among the rows with a shovel.

Silas held his breath and left the garden, letting the bot continue his thankless task. He felt very grateful the bot handled the manure.

"Worth its weight in gold, that thing is."

The screen door slammed on the back porch as Tom came out carrying two cups of steaming hot coffee. He lifted one toward Silas and sat down in an Adirondack chair.

Silas made his way over there, climbing up the steps to join him.

"Hope you like it black."

"Yes, sir. I'll take it any which way."

Silas sat down next to Tom and sipped the hot drink gratefully.

After sighing in contentment, watching the distant hazy brown horizon grow brighter with the rising sun, he turned back to Tom.

"Not much to do, really, until that fella gets back with the spaceship."

"How's the sap doing over there at your place?"

"Another few days and those buckets will be filled. I say three, maybe four, and we'll be ready to start boilin' it down."

"So the boiling evaporates the water . . ."

"Right. And what you're left with is delicious syrup. I been thinkin', though. The Old Earth formula was 40 to one. So, 40 liters of sap made one liter of syrup. But I'm thinkin' this Phaethon sap may have a different ratio.

I think it's thicker than Terran sap. That means less water, and maybe we'll have to boil it less. Dunno. Like I say, we'll give it three days and then we can start experimentin' and find out."

"Three more days it is."

"Thomas."

Tom and Silas locked eyes at the sound of Lisa's voice. She spoke in Silas's implant, too.

Tom touched under his ear.

"Yes, Lisa?"

"My satellites detect the presence of a ship in orbit, newly arrived. I have a high degree of certainty that this is Pulsar. The ship is heading down into the atmosphere as we speak."

"Okay. Thank you, Lisa. Let me know if anything changes."

He turned back to Silas.

"Why didn't they just show up here and jump out of hypertime then? Seems like some extra work to show up in orbit first."

"There's lots of old superstitions about using them Machro-drives, Mr. Savage. I think pilots still prefer not to fire 'em up in the atmosphere if they don't have to. Even the young'uns like that Jinxie gal. Especially if she was trained by somebody older and steeped in the hesitancy they all had when those things first came out after the war."

"Hm. Okay. That makes sense I guess. One generation of pilots hands down their peccadillos to the next, or something."

Tom tilted the cup back and finished the last of his coffee.

"Well, let's wait for them to land and go see if they brought back all our stuff."

They did not have long to wait. A distant speck in the eastern sky slowly grew larger and more defined through the haze. Then the roar of the

standard drives rolled in as the ship decelerated, slowing to a crawl before it hovered over the back pasture.

Gwen came out the back door holding the kitten.

“Look, Mr. Biddles! Our friends are back!”

“You know, I don’t think he can understand you.”

“Yes he does! Mr. Biddles understands lots of things. Don’t you, Mr. Biddles? You just ignore that mean old Daddy.”

She turned the kitten to face her. He put a paw up to her cheek, batting at it.

“See? I told you.”

Tom raised his hands up and rolled his eyes. But he did not press the issue. Instead, he walked down the steps.

“Come on you two. Let’s go say hi. Timmy! Where’s Timmy? We’re going to need his help to unload everything. You may as well bring the truck, Silas. We’ll probably need it, too. I don’t think Lisa can teleport everything where we want to put it.”

“Aren’t you still trying to keep that teleportin’ under wraps, Mr. Savage?”

“They know about it anyway. Let’s go see what Dad sent us.”

3.28

Pulsar's back ramp lowered as Tom and Gwen, still holding Biddles, approached.

To everyone's surprise, three people walked down the ramp instead of two.

Wink and Jinxie followed an older man of Korean descent. He looked more distinguished, and wiser, than anyone else present. His eyes seemed to speak for themselves. Looking at them betrayed a wealth of knowledge stored behind them.

"Mr. Kim! What are you doing here?"

"Hello, Tommy. And Gwendolyn. Pleasure to see you here, too."

He turned to Silas and stuck out his hand.

"I'm Anthony Kim."

Silas' face dropped as he automatically shook the man's hand.

"Uh . . . of Subtle Services fame?"

Anthony's face broke out in a grin.

"The one and the same. You see, Tommy? This is why you start your own business. That way, people won't automatically associate you with the Ultima Mule Company."

Tom brushed that aside.

“You and Mr. Pak have always worked closely with Dad.”

“True, true. Well, back to the present. I have had the pleasure of getting to know these two fine people over the last few weeks.”

He nodded at Wink and Jinxie.

“And, I’ve gotten to know their ship, too. I had time to make some improvements. Of course, I was already somewhat familiar with Pulsar since Subtle Services was the company they used to install her Machro-drive.”

“I’m glad to see you, Mr. Kim. But . . . what are you doing here?”

Anthony smiled again with an easy grin.

“Your father said you needed help building some generators. Let’s unload the cargo and I’ll explain what we’ll be doing. This will kick off your next round of experiments.”

-+-

An hour later, they all stood out in the desert near the second SCU’s spot, and the crater where the first one had been erected.

Before them, spaced out at a hundred meters distance from one another, three new SCUs sat on flattop rock pedestals.

The pedestals were not naturally formed. They had been crafted by the MicaBots. The new units mounted on them were black cubes, but three times as large as the first two.

“So, we made several modifications based on your experiences, Tommy. First of all, I know your parents were upset when you destroyed the initial solar containment unit right off the bat.”

Tom flushed in embarrassment and grimaced, loathe to recall that incident once again.

“Nonetheless, like I told your dad, you actually did us a favor. It showed that the machine could not live up to its specs. We already had the second one in the works and ready to go, and I appreciate that you kept it at the minimum threshold, although I think it could have handled a much larger chunk of solar matter. However, destroying it in the way you did, by porting the plasma out of the containment field and dropping it on that battle tank, gave us even more design metrics we could then use. Namely, if the solar chunk has to go away suddenly, we needed a design that would not simply implode.”

He smiled at Tom.

“Simply put, by destroying the first two, you gave us a lot of real-world data to work with. Thank you.”

“I doubt you were able to convince my parents that blowing them up was a good thing.”

“*Au contraire*. I can be quite convincing. Especially since I am the chief scientist for this project. Now, as you see we have three of the latest models. These can hold larger chunks, contain the plasma, and are set to not implode if and when the plasma is ported out. But that’s not all they are designed to do.”

He waved at the nearest one, to his left and closest to the crater.

“Thanks to the experiments you ran with Particle Two, we have clear readings on just how much energy we can expect to obtain from our next particles. These new units are designed to extract that energy.”

He turned and faced the young people again.

“And from that energy, we hope to be able to recharge depleted power packs. In fact . . . we will almost certainly be the sole provider of power pack recharging for this planet. Especially if this embargo continues for any length of time.”

Jinxie raised a hand, as if this were a classroom and Anthony led a lecture.

“Can’t they just recharge their own power packs?”

“With what? There are no power plants at all on this planet, Jinxie. They are relying solely on power packs, which is not unusual at all for an early colonial outpost.”

“But power packs go out.”

“Exactly.”

“And then what? I guess they import more?”

Anthony smiled at her, waiting.

“Oh. They’re under an embargo.”

“Exactly.”

“But surely that embargo won’t last long, right?”

Anthony shrugged.

“The soonest any power packs can get here is in one month, if the embargo were to end today. But even if a League zodiac comes in loaded with thousands of power packs in all shapes and sizes, we will nonetheless have a fully functioning power pack recharging station. We will be offering the service at a far lower price than any new power pack someone can hope to import.”

He looked at the three gleaming black cubes and added, “I hope.”

In the distance, out in the desert, they heard an outraged shriek. A cloud blew up as Timmy ran his route, scaring Big Ugly. Neither could be seen in the obfuscating dust, but Big Ugly continued expressing his displeasure with screams and howls.

“Ah, sand dragons. Yes, I’ve read about those. They can be rather destructive, can they not?”

Anthony touched the implant under his ear.

“Lisa? Please port in Particles Three, Four and Five into their respective CPUs. Make them three centimeters in size, please.”

Tom cleared his throat.

“Are you, uh, sure about that Mr. Kim? I blew up the first one with a two-centimeter chunk.”

“And as I said, I’m very grateful you did. We made sure these new SCUs could handle much larger pieces of solar matter, now that we know what we’re working with.”

Lisa’s voice sounded in everyone’s ears except for Wink’s and Jinxie’s.

“On my mark, Anthony. Three . . . two . . . one.”

Gwen flinched, holding Biddles tight to her chest. She half expected three mushroom cloud explosions.

Instead, the three units came alive, lights flashing. All three hummed audibly across the sand.

“Very good,” Anthony said. “Our next step is to hook up our recharging units. Does anyone have a spent power pack we can experiment on?”

Silas said, “The truck’s pack is just about shot. If you could get it recharged, Mr. Kim, I’d be mighty grateful.”

Anthony smiled at the farmhand.

“Bring it over.”

3.29

It took the men half an hour to remove the power pack from the truck. Anthony directed them to hook it up to a large charging bay he brought from Pulsar's cargo area and attached to SCU-3, the one closest to the crater.

"So, why is recharging such a big deal?" Jinxie said, genuinely curious. "I mean, folks could just make a power plant and get going. Or maybe use a power core like space ships do."

Anthony smiled and said, "I'm used to explaining things in simple terms because we speak a lot with investors and potential customers, so I'll give this a shot. You can't just recharge a pack that easily, Jinxie. Not under normal circumstances. And that's because of the enormous amounts of energy involved. It's easier to understand it all with a quick trip down memory lane to illustrate how far we've come with power storage."

He paused to attach a cable from the charging bay, resting on the wide flat rock base that SCU-3 sat upon, into the black cube. Green diodes flashed, indicating a good connection.

"So, people started seriously harnessing electricity in the 19th century, and initial batteries were indeed used for things like cars, although they were limited. In the late 20th and early 21st centuries, batteries powered many

more things. And by then, concern over pollution led to a resurgence of using batteries for powering cars. But here, we ran into problems.”

“I’ve read about this,” Gwen said, nodding. “Range anxiety.”

“Precisely. Batteries were good. They powered phones, computers and cars. But they were limited by the laws of physics. Namely, you can only pack so much power into so much space.”

He watched as Silas and Tom struggled with the heavy truck power pack. It was a meter long and half a meter wide, and apparently very heavy.

Tom paused to tap his implant.

“Timmy, where the heck are you? Quit chasing Big Ugly and get over here.”

When Timmy did not show up immediately, Tom grunted in disgust and continued helping Silas move the heavy pack.

“So, let’s throw some approximations around. The car battery of those days could be charged on household currents. American households necked things down to 120 volts. This was used to power all the appliances in a typical home. Europeans liked to go higher than that, to 230 volts. Think of voltage as similar to the amount of pressure in a water pipe. So, in an American household, the pipe was akin to a low flowing garden hose.”

Tom and Silas arrived with the battery pack, sweating. They dropped it down next to the flat charging bay, on the rock, and caught their breath. Silas wiped sweat from his brow.

“So, one of these early electric cars, with a top of the line battery, would plug into an American household’s electricity at 120 volts. After about 8 hours it would have enough juice to go . . . 300 kilometers or so.”

“Hmm.”

“Exactly. Not very awe inspiring. Now, some American appliances doubled the voltage, to 240. We’re talking about things like hot water heaters, clothes dryers and so forth. So, you might have seen a special plug installed

that could charge the battery in four hours and . . . it would go the same distance. I'm speaking in generalities, you understand."

The girls nodded.

Mr. Biddles squirmed in Gwen's hands, trying to get down. She set him on the flat rock, keeping a close eye on him as he approached the SCU, sniffing it.

"Then came fast charging stations. These public access places doubled the voltage again, to 480. Very nice. Not something many people wanted in their homes, necessarily, but they were handy to have while out and about. Even so, no matter how fast you were able to charge the battery, the cars still only went 300 kilometers or so before needing to be recharged again. You begin to see the problem."

"You ready?" Tom said to Silas.

The older man nodded.

"On three . . . one, two, *oof!*"

They lifted the heavy power pack up and over the short ledge of the charging bay and set it down with additional grunts.

"Then, the great challenge was met. Lithium-ion cells were dominant back then, they held the most juice. The search was on for something that would retain even more power. All sorts of things were tried. It was akin to Edison's search for the perfect light bulb filament. Solid state batteries using ceramics, nickel and all sorts of different mixtures were tried, in a valiant quest for increased capacity."

The power pack hummed, drawing everyone's attention to it. Then the sound died off. Several diodes on the charging bay turned green.

"Then . . . a eureka moment. All of a sudden, we had batteries that could power a car for years! The name changed to 'power packs.' An astonishing amount of energy could now be stored. But it came with a big problem."

"Charging them would take forever at 120 volts," Gwen guessed.

“Exactly. To charge these super high capacity energy storage modules, a *lot* of power was needed. Now you needed an enormous supply of energy, with lots and lots of volts if you wanted to recharge them in any decent length of time so they could last for years. Fortunately, the discovery of efficient and super-high capacity storage coincided nicely with reliable cold fusion . . .”

“And we can’t have that on a colonial planet,” Jinxie scoffed.

“Well, that’s another long story. But the gist of it is, those types of power plants are huge, complex things that take a lot of time and industrial strength and money to put together. No, for a planet like this, it’s far easier to just import power packs and hook them up to every household, car and building instead of trying to produce your own right from the start. If you need a little more juice, you can always harness wind and solar. But for the most part, power packs are the easy and efficient solution for a frontier planet. Kind of like your premade meals.”

Anthony smiled at everyone, then he looked down at the vehicle’s newly recharged unit.

“Okay, I think we’re done here. You should be good for another three years, gentlemen. You may put it back in the truck.”

“Let’s get Timmy to move it this time, Silas,” Tom said, tapping his implant. “Timmy? Where are you?”

“Where’s Mr. Biddles?”

Gwen’s face reflected concern. She had lost track of the kitten.

A meow trickled in several meters away, out in the desert.

“Biddles? Come back!”

Big Ugly burst from cover, shedding sand and spreading his wings wide while rising to full height.

The great lizard roared at the approaching kitten, his mouth three times the size of Biddles.

Every hair stood up straight on the kitten’s back as he reared back.

He turned and dashed for the flat rock, Big Ugly in hot pursuit.

3.30

“Biddles!”

The kitten ran full tilt, a black and white streak across desert sand.

The lizard moved faster, streaking toward him.

Lisa ported Biddles away as Big Ugly struck, like a snake. Green jaws snapped in empty air.

Big Ugly did not stop, though. His one good eye lost the kitten, but he looked up and found several more mammals to eat.

Bigger ones.

He snarled and picked up the pace.

Anthony touched his implant and said, “Instigate the force domes, Lisa.”

Power rippled in the air as translucent half spheres of force bloomed over the three SCUs like overturned bowls.

Big Ugly ran smack into it, all forward momentum stopped.

The giant lizard stood still for a moment, splayed out against the force field. His arms and wings were spread wide, a stunned expression on his face.

Slowly, Big Ugly slid down the side of the invisible wall, his body puffing up dust as it hit the ground.

Timmy appeared, running his route out in the desert. His sensor head tilted toward Big Ugly and he brought a heavy rifle up to his shoulder. He squeezed off a shot as the lizard stood back up.

Big Ugly ducked and blocked the bolt with his wing, like a vampire hiding behind his cape.

He roared with indignation, then raced off in the desert, abandoning all hope for a warm meal.

Timmy followed, running after him. Both were swallowed up in the dust almost immediately.

“Well, that was exciting,” Wink said, when they were gone. “What happened to the cat?”

“He’s back home,” Gwen said. “Or at least he should be. Lisa, send me to Mr. Biddles, please.”

She popped away in a sudden burst of displaced air.

“That takes some getting used to,” Wink said, raising an eyebrow at Tom.

“Yeah, you know all our secrets. Don’t tell anybody.”

“My lips are sealed.”

“Smugglers can keep secrets,” Jinxie said, a twinkle in her eye.

“We are importers,” Wink said, giving her an exasperated look. “It’s just that some of our imports may stray a bit outside the bounds of regulations in one system or another, depending on the mood or disposition of the officials we’re dealing with at the moment.”

“That’s a very nice euphemistic way of stating it,” Tom said with a smile.

He touched his implant again.

“Timmy! Give up on Big Ugly. You’ll never catch him out there. I need you back here to move this heavy power pack. Come on, man!”

Seconds later they heard metallic footsteps thudding through the sand as Timmy ran back.

Anthony turned the force dome off and let the battle bot inside the perimeter.

Timmy slowed to a walk as he approached. He effortlessly picked up the heavy power pack, then headed for the truck.

Silas watched him go with a mixture of envy and relief.

“He makes life so much easier.”

Everyone nodded in agreement.

“Okay, this project is complete,” Anthony said. “Just place any depleted power pack on the charging bay. The software will figure out what kind it is, how much juice it needs, and so forth. Green lights will tell you when it’s done recharging. As for the SCU, when the solar plasma dies down Lisa can swap it out for a new chunk, and we won’t see an implosion like we did last time. If this works the way we think it will, it could revolutionize recharging. Especially out here on a frontier planet. Of course, I expect you can ask what you want, in terms of credits, to recharge power packs if nobody can get anymore for a while. I’d say you have a monopoly at the moment.”

“Thanks, Mr. Kim.”

“Absolutely. Now for our next project. We need to revamp Lisa’s sensor circuits and upgrade her processing capacity. These little mini sensors are not going to cut it if you want to start teleporting all over the planet.”

He smiled at Tom.

“I’ll stick around for a while and make some much needed improvements to your property, Tommy.”

“Sure, Mr. Kim. Whatever you want. We got a spare bedroom you can use.”

“I believe that Mr. McKelway will allow me the continued use of my cabin aboard his ship.”

Wink nodded and turned back to Tom.

“He already provided some upgrades to Pulsar’s onboard computer, plus he gave us some established routes we didn’t have. For free, I might add.”

Ships without AIs, Tom knew, relied on preset teleportation routes as they ported through the galaxy, one astronomical unit at a time.

Anthony said, “Those routes might be needed if my company or Ultima Mule wishes to retain your services in the future. Call it a chit I may cash in, in the future.”

“It looks like we’ve sort of hitched our wagon to the Ultima Mule Company,” Jinxie said.

When everybody looked at her she added, “Not that there’s anything wrong with that. It’s been a lucrative arrangement so far.”

“And I’m sure it will continue to be so in the future,” Anthony said. “Most Lutian businesses are profitable to be associated with. Now, if I could borrow Timmy for a moment, we need to begin distributing those enhanced sensors around your property. And I understand there are some additional homesteads claimed by Mr. Vick and Ms. Del Rio? I brought enough sensors for them as well. And plenty of spares.”

3.31

As the sky brightened over League City, the devastation left by the mob grew more visible with each passing minute.

Fires had burned out, but mounds of debris still smoldered. The ruined hulks of ground cars lay strewn around the Courthouse square and down Commerce Street like discarded husks withered by the sun.

Some of the less fortunate, and less fortified apartments closer to the Courthouse had been ransacked. These minor victories had not been without loss for the mob. Even the moderately successful living in these lesser expensive places had been armed, and they fought to protect their home turf.

Bodies littered the streets. Some here had been tossed out windows, like the hapless fellow in wall crawler boots.

But in a few places, the mob had prevailed. These still burned.

The buildings were all pressed close to one another, but even though they were sourced from local materials, a few modern precautions went into their construction. Fireproof barriers coated the outsides, particularly anything wooden. The rest of the buildings' exteriors were typically stone and did not burn anyway.

So those few that succumbed to the crowd were torched from the inside. But the fires did not spread to neighboring buildings.

League City had a fire department. It featured secondhand ground engines that carried their own water supply, in some cases, or fire retardant that could be sprayed. They could also tap into the city's water hydrants.

But there had been no way for the fire department to respond, not with the rampaging mob. So the buildings that succumbed, burned. They looked like shells of their former selves, blackened husks like the ground cars. Smoke drifted out of empty windows.

And the morning light grew brighter.

The com system resumed working, and loved ones called one another to see if they were safe. Calls for help still flooded the sheriff's office.

The city was still too new to have a well organized emergency management system. Firefighters and three deputy sheriffs remained awake in the Courthouse, which remained locked up tight as a drum.

But no one left just yet. They awaited credible reports that the mob had dispersed.

In another office deep inside the Courthouse, Joachim Xu established a com link of his own. Anton Berris accepted the call, again.

"Hizzoner is not pleased."

"That's a shame about your commercial district. You know, if you had secured that ship like I asked you to, and maybe not gotten all my men killed, things might look a lot different for you this morning."

A long silence prevailed.

Xu frowned at the wall, where a holo displayed the open air bazaar. All the booths there had been trashed, although little in the way of merchandise was looted. No seller wished to commit their goods to the flimsy structures overnight.

They had come out in force, though, unwilling to let the rabble destroy their way of life, their means of making a living. Now, families worked together

to remove the destroyed booths and put up new ones, or at least bring in tables that merchants could set up and start selling from at first light.

Indeed, a few brave souls wandered through the wreckage, looking for bargains. Life would go on, albeit with some inconveniences for a while.

Finally, Xu said, “This was a completely unreasonable response, far out of proportion than what was warranted.”

“Was it, Mr. Xu? Over twenty of my men died.”

“And you would destroy entire neighborhoods for that? You would bring ruin and devastation to our marketplace for that? We are already under an embargo from all three governmental entities because of our failed attempt to impound that ship. You would add to our troubles?”

“We, uh . . . what’s this about an embargo?”

“That’s right. Haven’t you heard? Because of our efforts, which have been deemed illegal by Petra Roe and the League, all the systems are avoiding us now. No more imports. No more passengers. Nothing.”

Except humanitarian aid, Xu thought.

But he did not say that out loud because it weakened his point.

“I was unaware an embargo had been declared.”

“Yes. So think about that before you go trashing the commercial district again. We’ve got serious issues if this little incident you helped create isn’t sorted out soon. And like I said, Hizzoner is *not* pleased. Don’t come asking for any favors any time soon.”

The line clicked and went dead.

Xu turned back to the holo and waved his hand, switching the view. Now he had a shot of Commerce Street from the bazaar. Stretching down it, as far as the eye could see, bodies lay strewn along the asphalt.

“There may be a silver lining,” he murmured to himself. “I wonder how much political power Berris and that crazy Gliph lost last night?”

3.32

Silas parked the truck in front of his house as light in the hazy sky dimmed overhead.

The sun had set behind the mountain range to the west, and daylight waned. He had eaten supper with everybody at Tom's house, and plans were laid out for the morning, for a trip to League City.

The day had been rather productive. With Timmy's help, Anthony Kim marked out five square kilometers with complete sensory coverage for Lisa. He also spent considerable time working with Lisa's core, upgrading it.

When he was happy with everything, he had Silas drive them all back out to the mine shaft. Here, he had the MicaBots dig out a secure location for Lisa deep in the ground. He connected a new core to a sensor chain, leaving it buried under the rock.

This way, he explained, if anything happened to Lisa's original CPU at the homestead, she could continue functioning.

Next, he instructed the MicaBots to scout out two more shelf-stable locations, preferably in bedrock and well above the water table, to put in additional cores, tripling her redundancies. This would take some time. It would be at least until tomorrow before the little army ant bots would be able to report back on their progress.

Even Tom seemed impressed by the old engineer's planning and foresight.

"By the time Mr. Kim is done, our assets should be pretty much blaster-proof," Silas muttered to himself.

He opened the door to his house and slipped off his shoes, then climbed up the spiral staircase to the second floor loft. The furniture Gwen had bought him, with Tom's money, looked very nice he thought.

He would have felt lost in a furniture store.

He collapsed on the bed, in the largest room upstairs. It had been a long day.

"Silas."

His eyes opened, and his pulse quickened.

"Yes, Lisa?"

"I sense two women on horseback approaching your house. They do not appear hostile, although they are armed. One is Haley Stonecipher. I do not recognize the other."

"Haley . . . is that the ranger?"

"It is indeed."

"Aw, shucks."

He got out of bed and went down the stairs quickly, being sure to grab his sidearm along the way.

He pulled open the front door just as two women walked up his front steps in the early evening light.

"Oh. So, that's who lives here. We were wondering. I'm Haley Stonecipher. This is Lola . . ."

Haley paused and looked awkward for a moment. It seemed evident she did not know Lola's last name.

"Lodovico. Lola Lodovico."

Silas shook a proffered hand the young girl stuck out. It was warm, and slim. She looked to be of mostly Italian descent.

“I’m Silas Vick.”

He waited to see if the name raised any alarm bells. Silas did not have a reputation with the Ever Riders, like some of the men had. Nonetheless, he was still a former outlaw. It would perhaps always be something of a risk to introduce himself to others by his real name.

But Lola did not react at all. She just blinked at him, shyly.

He cleared his throat.

“I, uh . . . did y’all get attacked by that tank?”

“Yes,” Haley said. “In fact, we were trying to visit Gwen and Tom and see if they made it alright. We hadn’t heard anything. On the way in tonight, we saw this place from the road. I was telling Lola it looks just like their house.”

“Yeah, it was made from the same, uh blueprints I guess.”

“I see. And you’re living here?”

“Yeah. I, uh . . . I got this here homestead. And Ms. Wilder, she got the one next to me. We’re tapping the trees here for sap. Gonna make some maple syrup. Or, something like it.”

Haley smiled and looked around at the front of the house and the porch.

“Well, that’s very nice. Come on, Lola. We need to hurry and try and make it to Tom and Gwen’s before it gets totally dark. I’d like to get there before the sand lizards come out. We’re a little too close to the desert for my comfort.”

“Aw, I don’t think you have to worry about that, Ms. Stonecipher. I helped Mr. Savage and them install some new sensors for his AI today. In fact, that’s how I knew y’all was on approach. So, she will likely alert Mr. Savage and Ms. Wilder. And she’ll know if Big Ugly is skulkin’ around somewhere, too. Y’all should be perfectly safe.”

“Well, okay then. That’s good to know. Come on, Lola. Let’s get to Tom’s homestead. Maybe they can put us up for the night. So long, Mr. Vick.”

He waved goodbye to the two woman. At the bottom of the steps, Lola turned and smiled up at him.

“It was sure nice meeting you, Mr. Vick.”

“Uh, you too, Ms. Lodovico. You too.”

The women mounted their horses and soon disappeared in the night.

Silas closed the door and slowly made his way back to bed.

He stared up at the ceiling for a long time before drifting off to sleep.

3.33

When Silas drove the truck up to the house in the morning, Tom popped out the front door to wave at him.

“Come in, come in, Silas. You’ll help us break a world record.”

“A record? What kinda record?”

“This will be the most people I’ve ever hosted for a meal in this house.”

“Oh. Well, that doesn’t sound like much, if you’ll pardon me for sayin’.”

“No, it’s a big deal. There’s you and me, Gwen, Wink, Jinx and Mr. Kim, and Haley and Lola came in last night. So that makes eight!”

“Is he going on about the record again?”

Tom smiled at Gwen as they walked into the kitchen area.

“Hey, if you’re not setting a record, what’s the point?”

At the table, the front porch chairs had been added to the mix. Mr. Biddles wandered amongst the forest of legs, rubbing up against people and furniture.

Silas squeezed in at an open place to Anthony’s right, and found to his delight that Lola sat on his left.

She smiled sweetly at him.

At his spot, a platter marked “Bacon, Eggs & Grits” waited. Everyone else was already eating. He peeled open the top and dug in, savoring the steamy scents wafting up from the instantly warm dish.

“We can do just fine,” he said after chewing down his first slice of crispy bacon, “so long as these ready to eat meals hold out.”

“I brought six more crates on the Pulsar with me,” Anthony said with a smile. “And that’s just to feed people here. Captain Raleigh had me load ten crates of poshbird to resell in the League City marketplace.”

Tom’s face brightened at this prospect.

At the same time, Wink looked slightly crestfallen at the lost opportunity to turn a big profit.

Jinxie saw his expression. She elbowed him in the ribs, as if to remind him of the 50,000 credit fee the Ultima Mule Company paid them for making the trip.

“Well, you may have a bit of a problem selling anything in League City right now,” Haley said. “We were in Little York before coming out here, and the news came over the wire. There was a huge riot. The ‘have-nots’ tried to burn down the entire west side of town. By the time they made it out to the bazaar, the merchants were waiting for them with guns. It was a bloodbath.”

Gwen winced.

She said, “How many people died?”

“They don’t know yet. Several hundred, at least.”

“The only other details we heard about,” Lola chimed in, “was the fire department couldn’t make it to the fires because of the mob, and the city’s one police car had been knocked out of commission, so they couldn’t use it to quell the riots.”

“I’ve been on the receivin’ end of a squad car during a civil disturbance,” Silas said, grimacing.

Everyone at the table looked at him.

He felt the tips of his ears growing warm. He hurried to explain.

“They got these tear gas canisters they can shoot out. Not to mention the big guns mounted up front. Nope, riots don’t last long after a squad car shows up. Too bad they didn’t have one.”

Now Gwen flushed, but nobody noticed.

Wink said, “Well, they used to have one. It fired on us the other day.”

“Of course, that feels like months ago,” Jinxie said, nodding. “Since for us, it was months ago.”

“I don’t think that the sheriff’s department is on the up and up,” Tom said. “In fact, I’d say they’re probably corrupt, as is the whole city government. They tried to seize your ship, or help those people seize it. And if they did that, there’s no telling what other shady stunts they’re willing to pull.”

This comment was met with widespread agreement.

When everyone finished eating, Anthony slid back his chair.

“We should continue setting things up in League City today, then. We can travel over there, scope out the situation, and set up more sensors for Lisa.”

Most people around the table nodded.

Silas lifted an eyebrow at Lola nodding along, too. Evidently she knew about Tom’s teleportation capabilities.

“And also, while we’re there, I hope we can obtain some depleted power packs. Now that we know the SCUs can successfully recharge them, it would be good to build up a surplus.”

“Silas, you brought the truck?”

“Yes, sir, Mr. Savage.”

“Alright, then. Let’s load her up and we’ll have Lisa port us to the warehouse.”

“But first,” Anthony said, drawing all eyes back to him, “I’d like to put a bell on the cat, so to speak.”

Gwen looked down at Biddles, still winding his way between feet and chair legs.

“Not that cat. Although, that is where I got the idea.”

3.34

Gwen decided this was a man's chore, and elected to stay behind. The other women joined her. She and Haley still had a lot to catch up on, and Jinxie happily gave Lola a tour of the Pulsar.

Out in the desert, near the three large black SCUs, Anthony, Tom, Wink and Silas crouched behind a large rock.

Anthony peered over the top of the stone ledge and tried to see through the mote-filled desert air. Timmy moved slowly and deliberately, the wind whipping up eddies of dust all around him.

"The fable of belling the cat went something like this . . . A council of mice met to decide what to do about the cat terrorizing their community. Someone came up with the idea of hanging a bell around the cat's neck so they could hear the beast when it approached. This seemed like a fine idea, but they quickly faced an irresolvable problem. No one had the courage to go and actually do the deed, and be the one to hang the bell around the cat's neck."

"Fortunately, in our case, we can volunteer Timmy to bell our 'cat,'" Tom said, smiling.

"Just so," Anthony said, smiling back. "I had the idea when I saw how Gwendolyn attached a mini sensor to Mr. Biddles's collar. And it worked remarkably well when he wandered off and almost got eaten by your

resident sand lizard. With the new sensors, we can now track Big Ugly if he comes onto your premises. But we cannot track him out in the desert, and elsewhere outside Lisa's perimeters. Thus, my idea. We bell the cat. Or in this case, the sand lizard."

-+-

Timmy crept through the blinding sand. He had a good idea of Big Ugly's location. The sand lizard had strayed into the far northern extremities of Lisa's sensors covering the SCUs earlier in the morning. And although he had now moved out of the sensor's range, she could extrapolate his position with a fair degree of confidence, and had passed along the projected coordinates to the battle bot.

Anyone wandering out into the desert, however, would never see the giant lizard at first. His mottled, tough hide blended in perfectly with the rocks and sand.

He remained flat on the ground, covering himself and letting the wind throw even more dust over him. Countless unsuspecting animals wandering out in the desert met their end this way.

Timmy knew he was there, though. He approached cautiously. Slowly.

The bot and the resident sand lizard population had gotten to know one another in recent days.

The bot, they discovered, was inedible.

Worse, the bot was invincible.

Even worse than that, the bot had weapons that hurt the sand dragons. He had even killed some . . .

So the sand dragons gave up whenever Timmy made his rounds out in the desert, scaring them away from the SCUs when humans came to experiment.

But this time, Timmy did not run through the dusty desert. He approached the hidden dragon's position cautiously.

A single eye opened, yellow with a black slit, and focused on the robot now looming over it.

In a fight or flight situation, Big Ugly consistently showed a preference to fight. He reared up from the desert floor, shedding dust and spreading his wings out wide to make himself look larger.

He let loose a mighty roar, a long narrow tongue wagging between rows of sharp white teeth.

Timmy switched into hyperspeed. In a flash he reached out with a makeshift necklace made from a smart strap with a mini sensor attached to it.

He placed it around the lizard's head.

It slid down the creature's neck and the smart strap shrank up tight, binding to its new home.

In almost the same instant, Timmy backed away from Big Ugly, his legs blurring. He turned and ran back toward SCU-5, and the rock behind which the men hid.

Big Ugly roared in outrage and raced after his prey. This affront would not go unpunished!

Timmy crossed the dome threshold in a flash. Ready for this situation, having been primed beforehand by Anthony, Lisa reactivated the protective force domes around the SCUs.

As before, Big Ugly slammed into an invisible wall.

Stunned, he slid down to the ground. This time, he stood back up quicker and took several swipes at the wall, like a miniature Godzilla trying to tear down a building that was not there.

Finally, minutes later, the sand lizard snorted in disgust. Big Ugly turned and wandered back out into the desert.

"I don't think I'll get tired of seein' that surprised look on his face when he doesn't get his way," Silas said.

“The moral to this story,” Wink said, “is that the mice should have gotten a robot to bell their cat.”

Tom said, “Absolutely. There’s no way one of us could have done that. Thank God for Timmy.”

Anthony stood up straight.

He said, “Alright, gentlemen. Now let’s go make some money, if the big city isn’t torn up too badly.”

3.35

The truck appeared in Tom's rented warehouse space first, making a loud pop in the enclosed space.

One by one, the others appeared. Tom, Gwen and Anthony were followed by Silas, Haley and Lola.

Wink and Jinxie elected to spend the remainder of the day aboard the Pulsar to look stuff over and prepare for their next run. They had had enough of the big city and held little desire to return.

Haley and Lola had not been to League City in a while, and they were eager to check things out after the riots.

"I hope those bastards didn't tear up too much stuff," Haley said. "I've been needing to go shopping lately. It's just so darn expensive to ride the sky trains. Tom, if you ever decide to monetize your teleportation, you'll rake in the bucks. If you cut the prices by any amount . . . say you asked for a hundred bucks a port . . . you'd be rich beyond belief in no time."

"With just ten thousand ports, you'd be a millionaire," Anthony said in an amused tone.

"Or at least he'd make another million credits," Gwen said, smiling back at Anthony.

“Even at a *thousand* credits per port, you’d still be undercutting the sky trains,” Haley said. “At least you would out in Little York.”

“Well, for now, I’d appreciate it if we kept the teleportation thing under our hats,” Tom said. “Let’s go try and make some money the old fashioned way. By reselling stuff for a steep profit.”

They all piled into the truck.

Silas climbed into the driver’s side and the women sat on the bench seat with him. Lola squeezed in close to him and smiled as she made room for the other two.

He smiled back.

Next to her sat Haley, then Gwen took the far passenger side. Tom opened the warehouse door so Silas could exit, then closed it after he drove through. He climbed up on the back with Anthony and their cargo, and they were off.

The first thing Tom noticed was the heavy scent of smoke in the air. The streets among the warehouses looked deserted. Fortunately, the mob never made it to this side of town. But they saw no one loading up merchandise to take to market. The entire area seemed desolate.

They took the outer road on the edge of town as they made their way to the bazaar. Again, few people were out and about.

Soon they arrived at the open ag resale area that normally teemed with wildlife and farm implements.

Only a handful of farmers braved the circumstances this morning. One family had basket upon basket of eggs for sale. Another man guarded a pen full of baby goats.

A tractor salesman decided he could do worse on any given day, and decided to show up with four different models. A sign he planted on his retail square proclaimed they were “priced to sell.”

“There are some brave folks out here,” Anthony said, observing from the back of the truck with Tom. “But the real question is, will their customers

be brave enough to show up?”

Silas stopped at the edge of the market, where a harried looking old man held up a hand and walked up to his window.

“Ain’t much goin’ on this mornin’. You got the pick of the spots. What you sellin’?”

“Well, ah, this mornin’ we’re looking to unload some foodstuff. We’d also like to buy any old power packs that ain’t workin’.”

The old man chuckled.

“Ha. Just you wait. There’s more and more of them every week. This time next year we’ll be swimming in useless old power packs. Alrighty, take spot 183. Um, there’s six tables there, so that’ll be 30 credits.”

Tom jumped down off the back of the truck and handed the man some tokens. He let them through and Silas wound his way through many empty stalls.

They ended up near the middle of the open-air bazaar, at the end of the tables and the start of the open ag area.

“We’re almost certainly in a better spot than we otherwise would have been in,” Tom said, when he climbed down and inspected the tables.

Gwen said, “Come on, girls. Let’s go shopping. Maybe we can find some bargains!”

The men smiled at one another and commenced unloading the crates of poshbird platters while the women wandered off.

Tom also pulled out a hand-painted sign that read, “Cash for depleted power packs.”

A few minutes later, a harried looking restaurant wholesaler walked up. His eyes grew wide at the stacks of poshbird platters.

“How much? How much for all of them?”

“Ten credits each,” Tom answered without batting an eye.

“What? That’s highway robbery!”

“That’s if you buy them all. Individually, they’re twelve credits each.”

This led to much bluster on the man’s part, with complaints and threats to report him to authorities for “ill-gotten gains,” and “price gouging.”

Tom laughed in his face.

“You can’t price-gouge something that doesn’t exist anywhere else. Just for that, for you, they’re fifteen credits each.”

“You can’t *do* that!”

An older woman walked up as they spoke, staring down at the wondrous fare.

“Are these *poshbirds*? My word, I haven’t had poshbird in forever! How much did you say they were? Fifteen each? Here, I’ll take three.”

When she left, happily walking away with her prizes, the now red-faced restaurant supplier said, “I’ll give you ten each for one hundred of them. That’s a thousand credits.”

“Deal. And if you know of anybody with some spent power packs, we’re giving cash for those, by the way.”

3.36

By noon they were sold out of poshbird. Tom decided if this had been a regular day, they would have sold out a lot sooner. A handful of people picked up two, three or a dozen each. Then another wholesaler came along and bought out the rest of their stock.

They also received their first depleted power packs. Other merchants finally started trickling in. Word quickly spread about Tom's homemade sign, and people began showing up at the booth with guns.

"They're useless without a power pack," one woman who ran a home decorating storefront told him. "And I depleted four rifles during that mess last night."

She emptied the packs on the table in front of Tom and he paid her two credits each for them.

Soon, it seemed that everyone who had depleted their gun packs showed up to earn a little coin off Tom. Silas dutifully piled the incoming inventory back in the truck. Anthony merely watched everything, partaking little in commerce or conversation.

At last someone showed up with a ground car's pack, pushing it in on a floating dolly. For this prize, Tom paid the man twelve credits. He left smiling, pushing an empty dolly. Tom and Silas grunted and hefted the heavy thing up on the back of the truck.

Gwen and the girls showed up, each carrying large shopping bags.

She said, “We’re hungry. What’d you do with the poshbird?”

“Traded them for dead power packs, mostly. But I came out ahead.”

“That’s nice. I probably spent more than you made today.”

“It’s, uh . . . not a competition. What did you buy, anyway?”

“Stuff. Don’t worry about it.”

They decided to call it a day and piled back in the truck. Tom and Silas threw in the sign last. When everyone climbed in, resuming the same positions as before, Silas drove for the exit.

Tom noticed more people on the way out. It seemed with the rising sun, courage lifted the residents as well.

He also saw a head or two on the roofs of shops lining the edge of the bazaar.

“Snipers,” Anthony said, noticing the same thing. “Keeping an eye out for trouble.”

Out on the Loop Road, Silas picked up speed. Traffic remained light as they neared the spaceport and warehouse district.

When Silas slowed down, it piqued Tom’s curiosity. He carefully stood up in the back and stared over the top of the truck for a look ahead.

A cluster of men stood in the road, carelessly aiming guns at the cars they had stopped in both directions. Tom watched as a thug pointed his gun in the window of the car in front of them. The driver shakily handed over all the tokens he had.

The man did not have much of a choice. Thugs surrounded his car, all pointing weapons at him.

When he paid up, the lead thug slapped the hood twice and those blocking the road moved out of the way. The driver sped off, happy to get out of there with his life.

“It’s highway robbery,” Tom said. “Literally.”

Anthony remained seated near the rear of the truck, looking back the way they came.

He yawned and said, “You should do something about it, Tommy. Try not to get any of our people hurt.”

The gunmen turned toward the truck, noticing now that three young women sat up front next to the driver.

Tom did not like the expressions on their faces.

His eyes narrowed.

He tapped his implant.

“Lisa? Do you have a bead on Big Ugly?”

“I do indeed, Thomas. Would you like his coordinates?”

“No. I want you to teleport him here, about three meters in front of the truck. Leave him here for one minute, then put him back where you found him.”

A sand lizard popped into existence between the truck and the thugs. Big Ugly lay on his belly, covered in sand, ready to surprise and attack some unsuspecting morsel of food.

Finding himself suddenly in an unexpected environment, he reared up in surprise, flapping his wings wide in a great cloud of dust.

The thugs backed up and started shooting, their bolts hurting the lizard at close range.

Big Ugly shook his head, as if clearing it. He roared in pain and outrage, then reached out with a claw and ripped off the nearest man’s arm.

He pounced, slashing necks with claws, biting chests with massive jaws, a flurry of death in shades of the desert.

The men screamed as blood sprayed the pavement. The shots grew less frequent. Those on the periphery of the slaughter ran away.

Big Ugly paused in the carnage and let out a triumphant roar, nine dead bodies scattered around him . . . and he disappeared.

Tom pounded the top of the truck's cabin and said, "Let's go, Silas. No sense hanging around."

Silas let his foot off the brake and steered around the bodies in the road, resuming their journey.

As they passed the site of the melee, Anthony nodded in approval.

"Good job thinking on your feet. You would make a fine pirate Captain, like your father."

Tom smiled and said, "I always thought you guys were privateers, not pirates."

"That's true. Privateering is where we made our real money. But that requires a war, and it helps to be on the winning side."

They made it back to the warehouse district with no further troubles.

3.37

“I ’m gonna go back.”

Everyone looked at Haley as she made this announcement at the table over supper in Tom’s house.

“They’ve obviously got little or no law enforcement. If the capital slides into anarchy, it’ll set back admission to a governmental system by years. No one will want us to join if there’s just . . . bandits everywhere.”

She paused, as if waiting for someone to disagree.

No one did.

“And I’ve . . .” she glanced at Lola. “*We* ’ve lost so much, thanks to James Ever and that tank.”

Wink’s face fell at this statement. He still felt guilty about selling the war machine to the Ever Riders.

“I mean, I can’t really recruit out here. This continent will never have a big population. If I ride up to a farmhouse and ask if they have any daughters looking to find their way in the world, they’re likely to tell me they’re out working in the fields and ask me to leave. But I can reform the Fae Phalanx in the city. That’s where girls are lost, and don’t know what to do with their lives. Boys, too, but . . . I’m going to reform the Fae. Whenever this

embargo is over, the first ships carrying fresh immigrants will arrive, and our numbers should swell.”

Gwen nodded in encouragement.

“I’m happy for you. We’ll do anything we can to help, Haley. Just let us know.”

“Thank you, Gwen. And also while I’m there, I’m going to help figure out what’s going on. The sheriff should have better control over that city. There should not be armed gang members roaming around robbing people. The bazaar area looked controlled, but there were merchants everywhere, and they all had guns. I’d like to see what the rest of the city looks like, and do something about it.”

“They likely relied too much on their squad car,” Anthony said, offering an opinion on the matter. “It is a force multiplier, worth several law enforcement officers all by itself. It is blaster-proof, it has bigger guns than anyone else, with crowd control measures built in. When Gwendolyn took it out, they lost a major advantage. I would suspect the sheriff’s department is understaffed. Right now they are likely overwhelmed if the local hooligans have decided to riot and roam around robbing people.”

“Yeah. It’s anarchy out there. As a ranger, I’m duty-bound to help. So . . . I’m going back. I won’t stay the night here. I’m already packed. If it’s okay with you, Tom, Gwen, I’d like your AI to port me back there tonight.”

Tom nodded and said, “You bet. We should give you an implant, too. That way you can communicate with us if you need something. Also, I’ll set you up in the warehouse. You can use it as a place to sleep until you get settled.”

“Thank you. I greatly appreciate it.”

Her eyes drifted to Lola, sitting near Silas. The young girl’s face reddened.

“I’m staying here.”

She glanced at Silas, as if seeking his approval.

In response, he grinned from ear to ear.

“I mean, no offense Haley. I’ve just seen enough of law enforcement for a while. I want to stay out here, where it’s nice and peaceful. Maybe I can help Mr. Vick grow some things.”

“Please . . . call me Silas.”

The two stared in one another’s eyes, smiling.

Tom snorted.

“How’s it feel, Silas?”

The farmhand looked up, startled.

“Huh?”

“How’s it feel to be called by your last name?”

“Aw, Mr. Savage, I . . .”

He paused again, looking awkward.

Tom guffawed at the expression on his face.

“Don’t worry about it, Silas. Haley, let’s get you ready. We’ll send you with a bunch of food, some guns and credit tokens. What else will you need?”

“I, uh . . . I think that’s it. I can always come back if I forgot anything. Or you can port it to me.”

“That’s right. Stay there, I’ll be right back.”

The others engaged in light conversation, mostly wishing Haley well. Tom returned, holding a small black disk.

“Hold this in place under your ear.”

Moments later, Haley’s eyes blanked out as she accessed Lisa’s interface for the first time.

“Oh, wow. It’s been a while since I . . . oh, look at all the entertainment options!”

Her eyes refocused on the room.

“Well, I’ll have plenty of time to go through that later.”

She stood and went to get her saddlebags. Out in the living room, she hugged Gwen and Lola, then shook hands with all the men and Jinxie.

Stepping away from everyone, she picked up her saddlebags.

“Okay, Lisa. I’m ready when you are.”

Haley popped away with a loud displacement of air.

“If anybody can get that town in shape, she can,” Gwen said. “Right, Lola?”

But Lola was no longer paying attention to what was going on around her. She and Silas stared silently at one another . . . smiling.

3.38

Elmer DeLorenzo sat in a conference room with Joachim Xu.

Neither man spoke for a moment. They stared at one another, silently sizing the other one up.

The conference room was neutral ground for a meeting, but it was also one of necessity. DeLorenzo had private offices for the Sheriff's Department in the Courthouse basement, but he considered those sacrosanct. No civilians were allowed in the spacious complex devoted to the city's law enforcement.

Xu, on the other hand, had been relegated a tiny office roughly the size of a small closet. It remained barely large enough for him alone, and was not conducive at all for meeting someone.

Thus, the conference room.

Xu spoke first, even though he was aware by doing so he would be handing some measure of power and control over to the sheriff. But this was a far too important set of circumstances to worry about perceived power, he thought.

And egos.

"Hizzoner is not pleased, Elm."

“Nor am I, Joachim. I only have three deputies. Or had. They were all out last night and none of them have reported in. For all I know, my entire force has been killed by the mobs rampaging through the city. You can tell Hizzoner that if I find out those lunatics killed my men, I am going to be way more disappointed than he is.”

“League City is governed by the mayor, and this is indeed his ultimate responsibility. But he relies on you and your men to keep civil unrest under control, to suppress the criminal elements as best you can.”

DeLorenzo sneered and leaned back in his seat.

“We all know the XO Society is under Hizzoner’s thumb. Or is it the other way around? What I bet happened is they lusted after that ship that docked with all the candy bars. When my boys went to get it for you, and all hell broke loose, and I lost my one and only squad car, and all those thugs ended up dead . . . this was one big hissy fit about all that. Am I right?”

Xu stared back wordlessly. He kept his hands on the table. Xu did not normally go around armed, even before DeLorenzo’s directive to keep the Courthouse a gun-free zone.

DeLorenzo remained armed.

Xu was not afraid of the man, but he remained cognizant of the fact the sheriff could kill him with little or no repercussions.

That . . . felt slightly unsettling to Xu.

He leaned back in the chair.

“The mayor’s office has long had a good working relationship with the sheriff’s office, Elm. We know one another well. I attended your daughter’s *quinceañera* last year.”

DeLorenzo nodded, but his expression remained unwavering. He could acknowledge a close working relationship with the man.

“It would have been nice to see Hizzoner there, too. Just sayin’.”

“Hizzoner unfortunately could not make it.”

“Hizzoner never seems to be able to make it to anything these days. I haven’t seen him much since the election. Nobody has.”

“But he did, if you will recall, send a very nice gift, which I delivered personally to your daughter.”

DeLorenzo grunted in acknowledgement.

“Look, things have settled down by all accounts,” Xu continued. “But I have heard reports of armed bands of brigands holding people up in less protected places. I have not seen any of your deputies on the holos. We need to get this under control, Elm. Hizzoner is not happy. At all.”

“I may be the only law enforcement you got right now, Joachim. I’ll need to deputize some of these merchants who seem to be far better armed than we knew about. I’d like to know where they got those guns, by the way. Customs is supposed to do a better job preventing the importation of weapons. There’s too many private deals made by the merchants and these spaceships that keep landin’.”

“Well, that won’t be a problem for a while. We’re under an embargo at the moment, enforced by all three major systems.”

DeLorenzo’s eyes grew big at that news.

“Is that right? Well, I can see why y’all have not made that news public.”

“The important thing right now is re-establishing control of the city. We’re about to release the Courthouse from its lockdown. I’ll need you to guard it so we don’t have to put it back under lockdown. But above all else, Hizzoner wants his city back.”

The sheriff sighed and leaned back in the leather chair.

“I already have a call out for any rangers within a thousand clicks. I’m thinkin’ help is on the way. It’s posted in every public house between here and Westheimer.”

“Good,” Xu said, breathing a small sigh of relief. “Very good. I look forward to you bringing peace to the streets again.”

“I’ll do that, quick as I can,” DeLorenzo said, standing up.

He paused at the door and turned back, pointing a finger at Xu.

“You need to get that crazy Gliph bastard under control. If I ever get any manpower, I’m ordering him to be shot on sight. And if there’s some puppet behind the man pulling his strings that I don’t know about . . . you need to make sure that bastard stays under control, too.”

Xu nodded slightly in assent.

The sheriff closed the door on his way out, with a final frown at Xu.

3.39

Tom walked out onto his front porch as the sky grew lighter.

Before he could sit down, he heard a meow from behind the door, and he opened it again. Mr. Biddles padded out onto the porch with him.

After seeing that her idea for a sensor on his collar worked, after Lisa ported the kitten away from Big Ugly, Gwen was far less protective of Biddles now. She was willing to let him roam around outside without supervision.

So Tom let him out.

He sat down in one of the uncomfortable Holton designer chairs Gwen bought for the front porch.

Then he chuckled to himself.

She wanted the “nicer” chairs out front for visitors. But other than those arriving by spaceship, they had few people making it out this far out from town.

He took a long sip of coffee and set it down on the porch railing. Biddles jumped up and walked along the ledge, then stuck his head inside the coffee cup for a good sniff.

“Great.”

The kitten decided he did not like coffee. He stepped over the mug, moving on.

Tom dumped the coffee out on the ground in disgust.

“That’s a waste, Biddles.”

The kitten paid him no mind, crouching, then jumping softly down to the ground. He began exploring.

The force shield went off on the CC 1000 and the slats opened, followed by the door.

Robert the Rooster stepped out, surveying his domain with jerks of his head.

The chicks followed, cheeping and pecking at the ground.

“You know, I think they’re actually getting bigger. Must be something to that corn from Pearl.”

Timmy tromped in from his station out in the field, heading for the stables. Moments later, the horses followed him to the corral gate and trotted out toward the river.

Tom leaned back in the chair and sighed in contentment, unwilling to leave this morning scene of farm bliss for another cup of coffee just now.

The door opened again and Gwen stepped out, holding two cups of coffee, one in either hand.

“You must be psychic,” Tom said, gratefully taking one from her.

“Lisa told me you had to dump yours out. I asked her for an update on Mr. Biddles.”

He chuckled and took a sip while she settled down in the other chair.

In the distance, they saw the truck crossing over the bridge. Moments later, Silas parked it and exited. On the passenger side, Lola got out. Both were smiling as they approached the front porch.

Gwen said, “How do you like your new house, Lola?”

“I love it! I have some ideas for things to buy the next time we port over to League City. It needs more decoration. A feminine touch.”

Tom gave Silas a sympathetic look, but the farmhand was smiling ear to ear and staring at Lola.

Privately, Tom considered whether he should make a snide comment about who was wrapped around whose finger now. But he thought it didn't seem right. The couple looked very happy.

“We got married last night,” Silas said. “Meet the new Mrs. Vick.”

They hugged each other from the side and grinned wide at the couple on the porch.

Gwen frowned in confusion.

“Really? You found a preacher all the way out here? Or a priest? How did you do that?”

Lola shook her head, still smiling strong.

“No, we had a prairie wedding. We stood under the stars, and the moons were our witnesses. I promised to be faithful to him, and he promised to only have me, as long as we live. Lisa recorded the union in her ledger. She said she would share it with the other AIs whenever they had contact.”

Tom shrugged at Gwen.

He looked back at the couple and said, “Okay. I guess as long as we've got Lisa, it's official. Congratulations you two. Any plans for a honeymoon?”

The couple stared deep into each other's eyes, still smiling.

“Nah, we're good Mr. Savage. We gots lot of work to do around here.”

“Okay. Well, you know, you two can always go to a nice restaurant in League City sometime, if it ever calms down over there. Maybe we can plant some more sensors in other towns, too. It'd be nice to have access to all the cities. I know the overall population on this planet is still small, but it still might be good to have sensors around the globe.”

The couple continued smiling at one another, and Tom had the distinct impression nobody was listening to him.

Wink and Jinxie rounded the corner of the house, followed by Anthony.

“There you all are,” Wink said. “We thought we’d come by and say goodbye before taking off. Jinx wanted to spend one more night in real time before going home, and Mr. Kim didn’t mind. But I am ready to get going this morning.”

Gwen said, “Come inside and we’ll get coffee and breakfast for everybody before you go.”

Biddles found the chicks at that moment, discovering wondrous bright yellow creatures his own size. Scampering over to investigate, the sudden movement caught Robert’s attention.

He crowed in alarm and ran toward the kitten fast, with death in his eyes.

Biddles skidded to a stop, staring up at the giant bird rushing for him . . . and disappeared.

Robert halted, dancing in place, his head jerking all around as he tried to find the black and white creature and kill it.

Eventually he gave up and slowly walked away, his comb wagging as he kept an eye out for any other trespassers in his territory.

As the people filed in the front door, Biddles sat on his haunches in the middle of the living room, looking wide-eyed and confused.

Gwen said, “Mr. Biddles! How’d you get inside before us?”

3.40

Following a tip Tom gave her, Haley bought a used ground car.

She liked horses, but their use was discouraged in the city. Horses tended to leave behind messes, and nobody liked that.

So she found the open air part of the market, walking down the Loop Road to get there.

She came across bloody splotches left behind by Big Ugly's brief appearance in League City, but despite that uncomfortable reminder, she had no troubles.

Pity the man who did give her trouble. She felt ready to shoot someone. Haley actually felt a little disappointed that no one even tried to verbally harass her. She made it to the bazaar unmolested.

Someone had a car for sale with a few days left on the battery pack. After a little haggling, they gave it to her for 250 credits.

She drove it back to the Warehouse District. Tom had included her palm print in the rental document, so she could come and go as she pleased.

A short while later, the car popped away. She knew somebody would drive it out into the desert and get the power pack recharged, or maybe Lisa would port it close by.

At any rate, within an hour the car popped back into the warehouse, now good for another three years or so, depending on how much she drove it.

She opened the trunk and found it packed with municipal sensors. Not the giant kind that PLAIR and the others used. These were new models, specially designed for Lisa. They looked like little pyramids with the tops chopped off, roughly the size of an American football.

Out in the open, they had a one kilometer range, and a handful could cover a lot of territory.

Here in the city, with all the concrete and metal in the buildings, the range would be more limited. Thus, more would be needed.

“Alright, Lisa. Let me start placing these things around the city for you. Then I’ll get busy and start kicking some butts around here.”

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In a secluded basement on the south side of town, a rare meeting took place between Anton Berris and Reynard Glyph.

Berris, in his farmer’s outfit, looked sharp and suave in comparison to the unkempt Glyph, whose dirty white hair stuck up in tufts, matching his beard.

But if the differences in appearance bothered the older man, he did not show it. He met Berris’s eyes as an equal.

“Things are going well.”

“Things are completely out of control, Rey.”

“Wealth is being redistributed as we speak. Those that have it are giving it up to those of who do not. I would say things are going *very* well.”

“We’ve lost the numbers in any future election. Too many southsiders died in the riots last night. We had guns, yes, but the merchants had more guns. And the will to use them. They were defending their home turf, and it showed. I would say we lost three to one, maybe more.”

“Casualties must be endured for the cause, my friend. Sad but true.”

“We’re not going to have any pull in the next election.”

Gliph shrugged.

“So maybe we don’t hold an election. It will be our town by then, anyway.”

“Maybe.”

Berris looked unconvinced. He sat back in the chair and crossed his arms.

“Anton, we must stick with the plan. One cannot start a revolution on a civilized planet. You know this. PLAIR, StarCen . . . they are far too powerful. StarCen used to send SSI agents to kill people if she heard a whiff of civil unrest before the Great League Reset. Even now, she won’t stand for it. You know that if we are to have real societal change it needs to start out here, on a virgin planet. One untouched by AI technology as much as possible.”

“I know the plan, Rey. I helped write it.”

“But we do need some technology. In particular, we need that ship and its hypertime capabilities. Imagine being able to visit every city on the face of this globe in a matter of minutes. That’s what the Pulsar will give us, when we get it. It will render sky trains woefully obsolete, and we will be the ones who have it. We’ll be able to effect the revolution so much more easily when we can travel instantaneously.”

“Pulsar wasn’t in our original plans, Rey.”

“Plans can be modified when the opportunity of a lifetime comes along, Anton.”

Berris sighed.

“I suppose you’re right. It will be difficult to capture that ship, though. Captains and pilots are superstitious. I doubt they set down in our spaceport again anytime soon.”

“You forget, Anton. The X’s and O’s have a long reach throughout the galaxy. We may not have succeeded in revolutionizing an industrialized planet. But wherever there’s people, there are X’s and O’s. And we can call upon them for help.”

Berris nodded, with a little more enthusiasm this time.

“Very well. You’ve sent out a directive?”

“I have. They’ll find the Pulsar, Anton. And when they do, they’ll deliver her to us. We *will* incorporate that ship into our plan.”

Across the table, the old man with the wild hair smiled at him.

Berris allowed himself to smile back, at least a little.

-+-

Night fell once again across the homestead.

Tom stepped outside on the back porch, looking for his farm hand. He saw Silas in the garden, showing Lola something on the ground.

The door opened behind him and Gwen stepped out to join him on the porch.

“What are they doing?”

“If I had to guess,” Tom said, “I’d say the beans are coming up. Pretty sure they’re going to be the first things to show. I had to grow some for a project in school, back in the day.”

He squinted in the dim light as both Silas and Lola dropped to the ground suddenly, and began squirming around.

“What are they doing now? Can you see anything with your enhanced vision?”

Gwen glanced that way and quickly turned around.

“Oh. You don’t want to know. Come on, let’s go back inside and give them some privacy.”

As they walked back in, Tom said, “Don’t they have a house to do that in?”

“Thomas, I have an incoming call from your parents.”

“Oh, good. We’ll take it in the living room, Lisa. Definitely not outside.”

As they walked into the large room, Christopher Raleigh's holo appeared, standing next to Jillian Raleigh. Both smiled at their boy.

"Two things, son," his father said as soon as the connection established itself. "One, we've got a report that there's some trouble your friends are in with their spaceship."

"Again? What happened this time? Is everybody okay?"

"We think they're fine, for the moment. But there was an incident at the space station they were dropping Anthony Kim off at. I'm still waiting on details."

"Okay. What's the second thing?"

"Somebody's here visiting and wants to talk with you. Well, with Gwen, really. Gina? You wanna come in here?"

"Gwendolyn Wilcox Del Rio!"

The holo for a tall, older woman with short blonde hair appeared in the living room.

Despite her age, somewhere in her 50s, she stayed athletic with no apparent body fat showing.

She glared at the younger version of herself, across time and space.

Gwen's mouth dropped open.

"... Mom?"

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A klaxon rang out through the ship as Wink ran for the bridge.

"Wink? Wink! I can't move! We can't go anywhere! Nothing is responding!"

He slid to a stop, staring out the front holo. A space station took up a third of the view, a gas giant filled the rest.

A much smaller ship, a maintenance model, drifted toward them using a standard drive.

“That’s going to be a boarding party,” Anthony Kim said, walking onto the bridge to join them.

“Where’s everybody from your space station? What’s happening?”

“We ported into a stasis field. It’s actually an old idea, one that my boss, Chris Raleigh, invented during the war. With teleportation, if someone knows where you going to be, they can lay a trap to prevent you from leaving once you get there. It disables the Wu Drive.”

“But . . . how did they know we would be here?”

“I don’t know. But this,” Anthony said, raising an eyebrow, “is what we call a betrayal.”

A clanking sound reverberated throughout the ship as the maintenance vessel clamped onto Pulsar’s hull with magnets.

“Get ready,” Anthony said. “This won’t be pretty.”

He pulled out a gun and left the bridge.

End of Book 3

PULSAR'S PERIL

4.1

Silas Vick and Lola, his bride, walked in through the back door of Tom Savage's house.

An age gap existed between the two, but neither seemed to mind. The couple looked unkempt and a little dirty, with garden soil clinging to clothes and skin. Both had flushed faces, and distraught hair.

They found Tom sitting at the kitchen table sipping a cup of coffee, Gwen Wilder yelling at someone in the living room at the front of the house.

"What's goin' on?"

"Don't go in there. Mother-daughter chat."

"Oh."

Lola said, "She's talking to her mom? The head of the Planetary Republic's Agency of Justice?"

"Yep."

Silas blanched at this comment, and his eyes grew wide.

"Oh. I didn't know she was . . . Hey, sweetie, why don't we go on home? I don't think Ms. Wilder is gonna be too interested in eatin' supper with company right now."

Tom smiled and offered them a couple platters of poshbird from his pantry, but Silas had already stocked his own house with several dozen trays. He declined the offer for more.

Tom walked the couple to the back door and watched as they climbed into the old flatbed truck. It drifted past the stables and chicken coop, floating down the road toward the bridge before disappearing in the dark.

The shouting from the living room continued.

“YOU sent me out here! Remember? It was an opportunity to grow up! ‘Get out on your own,’ you said. And I wanted to get out from under your . . . your surveillance state!”

“I have a surveillance state? Do you really think living on Diego is so oppressive, Gwendolyn? Don’t answer that. I already know by your actions what you think. But what I can’t understand is . . . what in the world are you doing shacking up with the Raleigh’s boy?”

Tom smiled again, listening. He leaned against the doorjamb and took another sip.

The argument between Gwen and her mother, via hologram over the quantum matrix, was loud enough for him to hear it anywhere in the house.

He sat down, put his feet up on another chair and continued sipping coffee while the two talked.

“I . . . Mother, housing is . . . we’re on the *frontier*, Mom. Tom has a way to build houses fast out here. I have my own room, okay? It’s not what you think.”

“Fine. You are so many light years away, I can’t do anything about it anyway. I trust you to make good decisions, Gwendolyn. I was just surprised, that’s all. I knew nothing about what you are doing on that . . . that frontier planet. Marshal Metger sent me a message on his way home saying he met you and you looked good, and that you and Thomas Raleigh were together. I got the message when I arrived on Lute. I called Jillian, and she already knew all about it. Apparently, *her* child actually calls home on occasion.”

“Mom, I don’t have the means to call home all the time. Or even on occasion. We’re out in the middle of nowhere. This is an unaligned planet. We don’t even have a permanent antenna for the quantum matrix.”

“Of course you do. You do now. Because the Ultima Mule Company installed one. I realize it only works on Thomas’s local AI. But . . . you do live inside Thomas’s *house*. You can call your mother on occasion.”

“Mom, he just got that. I think the Pulsar brought it in or something. They had a guy, Anthony Kim. He set up a lot of new things.”

The expression on Gina Del Rio’s face changed.

“Yes, I know Anthony. And right now, he and that ship are in a bit of trouble. It’s one of the reasons I’m meeting Chris and Jillian in the first place.”

She sighed, then glanced around the living room.

“The door is open. I presume your boyfriend is listening in. Get him in here. Jillian and Chris need to hear this too. I’ll go get them.”

Tom put his coffee down and walked into the living room the same time Gina reappeared. He shared a sympathetic glance with Gwen before turning to her mother.

“Mrs. Del Rio. We’ve met before, at a reunion for the Mule.”

“Yes. Hello, Thomas.”

Both left much unsaid.

Thomas’s parents helped the Republic win the war. Arguably, the Planetary Republic would not have won at all without help from the Pirates of the Milky Way. The Republican Navy had been outnumbered and outgunned at the start of the conflict, and needed all the help they could get.

But more than that, Tom’s parents had helped Gina personally. They were friends. And that, Tom guessed, would shield him from at least some of the matrimonial vitriol emanating from the famous AOJ Director.

At least to his face.

His parents' holos reappeared in the room by walking through the walls. Gina turned to face them.

"Chris, Jillian. Thank you for joining us. I have been keeping an eye on Phaethon, since my lovely daughter went there. We try to coordinate with the locals and find out who, exactly, is immigrating to planets outside the realms of government oversight. Unfortunately, we haven't had a lot of cooperation in that regard as far as Phaethon goes. We think, based on ship manifests that PLAIR was able to intercept for us, that several fugitives and known criminals headed there when it opened for colonization three years ago. And based on what we've been able to glean, that stream of criminals has continued."

"That's how the Marshal's Service tracked down Malcolm Dalmont. You helped them."

Gina gave her daughter a flat stare.

"Of course I did. He needed to find a fugitive, and I happened to know the Dalmont brothers immigrated to Phaethon. You know we work with the Marshal's Service all the time, Gwendolyn. And there are several other known criminals who headed to your little paradise. Par Strovich. Leonwood Iglese. James Ever."

Tom coughed in his fist to interrupt.

"You don't have to worry about that last one anymore."

"Oh, really?" Gina gave her daughter a glare. "He's right. I would have less to worry about if someone would call home every now and then and tell me what's going on in her life."

"That *just* happened, Mom. We did not have an antenna in orbit until, like, yesterday."

Gina's eyes softened, and she glanced apologetically at Jillian.

"Anyway, as I was saying, our analysts who monitor these things uncovered some interesting tidbits. A large percentage of the passengers on the manifests we were able to retrieve had people with ties to the X's and O's."

Chris and Jillian traded a look. He shook his head. She shrugged.

Gina noticed the exchange.

“They try to stay out of the limelight. After the war their founder, a man by the name of Reynard Gliph, started a movement to establish a utopia. Not a libertarian one, or a socialist one, necessarily. More like a libertine colony. An anarchist commune would be a close descriptor, but more nuanced. One with him at the top of the org chart.”

“Oh,” Chris said, nodding. “One of those.”

“Yes. He’s very charismatic. A true believer. He’s convinced he can tailor a society separate from the AIs that would be ideal, if only someone will let him do it. We’ve tried to put a lid on his activities over the years, but he keeps moving on, gathering followers along the way. He’s given the League fits, too, needless to say, in the short while he spent over there. They’re more aggressive in squashing political dissent than we are. We’re mainly worried about someone trying to undermine the government. They’re much more vindictive, even after the reset. He didn’t stay there for very long.”

“We’re not familiar with him or his movement here in the Alliance. At least I’m not.”

“Consider yourself lucky, then. About five years ago, he met a man named Anton Berris. Anton’s father made a fortune selling ball bearings and other small but crucial components to Republican Shipworks.”

Jillian said, “So he met money, you’re telling us.”

“Exactly. Gliph recruited him. Berris became his primary strategist, confidant, and co-conspirator. Basically, Gliph is the driving force and Berris is the steering wheel. Berris reorganized everything and came up with their name, the X’s and O’s. We think it’s a sports metaphor, and has something to do with game analysis. Sometimes they’ll shorten it and call themselves XO, or otherwise put the letters in the name of whatever outfit they’re using.”

“So, what’s their endgame?” Chris said. “Anarchy? Reshape society?”

“Their goal is to establish Utopia. They’ve failed to make headway up till now on settled worlds, mostly because in order to create an independent entity the way they want it requires breaking all kinds of existing laws. So in the last two years, over several inbound ships, they’ve migrated almost all of their followers to Phaethon. We think they’re going to try and set up their Utopia over there.”

“Where? On an island or something?”

Gina shook her head.

“We think they want the whole planet.”

“How are they going to control a whole planet? Do they have that many people?”

“That, Chris, is where Pulsar comes in. We also recently learned, thanks to a little incident that ship was involved in on Sporades, in which we believe it smuggled offworld some League weaponry left over from the war . . . we learned that Pulsar has a Machro-drive installed. That would explain your old engineer’s presence at the moment, since Kim and Pak’s Subtle Services is the only company in all three systems that would have been willing to install something like that on a private vessel.”

She gave the former pirate Captain a steely look.

Chris raised his hands and said, “I have no control over Kim, Pak or Subtle Services. They founded that company with their own money. I’m not even a stakeholder.”

Gina waved it aside. She had bigger things to worry about at the moment.

“The point is, those fanatics want that Machro-drive. With it, they can practically be in several cities at once. They can transfer people and weapons almost instantly to every continent in the blink of an eye. They can finally establish their own régime on a fresh unaligned planet. After that, our intelligence indicates Gliph and Berris want to establish a new governmental system, joining the Republic, the League and the Alliance.”

“Is that necessarily a bad thing?” Chris said. “That doesn’t sound much different than how the Alliance got started.”

“I’ll send you Gliph’s file. ‘Megalomaniacal’ is a good word to describe him. You do not want him in charge of anything, much less an entire planet. Berris is not much better.”

“Okay, fair enough. But I’m not sure there’s much you or I can do about it. Hopefully Tom will stay out of the way on his farm. I may be able to help out a little with the Pulsar issue, since it’s in Lutian space at the moment. Although, I’m not even sure how much that will be needed if they’ve got Anthony onboard.”

Gina nodded.

She glanced at her daughter again, then back to the Raleighs.

“I’m sending someone to Phaethon on the first humanitarian mission.”

“We’re under an embargo, Mom. And there’s no real need for humanitarian assistance. This planet is loaded with food. Heck, even we are growing a garden.”

Gina gave her daughter another flat stare.

“‘We?’”

Gwen blushed.

“Yes, ‘we.’ Tom and I are in this together.”

Subconsciously almost, they both moved closer together in the room, facing their parents.

Her mother relented, eyes softening.

“I still have contacts in the Navy. They owe me plenty, and I’ve got a lot of chits to turn in, if I have to. Trust me, dear. A Republican humanitarian mission will be underway to Phaethon within the hour. Because I’m going to ask Admiral Bizzell to send one. And on that ship will be a reporter for the Zeitung. His name is Ashley Thallus. If you meet him, and he knows all about your little farm, so I expect you probably will at some point, extend to him every courtesy. He works for your father, after all.”

“You’re sending someone to *spy* on me?”

Gina snorted softly. She tilted her head, staring at her daughter across the light years of space between them.

“Don’t be so self-centered, Gwendolyn. This is not about you.”

4.2

Haley Stonecipher parked her car in a field out past the bazaar near the edge of League City. Here, officials set up an open-air morgue to allow next of kin to recover bodies.

Most of the townsfolk killed by the rioters had already been interred. She spotted ten or twelve corpses remaining. But as for the rioters, the larger group, few had been claimed.

Above, buzzard-rocs floated on updrafts, their giant wingspans catching the dusty air and holding them aloft.

On occasion, one dropped down lower only to run into the force dome above the field, disrupting their flight. With squawking and much flapping of wings they regained altitude and resumed circling.

“Scum,” said a man watching over things after he switched off the force dome to let her inside.

He looked older, a city employee on the maintenance crew judging by his neon-blue overalls. They had blocky white letters on the front reading, “LC.”

“The birds?” Haley said, looking up at the circling flock.

“Naw, the southsiders. Nobody wants them. We’re gonna have to figure out what to do with all these bodies.”

“Nobody has claimed *anybody* from the rioters?”

“A few. Some maybe weren’t southsiders. Their next of kin found them in that group, though. Maybe some folks got caught up in the spirit of the thing and tried to loot a store, and ended up gettin’ shot or something. Who knows. You lose somebody?”

“I’m not sure. Maybe? I’d like to look around, if I can.”

“Sure. Take a look around. Most everybody else has found who they were looking for. It’s trickled off. You’re the first one all mornin’. I guess we’re gonna have to incinerate the rest. Or dig a big ol’ grave out here. Or something. The smell’s gettin’ bad.”

“Maybe somebody should take pictures before the bodies are disposed of. For records.”

The old man raised his eyebrows.

“That’s not a bad idea. I’ll pass it along. We’re probably gonna have to do something before nightfall. Hizzoner, or rather Mr. Xu, will like that idea, I bet.”

He waved at the cadavers lining the field.

“You go on ahead and take a look. I’m gonna step outside the dome for a breath of fresh air. If you find somebody and want to claim their body, come find me and we’ll get it squared away.”

Haley thanked him. He turned off the dome via a button on a podium nearby. Its twin was connected by a wire outside the force dome. When he crossed the boundary, he turned it back on again.

She watched him leave, then headed deeper inside, walking among the corpses laid out on the grass.

It was not a pretty sight. But at least it looked sanitized, somewhat.

Someone had procured white sheets. Maybe a store owner donated them for this purpose, she thought. City workers covered all the bodies, making uniform rows of white mounds. Blood seeped through some, adding splotches of red spots here and there.

The force dome kept out the wind and held in the smell of death, at least to an extent. Haley thought when it flickered off to let people in and out, that's when enough of the scent was released to attract buzzard-rocs.

She did not know what she was looking for, or what compelled her to come out here and see the end result of the riots firsthand.

If she had to search deep inside for an answer, it might have something to do with the historic nature of the riots. The planet was still young, and this had been a significant event in its early history of settlement. Haley had not been there, but she could at least witness the aftermath. That felt important, and she acted on the impulse.

The bodies were laid out with half a meter separating them and rows to walk between. To her left, feet stuck out from the sheets. To her right, heads were covered, making a smaller lump than the torsos and legs.

She wondered how difficult it had been for families to find loved ones, uncovering sheet after sheet in the makeshift morgue until they saw a familiar face.

Idly walking, her mind inevitably drifting to the gruesome nature of it all, her eyes roamed the many white sheets with feet sticking out.

She stopped, staring at one pair of feet in particular.

"Are those wall crawler boots?"

She edged closer to a corpse on her left, squatting down for a closer look.

"Those *are* wall crawlers."

Curious, Haley removed the sheet from the corpse's face, pulling it back halfway. She found a dead young man with mouth open, eyes closed, and a hole in his chest.

“What was a rioter doing with wall crawler boots? Did you try to break into a place with those on?”

She looked back in the direction she entered, but the old man was nowhere to be seen.

“Hm. Well . . . you’re not going to need those anymore, are you?”

She covered the corpse’s head again.

“And I could surely use something like this.”

She pulled both boots off the dead man and headed back for the exit.

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The black boots, Haley found to her delight, were lined with the same material used for smart straps. After spraying the insides with disinfectant and letting them dry out, she pulled them on. The material compressed around her feet, making them fit perfectly.

Haley waited until nightfall before venturing out again. She left the car behind and walked out the front door of Tom’s warehouse.

The area looked dark and deserted, scattered streetlamps providing weak illumination.

She bent down and pressed buttons on the sides of the boots. The soles glowed softly, activating.

“Alright. Let’s turn the lights off.”

She held the buttons down briefly. The lights died.

“They’re still on, right?”

Experimentally, she placed her right foot on the wall of the warehouse. It held in place.

Pushing up, she lifted her left leg higher on the wall, then waved her arms as her balance shifted.

“I think I got the hang of it.”

She took another step up the wall, then another, walking vertically. At the top, she crossed onto the roof’s slight incline, standing straight again. Now she could look out across the Warehouse District, the dark shapes of neighboring structures disappearing in shadows.

“Well, alright.”

She walked to the middle of the roof, feeling confident in the boots’ grip. Here, she unslung her backpack and took out a sensor, placing the unit in the middle of the roof. It activated as she watched, noting that it appeared to be about the size of an American football, a flat-topped pyramid shape.

“How’s it looking, Lisa?”

“I have an unobstructed view of this entire area now. Thank you, Haley.”

“You are welcome. Let’s get the rest of the city covered for you. Tell me where to go next.”

4.3

Haley parked the car near the bazaar. She climbed out and looked at the surrounding buildings. Height mattered with the sensors, she thought, which is why most municipal ones were mounted on poles.

Lisa would be an unofficial municipal AI. Her sensors would hopefully avoid detection, at least for a while. But they still needed to be mounted high.

At the end of Commerce Boulevard, where it emptied out into the open-air bazaar, stood the last of a string of five-story apartment buildings lining the street all the way back to the Courthouse.

She nodded, her course determined, then glanced around to see if the coast was clear.

More people populated the shopping district than the warehouse district, even at night after all the stores were closed. For one thing, apartments took up the upper floors of these buildings. Merchants who could afford it wanted to live closer to their showroom floors, and people still went in and out.

She wandered out into the bazaar a ways. Here, the plywood booths fronting Commerce Boulevard were closed down, all merchandise carted off by the sellers until morning light.

Haley strolled along until she found herself walking beside the last building, a few windows on the ground floor facing out to a sea of booths.

She glanced both ways and saw no one. Reaching down, she activated her boots and took a step up the wall.

Moments later, she strolled onto the apartment building's top. Some air conditioning units squatted on the flat roof here, along with an access point featuring a hinged door. Lights from the street were very dim, but Haley's enhanced vision made up for that.

In a quiet voice she said, "Lisa, where's the best place up here to put your sensor so it won't be disturbed?"

"The least observed place will also be the highest. I suggest placing it on top of the roof access structure."

Haley nodded and moved toward the center. There, a small cubic structure large enough for a door and not much more stood. She walked up the side, leaving another sensor on top, right in the middle.

"Hey!"

She jerked her head toward the shout.

Two men on the other side of the street pointed at her. One of them fired a gun, the bolt sailing across open air.

Haley jumped off the roof and rolled, bolts zipping through the air.

More shouts went up further down the street.

"What's going on?"

"Somebody's on top of the Bakery Building! Not one of us!"

Haley bit off some curses, and belly-crawled back toward the wall facing the bazaar. Fortunately, the lip of the roof hid her from the men on the other side of the street.

"Where are they? I'm headed that way!"

"On the roof! I don't think I got 'em!"

“I’ll have a light on when I come out! Don’t shoot me!”

“You got it!”

Haley picked up the pace, grunting. Her arms and legs hugged the surface as she willed herself forward like an inchworm.

She looked down at her bare arms, wishing they were covered with something black. Her blouse, too, had a plaid red and green pattern, more appropriate for horse riding or working outdoors.

Right now she found herself wishing it was solid black.

Haley reached the edge of the roof, a low one-third meter wall marking the lip.

Just as her hand touched the edge, the door to the roof burst open. A gunman came out, a flashlight mounted on his rifle. He swung wide, sweeping the area.

Haley took a couple of deep breaths, psyching herself up.

She jumped up and did a handstand on the edge of the roof.

“There they are!”

Bolts from across the street streaked through air. But the narrowest part of her body faced the gunmen. Shots flew by to her left and right, but missed.

The man with rifle light swung it her way.

She pushed off from the roof and somersaulted just as his light found her. The gunman squeezed the trigger on full auto, but she dropped down the side of the building, out of sight.

She fell one story, legs scrambling . . . two . . . three . . . then her feet connected with the wall, the boots grabbing hold.

She slowed but kept running, maintaining speed, then jumped off close to the ground.

Haley jogged away, heading for the shadows as fast as she could.

When the gunman reached the edge of the roof and shined his light down in the darkness, she was gone.

-+-

Two buildings and one street over, Haley paused to catch her breath. Few other pedestrians were out this late, but she did not want to be seen running anywhere.

“Nothing’s more suspicious than someone running at night,” she murmured to herself, forcing her pulse to slow down along with her feet.

At last, Haley felt collected enough to continue with the job. She wandered down the sidewalk and cut over again toward Commerce Boulevard.

“Let me know when I’m out of the range of that last sensor, Lisa.”

“Will do.”

Back on Commerce Boulevard, she found the way well-lit. Couples wandered by hand-in-hand. Merchants headed home after staying late in their shops. Shouts and sounds of confusion from gunmen on the rooftops faded as she kept heading toward the city center.

Feigning interest, Haley paused on occasion to look through one of the large windows facing the sidewalk.

A few buildings down from her near miss on the roof, she stopped in front of a small clothing store. A mannequin wore black tights, boots and a leotard.

She stopped and thought for a minute. Then she walked back to the alley between buildings.

Glancing up, she could see no gunmen watching for more rioters.

“Maybe they’re all still focused on that other building,” she muttered.

She walked deeper into the alley until she found a side door. Traditionally hinged, it had an electronic lock, with a palm pad to the side glowing red.

Haley unzipped a pocket on her backpack and pulled out a flat rectangular object the size of a business card. She looked both ways down the alley, using her night vision to doublecheck no one else was around. She held the card against the palm pad a few seconds.

The pad flashed green and the lock slid back.

“Thank you, Mr. Kim.”

She pushed the door open and waited to see if an alarm would sound. She used her enhanced hearing, tuning into the interior, to find out if anybody was inside. Hearing nothing, she entered and closed the door softly behind her.

“Might have a silent alarm. I think they’re short on cops right now, though.”

She made her way deeper inside, seeing in the dark just fine without light thanks to her enhanced vision.

A few minutes later, she stepped out the door again, locking it behind her. Now she was clad head to toe in black, just like the mannequin. She had estimated how much everything cost and left behind the appropriate amount of tokens.

Smiling, she pulled a black mask down over her face, covering all but her eyes.

“Don’t have to worry about iris scanners yet,” she said smiling under the hood.

Haley walked back to a display window at the corner, and looked at her dim reflection. A completely black-clad woman stared back at her, much harder to see in the night.

“That’ll work.”

She turned and faded back into the darkness of the alley.

4.4

“They’ll be coming in through the airlock,” Anthony Kim said, his back against the wall inside a narrow corridor leading to a circular vault-like door.

He held a gun up, ready to use. For right now, his finger remained off the trigger.

Wink McKelway squinted at it. The pistol looked rather big, he thought.

A clunking sound reverberated through the corridor.

“Hear that? They’re working on it now.”

“The ship’s computer . . . They can’t . . .”

“A common misconception,” Anthony said, looking at Wink’s stunned expression. “Airlocks only lock in air. They’re not ‘locked’ on the outside in the traditional sense. No one ever uses them anymore, thanks to teleportation, but accessible airlocks are included in all ships, even drones that never see a human walk through them after construction. All airlocks have a mechanism to enter from the outside in case of emergency. You just never had to use yours before, so you never thought about it. We’ve got about two minutes. What kind of guns do you have?”

Wink showed him the pistol in his hand by holding it sideways in his palm. He pointed at its twin sticking out of his belt.

“I’ve got two.”

Anthony frowned.

“Ah, the venerable LE-42. Those are just about useless. I know, it’s a good candidate for spaceship service, since its output is so weak. You’re unlikely to breach the hull with that thing.”

He sighed in disappointment.

“Okay. Put it on full auto and just spray the airlock when they come through. You won’t kill anything, but it takes someone with nerves of steel to face any kind of blaster bolt, even one as weak as a 42’s. When the power pack depletes, do the same thing with the next one. That should help buy us some time.”

Wink looked around. The service corridor only extended a few meters behind them before emptying into the hull.

He said, “Where are we gonna hide?”

“Hide? We’re going to stay right here and I’m going to kill as many as I can before they board. I’ve got a Firedog TP. It’s considerably more powerful than your 42.”

He waved his much bigger handgun at Wink, with a muzzle wide enough to fit two golf balls side by side.

A loud *thunk* sounded throughout the ship, followed by a deep metallic squeal.

Anthony said, “They’ve opened the outer door.”

He sighed again and reached into his pocket, bringing out a circular disk about half the size of a hockey puck.

“Activate this by pressing down in the middle with your thumb. It will align with your print. Do that again to turn it off . . . if there’s any power left.”

“Any power? What is it?” Wink said, taking the disk and looking at it.

The airlock's outer door slammed shut, and a hissing sound came from behind the inner one.

"It's a shield. It'll absorb blaster bolts until the power pack dies."

"How many hits will it take?" Wink said pressing his thumb down in the middle. A force field shimmered into place around his body.

"Can I breathe through this?"

"It's calibrated to block fast-moving energy. Yes, you can breathe and talk, use the restroom, whatever. And I don't know how many hits it will take. My company developed these only recently. They're an improvement of a design by Thespar that our guys reverse engineered, but they haven't been field tested yet. It should take a couple dozen hits or more. In theory. The field will start flickering nonstop when the power is near depletion, to let you know."

The hissing stopped.

Anthony said, "Alright, hit the deck. Give them as small a target to fire on as you can. When your gun runs out, or when your shield is about to deplete, retreat to the hold. Whichever comes first."

"And then do what?"

"Do you have a knife?"

"No."

"Then hide."

Wink's face did not look good. A hint of terror flashed in his eyes. But he remained resolved to help protect his ship as he went down on his stomach beside Anthony. They both aimed their weapons at the door.

Wink touched his implant.

"Jinx? Are you okay?"

"Yes. I've got all our furniture piled in front of the cabin door. Nobody's getting in here easily."

“I want . . . I know you’ve got a gun. Be careful. If you use up all the shots, grab something that will stab. Anything.”

“Don’t worry about me. Just kill those bastards before they get on our ship, Wink!”

The hissing sound stopped, followed by an eerie silence.

Another clank resounded through the hull.

Wink watched, eyes wide, as the round metal latch in the middle of the vault door turned slowly clockwise.

4.5

The airlock door swung open like a vault, revealing a small room stuffed tight with six men and guns.

They rushed out roaring like bulls at the gate . . . straight into a barrage of gunfire.

The two in front took multiple hits from Wink's LE-42, the narrow bolts slicing through arms, legs and other things in between. But their pants and jackets, made from thick material resistant to energy, absorbed or deflected most of the shots.

They tumbled to the floor for cover, shooting back. Most of the bolts sailed over Anthony and Wink. A couple splattered on the deck, centimeters away.

Wink flinched but kept firing.

He squeezed the trigger, the LE-42 on full auto, but no bolts penetrated the hull or the metal around the airlock door as the first two advanced.

The second pair crouched down into kneeling position, taking more careful aim despite shots littering the air around them.

The last two in back retreated behind the lip of the airlock door, taking full cover.

One of the crouching men took careful aim, ignoring all the tiny slivers of green streaking by his face, and fired the first good shot at Wink.

Wink's shield flickered as the bolt slammed in, a direct hit.

It surprised him. For a second, he took his finger off the trigger.

The two men in front yelled and scrambled to their feet, ready to charge.

Then, Anthony fired for the first time.

The Firedog Firearm Company faced bankruptcy after the war, with a limited product line. Gwen's mother and grandmother bought the company, helping it get on its feet with the Whillicker Wildcat, the most powerful handheld weapon on the market.

Years ago, Gina suggested if Firedog made something similar in pistol form, they might find a market for that as well. Thus the Whillicker Bobcat was born, a limited production handgun with phenomenal power.

The name was quickly abandoned for trademark reasons, and TP was adopted instead. Legend had it the infamous Gertrude "Granny" Wilcox called the gun a "Totalitarian Pistol." Apocryphal or not, the story stuck, and so did the name.

Anthony lined up his shot carefully, trying to avoid the airlock and a potential hull breach.

BLAM!

The big gun's bolt exploded in the chest of the man on the right, knocking him backward and leaving a basketball-sized hole in his chest.

Blood misted the corridor, as if someone took a giant spray bottle and squirted the walls with red liquid.

Everyone stopped, like a holo on pause.

A fresh corpse fell to the floor, arms and legs splayed wide, chest vaporized.

The pause played into Anthony's hand.

One of the limitations of the TP, leading to its lack of adoption and quickly being pulled from the market, was a long recharge cycle between shots.

Whereas the Wildcat could quickly power up for follow up shots, the TP could not due to its smaller size.

Derided by the Republic's military procurement arm as a "one shot wonder," the Firedog TP sold only a handful of units to special forces and a few others in the civilian market before being pulled by the company.

Slowly, recovering from the shock of the blast, the remaining men turned back to face Wink and Anthony.

Wink squeezed off several more rounds, spraying the corridor, making them duck and cover.

Then his power pack sputtered out.

He dropped the gun after the last weak bolt sailed out, and grabbed his backup gun, resuming fire.

The closest man to them figured he could survive most of those shots. He stood, raised a protective arm in front of his face, and ran down the hall screaming and shooting.

Bolts flickered against Wink's shield. He focused his fire on the charging man, who got a few shots off. The two kneeling men shot at Wink, finally getting a bead on him. The screaming man ran down the corridor.

BLAM!

Anthony fired the TP again, leaving an even bigger hole in this man's chest. The man stumbled down two meters shy of the men, his corpse a mess.

Again, a slight pause in the action ensued as everyone processed this fresh new death. The men in kneeling positions by the door glared at Wink, the corridor now unobstructed. They raised their guns and returned fire with a vengeance.

Wink's shield flickered again, and again, absorbing more hits.

He sprayed the hallway with more bolts, trying to hit both men in the corners. Some shots found flesh, and they jerked and grunted in pain as tiny dots of blood appeared.

But most of Wink's shots proved useless.

"Concentrate on the one on the left," Anthony said. "I've got the other one."

Wink nodded and stopped spraying, focusing his fire on the man directly in his line of sight.

The gunman snarled, swatting at the bolts like they were mosquitos. He aimed carefully and flicked his own weapon over to full auto. A hail of strong return fire sailed down the passageway, many finding Wink. His shield flickered again and again, and more shots splattered the floor around him.

"This is ridiculous. I'm invulnerable right now and I can't get off a good shot."

Wink stood and marched down the hall, gun out in front, shooting one-handed.

The man's bolts slammed into him, the shield flickering almost non-stop now. Wink trudged through the impacts, stepping over the bodies, firing his little gun all the way.

Halfway there, Wink focused on the man's head. The gunman stopped firing as tiny green bolts seemed to seek out his face.

He stood up, roaring in rage . . . and one of Wink's shots hit him in the eye.

He slumped to the floor with blood on his face.

4.6

For the third time, death took the boarding party by surprise.

It surprised Wink, too. He reached the same conclusion everyone in law enforcement had over the last 20 years or so, that the LE-42 had little in the way of stopping power.

He also learned a critical lesson on shot placement.

The dead man's partner, kneeling to the right, pulled eyes away from his fallen comrade and glared at Wink.

An older fellow with white hair, he switched his gun over to full-auto and opened fire, spraying bolts down the corridor.

"Get out of the way, Captain!"

Wink turned and ran back, hugging the side of the wall, his shield flickering with shot after shot.

Anthony checked the TP and aimed carefully from his spot on the floor.

Wink raced past him, heading for the hold. He veered right in the open area, out of the line of fire.

The fourth gunman's eyes shifted to Anthony just as a green diode lit up on top of the TP.

The old man hit the deck the same time Anthony squeezed the trigger.

BLAM!

A massive bolt slammed into the hull, the impact reverberating throughout the ship, leaving a round black scorch mark on the metal wall.

The gunman lifted his head up from the floor and gave Anthony an evil grin. He stood up slowly and walked down the corridor for a closer shot, aiming his gun at the man lying prone on the floor.

Anthony raised an eyebrow.

He stood up, too, holding the TP at his side. Both men knew it would be several seconds before the weapon could cycle up to fire again.

They locked eyes down the hall.

The old man marched forward, confident now.

Anthony smirked back, exuding confidence . . . Then he turned and raced for the hold just as the gunman opened fire. A bolt slammed into Anthony's back, and his shield flickered, absorbing the blast.

He stumbled, but he kept running, turning away from the door when he reached the hold.

The gray-haired man walked into the open hold with confidence.

His face fell at the size of the place, littered with crates and packing material. Three dozen places to hide lay scattered about, with neither man in sight.

He sighed and moved to the nearest pile of boxes.

Holding his gun out with both hands and ready to fire, he kicked over the pile. Containers clattered to the floor, revealing no one behind them.

He moved to the next pile and repeated the procedure.

On the third pile, just as he pulled back his leg to kick, Wink stepped out from behind a shipping container along the far wall.

Wink splattered the old man with little shots, aiming for his head across the distance.

Most of the bolts missed, but enough grazed the fellow to bother him. One blew off skin on his cheek, covering one side of this face with blood.

He roared in rage and ran toward Wink, firing.

Wink's shield flickered once . . . twice . . . then suddenly very rapidly . . . and it gave out.

Wink's eyes grew big.

He ducked behind the container as a flurry of blasts pounded into the polyresin, shattering it.

The old man smiled and slowed to a walk.

“We're on even footing, now.”

He marched slow and steady toward the shipping container, a bus-sized rectangle normally requiring a loading bot to move.

“Come on out and I'll make this quick. It's better than you deserve after what you did to Wallace and them.”

Wink said nothing as the old man approached the right side of the container.

The gunman paused at the locked double doors, holding his weapon with both hands. He took a deep breath, brought the gun down and stepped around the corner.

-+-

The two men still in the airlock cautiously peeked around the edges of the round vault door. The corridor smelled of blood and scorched flesh, three dead bodies littering the way.

They looked at one another and nodded, then carefully stepped out of the doorway together, crossing over the round lip. They both held guns out as

they advanced silently down the hall, weaving around the bodies on the metal floor as best they could.

A normal man, someone less used to bloodshed, might be bothered by the carnage. But these two were professionals. Any inward grimacing never made it to their faces, nor did they talk about it.

Right now, they had a job to do. Once it was done, with the credits added to their bank accounts, they could sit around over drinks and discuss what went wrong and what went right.

But right now, the job still needed doing.

They paused in the hold when they heard the old man say something about making it quick. The one on the left gave the other one a knowing smile. No one cared whether the Captain's death was quick or slow.

Silently, they turned toward the prow and headed for the bridge.

"Let old Wallop do the dirty work," one of them muttered softly. "We'll go take control of the vessel."

4.7

The two gunmen walked onto the bridge, which they noted remained curiously unguarded.

“It’s wide open, Bart.”

“They got no drives. It’s pointless to shed blood over this spot, Red.”

Bart had dark brown skin and eyes, and black hair. In contrast, his companion had bright red and orange hair, with splotches of freckles covering his pale skin.

“We just need to transfer control.”

Bart sat down at the pilot’s chair and waved his hand over the console.

Nothing happened.

He waved his hand over it again.

“What’s goin’ on?” Red said.

“Well . . . it do appear they got some security. They’re not supposed to be aligned with an AI. Uh . . . Ship! Release the console controls.”

Both men paused, waiting. But Pulsar did not respond.

“I’ve never been on an unaligned ship before,” Red said.

“Sure you have. You’ve been on a ferry and such. Lots of little ships are unaligned.”

“Yeah, but I’ve never tried to take one over before. Have you?”

“Ain’t nothin’ to it. We’ll just get the Captain to give us control.”

They heard screaming from the hold.

“Provided the old man doesn’t kill him, first.”

-+-

Wallop moved quickly, now, irritated. He marched to the next pile of crates and jumped to the side, aiming his weapon and ready to shoot.

But no one hid here, either.

He swung around, doing a 360-degree turn, looking for more hiding places in the hold.

His eyes stopped on a stack of metal barrels. They stood stacked up like a pyramid, four layers high.

“Found somethin’ blaster-proof, ay? Thought you could hide behind it, ay?”

He walked toward the barrels, gun out, ready to blast anything that moved.

An empty box the size of a coffin burst up after he passed it.

Wink screamed and jumped on his back, knocking Wallop over. He held the old man down, all his weight on Wallop’s back. He slammed the gun hand on the deck repeatedly, pressing Wallop’s neck down with his left hand, screaming in his ears.

Wallop reached back with a burst of adrenalin and delivered a roundhouse blow into Wink’s side, below the ribs. He ripped his gun hand out and tried to twist around, aiming up. Wink let go and used both hands to slam Wallop’s head against the deck, hard as he could.

Stunned, the old man’s eyes went blank, and his face grew slack. Wink slammed his head again, and again, until blood seeped out on the floor.

The Captain let out a shuddering breath. He stood up and put his foot on the old man's wrist, then gently removed the pistol.

Anthony reappeared, moving out from behind a small stack of boxes.

"Good job."

Wink stared at him, cortisol leaching from his system, breathing hard.

A loud slam drifted back from the prow.

"Wink!"

Jinxie's voice came over his implant.

"Wink! They're trying to get in the cabin!"

-+-

"We need a freakin' crowbar!" Red said, pulling on the door.

"Just hold on. I've got somethin' that will let us in."

Bart pulled out a flat rectangle the size of a business card and pressed it against the door's palm pad. The red panel turned green suddenly, and the door whisked open.

They stared inside at the empty room.

"Are we sure this is worth breakin' into? Maybe Wallop got the Captain by now."

"This is the only room that was locked, Red. You don't lock rooms on a spaceship without a reason."

Bart entered the room without hesitation, leaving the other man outside. He took a step inside, fully committed . . . and promptly shot up in the air.

"What the . . ."

He flailed around, performing an awkward somersault as he drifted up toward the ceiling.

“It’s an anti-grav field, Red!”

Then he noticed the young woman with blue hair hanging onto the ceiling, glaring death at him.

She pressed the plunger on top of the cylindrical remote gripped in one fist as he drifted up closer to her.

The gravity turned back on.

Jinxie was ready for it. Bart was not. She fell on top of him, arms wide.

Bart screamed.

They both dropped to the floor, hard.

Jinxie landed on top of Bart.

A sickening crack echoed through the room as his neck broke.

Jinxie stood up, hyperventilating, staring down at the fresh corpse on the floor.

“You little bitch!”

Red rushed her from the hallway, reaching out to grab her.

She clicked the plunger again, and they both floated up, Red’s legs still kicking.

“Wait! Wait! What?”

She lashed out with her own leg, connecting with his face, breaking his lip.

“ARRGGH!”

Jinxie flipped onto her back and stuck out again, this time connecting so hard they both flew away from the other with the impact.

“I’m gonna kill ya!”

Red bumped up against the wall, above the door, and he finally got his bearings in the zero-grav. He bunched his legs underneath and shoved off, hard, flying across the room toward Jinxie, arms outstretched . . .

BLAM!

Blood hovered around Red's limp body like a lava lamp display, floating away in globs.

Jinxie looked down at the doorway. In the corridor, Anthony stood, holding his gun up.

Wink poked his head in from the side, anxiously scanning the room before finding Jinxie's eyes.

"Are you alright?"

"Yes. Thank you, Mr. Kim."

Anthony nodded and shoved the gun into his belt. He looked down from his kill and raised an eyebrow at Bart's corpse floating a few centimeters off the floor, head lolling at an angle.

"That was the last of them. You can turn the room's gravity back on now."

He reached out and plucked the skeleton key access card as it floated in the air.

Jinxie floated midair, hair gently waving over her head as she shook it.

"I don't want to. It's gonna make a mess."

4.8

“We are essentially stuck here, I think.”

Wink looked out over the front holo showing the space station. The console buttons were reactivated and floating in place. But the ship still could not move.

“We can use their boarding craft to push us close enough to the station,” Anthony said in a calm tone of voice. “From there, the auto sequence will take over and dock us, no drives needed. Aboard the station we can take steps to call for help, and order replacement drives to be sent in from Lute.”

“You sound so sure of it,” Jinxie said. “How do you know for certain the auto sequence will take over? We don’t have any drives, Mr. Kim. At all. That little boarding craft will get us close enough to dock? How is that going to work? Do you even know it will work at all?”

Anthony gave her an expressionless stare. Then he raised an eyebrow.

“I designed the auto docking sequence for all Mule Company space stations. All we need to do is get Pulsar close enough. And it doesn’t matter how big or how little the boarding craft is. If it can provide us with thrust, no matter how weak, that will move the ship. Surely you understand how that works in zero-grav. You had no trouble using it to your advantage in the bedroom.”

Jinxie blushed.

She knew Anthony was referring to her recent part fighting the boarding party, but the way he said it could be taken multiple ways.

If Anthony was aware of his double entendre, he did not show it. Instead, he focused his emotionless gaze on her, waiting for a response.

“Yes, I understand how that works.”

“Good. Then prepare the ship for auto-docking. If you have any proximity alarms or collision countermeasures, now is a good time to turn them off.”

He turned to Wink and said, “Captain, if you will accompany me, please. I might have need of your assistance.”

-+-

The men stepped around bodies in the corridor, heading back to the airlock.

Wink felt tense, and half expected somebody to be hiding somewhere, ready to jump out with a gun. But the six men from the boarding party were all dead, and no surprises waited for them.

“We’ll need to enter the other ship. I take it you’ve never used your airlock before?”

“No. I’ve never needed to.”

“Right. Well, there’s a first time for everything.”

Anthony motioned for Wink to step over the lip of the round opening, then he pulled and pushed the heavy vault door until only enough space remained for him to squeeze through.

“Help me pull it shut. Grab that side of the wheel.”

Together, the two men slammed the door home. Wink helped Anthony in the laborious process of turning the round handle, sealing it shut.

“There we go. Now, if we were needing to do a spacewalk, or go outside for some reason, we’d use these buttons here to initiate an atmospheric

reduction. However, our guests have a transport attached, and have equalized the pressure between their vessel and ours. Technically speaking, we could leave both doors open. But it's a safety precaution to close at least one door when transferring."

Wink nodded, accepting the lecture.

As a relatively young man, especially in comparison to Anthony, he willingly listened to any and all advice.

Anthony Kim was one of the greatest living engineers in any system. Wink felt somewhat in awe of the man, especially after listening to his stories about the war and all that happened after, during their long weeks together on the voyages to and from Phaethon.

"Give me a hand with the outer door. This indicator here tells us a boarder is attached, and this gauge shows the air pressure on the other side."

He pointed to two manual instruments mounted on the wall.

"Why aren't they holographic?"

"For the sake of reliability. Holograms are nice, but when power fails in the entire ship, they won't work. Redundant systems are always going to be manual. Ready?"

Wink nodded and helped Anthony turn the wheel on the outer door counterclockwise. Together, they pushed and breached the outer hull. The vault door swung open and bumped lightly against the ship.

Wink found a solid polyresin tube surrounding the door, leading to the boarding craft. Rather than a vault door, the smaller ship had an iris opening. It stood open now, revealing the interior of a spacecraft the size of a van. Seats for 17 people remained empty, with a navigation station in the rear.

"Brace yourself. The tube will be weightless. We need to close the door and seal it while in the tube, then board the transport. Ready?"

Wink nodded and crawled into the space between the two vessels, instantly transferring out of Pulsar's artificial gravity.

Anthony joined him. Together, they clumsily pushed and pulled the vault door shut.

“It needs to be tight. You push on it while I turn the handle.”

Minutes later, the job was done. Anthony felt satisfied the outer door was secure. He motioned for Wink to pass over to the boarding craft, then joined him. Wink breathed a sigh of relief as the pull of gravity washed over him when he crossed over.

Anthony crawled in. He turned and flicked some buttons on a control panel. The iris doorway cycled shut. Small holes appeared in the polyresin tube, venting air off into space. Then the tube, evidently made from similar material as smart straps, seemed to melt back into a larger circle surrounding the iris.

The boarding craft floated free from its tether now as Anthony made his way to the navigation panel.

“Let’s see. We should be able to use this as a tugboat.”

He glanced over the controls and found what he was looking for. He pushed a sliding holo button up on the panel.

At the front of the ship, which remained transparent, Wink watched as the smart material around the iris extended again. This time the molecules did not form a tube. Instead, two thicker arms reached out and attached themselves to Pulsar’s side with a thump.

“Right. A new connection has been made,” Anthony said. “Now, we’ll just apply some thrust. We’re on the side, not the back, so I’ll need to go in an arc . . . to the left.”

The standard drive in the little boarding craft kicked in as Anthony adjusted the controls. Wink felt the sense of forward motion.

Evidently, Jinxie felt it too.

“Wink? Are we moving?”

“Yes. He’s going to try and angle us in to get closer to the space station. Can you keep an eye on it through the forward holo?”

“Sure.”

In a lower voice, as if concerned Anthony might hear her, Jinxie added, “Do you think this will work?”

Wink glanced back at Anthony, studiously examining the boarding craft’s control panel.

“Yeah. He does, so I do too.”

Slowly, ever so slowly, Pulsar moved across the open space, turning in a wide arc and closing the gap with the looming space station.

The multicolored surface of a gas giant, about the size of Jupiter with streaks of red, orange and gray, swirled slowly below.

4.9

A light on the little craft's panel lit up. Wink felt them come to a sudden, shuttering halt. Jinxie felt it in the Pulsar, too.

“Wink?”

“I think we're within range, finally.”

They had been floating for some time, although Wink had not been keeping track. He suspected they had been moving for somewhere close to an hour.

Now, everything stopped. Anthony flicked some switches and killed the boarding craft's standard drives.

Suddenly Wink felt the sense of motion again, stronger and faster this time.

Jinxie said, “It looks like the space station has us, Wink. We're being pulled in.”

“Tractor beams,” Anthony said, as if he could hear her. “The space station is surrounded by a continuous field that will pull ships in no matter what angle they approach. The power requirements are tremendous, as you might imagine. However, there is a new company out there working on better recharging, so I'm hoping that issue may be mitigated in the future.”

He smiled, a rare expression. Wink found himself wondering how much the famous engineer knew, and how much he left unsaid. Anyone with ties to

the Ultima Mule Company seemed to have insights others did not, he decided.

“Wink, look at this.”

Jinxie relayed what her eyes saw as she stared at Pulsar’s forward holo. A massive iris on the side of a huge metal globe opened, showing a cavernous space inside. Slowly, Pulsar and the attached landing craft moved toward the opening.

They passed a ring surrounding the globe, flat with cables floating free at regularly spaced intervals. Here, one ship smaller than Pulsar but larger than the boarding craft, held firm to the flat ring, joined by one of the cables.

“So, Jinxie is showing me there’s one ship docked at the station on the outside. But we are apparently going inside.”

“Fortunately, the loading bay on Nefos One is big enough to accommodate us. Pulsar is probably at the maximum range in terms of size, but I must say that having a Landing-class ship is beneficial in many ways.”

“What would happen if we couldn’t fit?” Wink said, curiously.

“We would use the docking ring. Ordinarily, we would then teleport aboard, but something has happened here. I have not been able to contact LuteNet. Most likely, someone has disconnected the station from the quantum matrix somehow.”

“So, how would we get from the docking ring to inside the station without teleportation?”

“It would be difficult but not impossible. We would have to bring Jinxie in here and all go together in this boarding craft. If we didn’t have the boarding craft? We’d have to use spacesuits.”

“I don’t have any on the Pulsar.”

“In that scenario, it would be even more difficult.”

“Impossible?”

“Few things are truly impossible, Captain. Some things can remain unfeasible, however.”

“What’s the difference?”

“Attitude and imagination, mostly. With the proper degree of determination, you can do almost anything you want.”

Their forward motion stopped. Wink watched through Jinxie’s eyes as Pulsar’s outer holos showed them to be inside a massive interior space.

Anthony said, “We have arrived. I presume you will want Jinxie to remain onboard Pulsar?”

Wink nodded.

“Very good. Let’s transfer over to the station. I believe you will be able to maintain contact throughout the entire facility. Bring your gun.”

Wink nodded, patting the pistol he had looted from one of the gunmen. Both LE-42s were left behind, the power packs depleted on both.

He opened up his senses to the implant, allowing Jinxie to see and hear everything he did.

Anthony made some adjustments to the control panel, and the smart arms retracted, the molecules resuming their circular shape around the little craft’s forward airlock. They floated free of the larger vessel, and he added a one percent thrust to gently turn them away from Pulsar.

In the narrow confines of the interior, they found a docking bay for landing craft up above, a short platform reaching out and an iris opening with the number 2 in a white circle above.

A quick glance as they turned let Wink see another platform with the number 1 above it. He presumed a 3 and 4 were on the opposite side, hidden by the bulk of his ship at the moment.

Below, larger platforms and other openings evidently allowed for manual transferring of people and materiel from ships using this space. He also saw multiple round air vents which could flood the entire cavern, if needed.

Right now, air would not be needed. Their landing craft bumped lightly on the platform, and the ring around their iris activated again, forming a transparent tube to the space station's door.

It dilated open and a scale in holo floating to the right quickly rose from red to yellow to green as atmospheric pressure increased to a tolerable level in the tube.

With a warm note of satisfaction, Anthony said, "Welcome to Nefos One. After you, Captain."

Together, both men crawled through the ship's iris and over to the space station's airlock.

4.10

“**W**hat’s the purpose of this place?”

Wink and Anthony had their guns out, but no one greeted them at the airlock. Now they walked down an empty corridor, passing gleaming metal walls to either side.

Everything looked clean, sanitary . . . and empty.

Handrails continued along one side of the hall at waist height. Wink figured they were there in case of gravity failure, so people could still move by pulling themselves down the hallways.

They stopped at an intersection several meters in. A wide spiral staircase with handrails led up and down. They could also go forward, left or right.

“We’ll go straight,” Anthony said, pointing at a floating holosign with arrows facing different directions for the station’s various offices. “We’re headed for the command center.”

He kept going, and Wink followed.

Anthony said, “To answer your question, Captain, this station exists primarily for the purpose of harvesting helium from Nefos, the gas giant below us.”

“Helium?”

Anthony nodded.

“Helium is difficult to synthesize. It’s also difficult to harvest in most places. On Old Earth it was only available in a select few mines, mostly in the American West. However on Nefos, the eighth planet in the Lutian system, helium makes up a small percentage of the planet’s atmospheric mix. We designed accumulators to float in the planet’s upper atmosphere to collect helium, isolating that gas from others. These devices use the gas to inflate large balloons which then float up. LuteNet monitors the planet from this satellite, and ports the balloons home when they appear. Or at least she did. Apparently she is offline at the moment.”

“That’s . . . interesting. And it’s cost efficient to harvest helium that way?”

“Ah, very good. You’re thinking like a capitalist. Yes, it is. As I said, helium remains in relatively short supply. Right now, a subsidiary of Chris Raleigh’s Ultima Mule Company has a corner on the market for helium in all three systems. It’s used as an industrial gas in various applications, as well as in toy balloons for children’s birthday parties, weather balloons and myriad other applications. He is able to undercut all other sources using planetary mining to obtain the gas, and he sources it in much higher quantities this way.”

“Mr. Raleigh seems rather ruthless.”

“He is a very good businessman. History is filled with his type, wherever capitalism flourishes. Someone sees a need, fulfills it in an efficient and cost-effective way, and subsequently prospers. Rinse and repeat. The Raleighs have followed this formula time and again in multiple markets since the war ended.”

They walked in silence a while.

Before them, a doorway blocked further progress. A holosign floating above it read, “Command Center. Authorized Personnel Only.”

“Don’t worry,” Anthony said. “I’m authorized.”

He placed his palm on the red panel to one side of the door. It turned green and slid open.

“How is it that you’re authorized? Do you work for the Raleighs’ subsidiary?”

“Yes and no. As you know I served under Captain Raleigh in the war, as an engineer on the Mule.”

“Yeah. That should make you one of the richest men in the galaxy, if you didn’t blow your earnings. But since you and your partner started Subtle Services, I presume that was not the case.”

“Good presumption.”

As they walked through the door, the smell of death assaulted their senses.

Wink muttered several monosyllabic curses as the scent of human decay hit his nostrils.

Anthony sighed. Four bodies were here, all shot up by blaster fire. They lay in various poses on the floor of a large, circular room.

“To answer your question, Subtle Services is used for a wide variety of efforts the Ultima Mule Company pursues, including this one. I always make sure to program in administrative privileges for myself and a select few others. Chris knows this and allows it, for situations such as this one.”

“What happened here?”

Anthony walked past the two corpses between the door and the center console, which was a circular panel in the middle of the room surrounding a large column.

He studied the holo layout for a moment then found the controls for the surveillance system. He moved his hand in the air, as if paging through a book.

“Aha. Someone has erased the Fool’s View.”

“The Fool’s View? What’s that?”

“That is the obvious, overt security recording. I see they erased everything for the last month. Very thorough. Now let’s see if they erased the Wisdom’s View.”

He made several motions with his hands before speaking again.

“Anthony Kim. Mark seven, eight, one, Delta.”

A circle flashed green and hundreds of thumbnail images appeared in the air.

“So, the Wisdom’s View is a backup recording?”

“It’s a redundant one that is much harder to access. Most security system hackers are not even aware of its existence. Even if they do know about it, getting through the additional layers to delete it often requires more time than they have available.”

Anthony paused the video stream rushing by with a finger. He spread his thumb and forefinger, making the image much larger.

“Here we are, I think this will be the moment we are seeking. Brace yourself.”

The image showed the four men in the control center, working in different parts of the large room. One appeared to be the man in charge, based on his older age and uniform. The other three were apparently higher ups in the station, Wink thought, although he could not discern their titles or functions yet.

“What’s the time stamp on this?”

“Twenty-two hours ago.”

“So, this just happened yesterday.”

“Yes. The bodies are starting to smell, unfortunately.”

They paused as the door panel in the recording turned green before it swished open.

The commander turned around from his spot in the middle of the room and smiled.

“Ari! I’m glad you’re here. We’re having some trouble with the quantum matrix.”

A young man in his mid-20s, with thick dark hair and light brown skin, did not respond to the commander in words. He pulled out a small black handgun from a front pocket.

Without a word, he walked inside, closing the gap. A single shot blew apart the commander's chest as he approached.

The other three men yelled. The nearest one raced for him.

Ari shot him next, then quickly squeezed off two more blasts, taking out the other two before they could react.

"That gun is called an FN 1910, by the way. It's a League model, recent make. Post-war. It's named after the gun Princip used to assassinate Archduke Ferdinand, back in the day. Nasty, wicked little thing. It's only good for a few shots, but they're all solid. Not like your LE-42."

Both men turned back to the video.

Ari glanced around the room, looking for anyone else. But he found no one.

He pocketed the gun, moved to the massive circular control panel and began flipping holo switches.

Then he touched an implant under his ear.

"You are clear to approach, Festoon."

Anthony and Wink watched the holo as Ari continued flicking switches.

"Here, he is deleting the Fool's View," Anthony said. "This is how the security system was designed, to lull a hostile entity into thinking they've covered their tracks. He remains unaware of the Wisdom's View."

"Interesting name choices."

"They're biblical. Fortunately, he did not try to self-destruct the station. That would not have worked, and he may have then realized there is a subsystem that controls everything to a greater degree than the top-level system."

Anthony swiped the view with a finger, making it fast-forward. Then he switched over to an external view as a ship came in and docked on the giant

sphere's outer ring. The little transport they had been using made its way out of the larger station and docked with the ship, then returned a few minutes later.

"So, it appears our 'Ari' disabled the quantum matrix antenna. That essentially isolated the station, cutting it off from LuteNet. Then he murdered the crew and invited this ship, the Festoon, to dock. Presumably the Festoon had the materials needed to create the Wu-drive trap that snared Pulsar."

He fast-forwarded through some more feeds, confirming his hypothesis. The little transport set up a net, of sorts. Floating satellites prepared to zap any ship porting into place near the station.

"What are we gonna do?" Wink said with frustration tinging his voice.

Anthony finished watching the events play out on the recording before responding.

"Our first priority is restoring communication with Lute."

He reached over and expanded a live feed showing the top of the station. There, three broken stumps protruded from the globe's axis. Black scorch marks marred the metal around the base.

"It appears he set off an explosive device and obliterated the antenna."

"Are there spares?"

Anthony flicked over to another video feed showing the door to a storage center. He reversed the video on the Wisdom's View by 22 hours and stopped when it showed Ari exiting the room.

Smoke drifted out from the door as it slid shut.

"There *were* spares. Unfortunately, it appears he thought about that."

4.11

“Can’t we just grab the other ship and port over to Lute?”

“Yes. In fact, we will be taking control of Festoon momentarily.”

Anthony spoke from the control panel of the transport. The two men had quickly walked back the way they came in and reentered the little craft.

Along the way he had stopped at a storage bin to raid it, grabbing a bundle of fiber oxygen tanks.

“We can use these,” was all he said when Wink questioned him about it.

In the craft, Anthony pulled away from the No. 2 platform and headed toward the larger iris, which opened as he approached.

The outside view was dominated by the gas giant, streaks of orange and red and gray filling up the viewport to their right.

“Porting the other ship home without an AI to guide us in is always tricky. We need to reestablish contact with LuteNet, first.”

“You know that Jinx is a skilled pilot. We do that sort of thing all the time, popping into orbit without an AI.”

“I’m sure you do. However, there was a reason to have you come out to Nefos instead of going all the way to Lute. One of those reasons involves

the potential of someone getting the idea to capture your ship in the hopes of collecting a bounty.”

“We paid our fine.”

Anthony nodded.

“Yes. However, an enterprising pirate might figure it would be worth it to claim the ship, then suggest he had not heard the levy had been rescinded. I’ve worked with pirates most of my life. Trust me when I tell you I know how they think.”

“Well, that plan didn’t work, obviously. Someone knew we were coming and set a trap.”

“Indeed. This was a betrayal. When we get back online, we should be able to figure things out. Make ready.”

Anthony expertly swooped away from the landing bay and gently nosed his craft toward the ship docked on the station’s ring.

He slowed down as they approached the side, heading toward a meter-wide ring on the ship’s center hull.

When the boarding craft nudged up close to the larger vessel, a series of magnets shot out from the nose on the end of tethering lines. Anthony and Wink felt slight vibrations as the magnets locked the two ships together.

“We have now announced our presence to all aboard the Festoon,” Anthony said with a grim smile.

The smart polyresin surrounding the shuttle’s front stretched out and formed an airtight tube, quickly pressurizing. Anthony and Wink moved up to the front iris. It dilated and they entered the small gravity-free space between the ships.

Anthony twisted the handle on Festoon’s outer door and pulled it open. The air from both ships met with a slight hiss.

Then he crawled inside Festoon’s entry compartment.

“You know,” Wink said, following Anthony in before helping him pull the outer door shut, “we are now doing exactly what that boarding party did to us a little while ago.”

“Indeed. Let us take care not to meet their fate.”

Anthony pulled out his Firedog TP. Wink held a pistol looted off the men trying to take his ship.

“Got anymore of those shield thingies?”

“Alas, no. If you take a shot this time, it’s going to hurt.”

Wink’s face paled a bit. But he nodded.

He said, “I’m ready. We can hide behind the lip, just like they did on my ship. If there’s somebody waiting for us, we’ll shoot back.”

“Wink? Wink! What’s going on?”

“Not now, Jinxie. I can’t talk at the moment.”

He grunted, helping Anthony turn the handle on the inner door. The bolts slid back reluctantly. They both threw a shoulder into it, pushing . . . and the door groaned wide.

A hail of bolts splattered the door before it swung open half a meter. They jumped back behind the lip.

Anthony smiled at Wink.

“Good call, Captain.”

“That was easy, Mr. Kim. You don’t have to be Nostradamus to guess that one.”

The bolts continued pounding the doorway. Anthony pulled back further, completely away from the open part.

“Nonetheless, it’s always good to accurately predict your enemy’s moves.”

The fire continued nonstop for several seconds.

Finally, it tapered off. Whoever was shooting realized it was useless.

“How are we gonna get past this?” Wink whispered.

“Always use the resources available, and do what is feasible.”

Anthony slipped back through the polyresin tube connecting the two vessels and reappeared seconds later carrying the oxygen tanks.

“On my mark, push the door open enough so I can toss these out. Then hold your ears.”

Wink nodded and placed his hands on the door.

Anthony held two high-pressure tanks bound together in netting. They were not meant for long term use, only ten centimeters tall and six round. He positioned himself carefully near the door.

“Now!”

Wink pushed and the vault door swung open. In one smooth motion, Anthony tossed the tanks out just as the gunman in the corridor opened fire.

Both men clapped their hands to their ears and hunkered down in the small space.

WHUMPF!

The vault door slammed shut in the sudden burst of air pressure. Then it opened again, slightly.

Anthony smiled at Wink as both men pulled their hands away from their ears.

“Almost as good as an egg grenade, hm? Let’s go see how the other guy fared.”

4.12

Anthony pushed hard on the heavy door. It swung open into a corridor not much different from the one on Pulsar.

The walls were different too, but Wink guessed this was another ship with League origins. It had some telltale signs of Thespar engineering, and he knew they borrowed elements from one design to the next. The cross-corridor, for instance, looked to be identical in measurements to the one on Pulsar, even though the colors of the walls and floors were different.

Both men held their guns out, ready to dash behind the door if fired upon. But no bolts came their way as the door continued swinging open.

Instead, a lone gunman lay face-down on the floor, blood leaking from his ears. Fragments of exploded fiber were strewn around the deck. Little remained intact of the tanks.

“High pressure containment units are like miniature bombs when they explode,” Anthony said as he approached the body.

Dead or not, he slid the gun out of the man’s reach before bending down and holding a finger to the neck.

Wink said, “Is he alive?”

“No. He has joined his comrades in the afterlife.”

“Good. I suppose we need to thoroughly explore the ship and make sure no one else is here, since we don’t have a way to scan it.”

“You suppose correctly. We’ll start with the bridge. From there we may be able to see more, and it will save us some time going through every nook and cranny.”

The men turned left at an intersection, both peeking around the corner first. They marched up the corridor toward the prow.

“Wink! Are you okay? What’s going on?”

“We’re onboard the Festoon, Jinx. Only one guy came out to greet us, so far. We’ll know more as soon as we get to the bridge.”

“I feel so helpless, Wink. I can’t control anything on our ship. And I’m not out there helping you.”

“Try not to worry about it. We’re gonna try to call home from this ship. The space station has been sabotaged. I’ll talk more later. We need to check out the rest of the Festoon.”

At the end of the corridor, they found a closed door with white paint that read, “Bridge.” A palm panel glowed red to the left, on the wall.

Anthony reached into his pocket and pulled out Bart and Red’s access card.

“This is another one of my company’s designs. I was mildly perturbed to find it in the possession of our visitors on the Pulsar. But that’s the market for you. You never know who will buy your products. Or steal them.”

He held the card up to the panel and waited a moment.

“You think it’ll work here?”

“It works on almost every door of this type. Newer locking technology has been developed to thwart this sort of skeleton key card. But literally millions of locks are out there that would have to be upgraded.”

The panel turned green. Both men raised their guns and pressed against the walls of the corridor, offering as small a target as possible for anyone on the other side.

The door swished open.

No one waited to greet them on the other side, armed or otherwise. They found an empty bridge, the front holo filled with a view of the station and its ring. The gray and orange bulk of Nefos crowded out the left part of the view.

Anthony walked over to the inner surveillance holos and quickly flicked through the ship's holds.

"I see no one. We'll have to check the cabins to be sure, but I think it's safe to say for the moment that we are the only ones aboard."

He flicked over to the security recordings and zipped through a couple hours in reverse.

"If someone is hiding, they haven't shown their face in a while."

"Okay. So, what do we do next?"

"We call home."

Anthony pulled up a different set of holo buttons and flipped through a virtual rolodex of frequencies before stopping on one.

"Here we go."

He pressed one and the front holo changed to a call transceiver image, with a wavy line like an oscilloscope's dancing in the air.

"Anthony Kim, Mark seven, eight, one, Delta. Seeking contact with the Ultima Mule Company's Port Ryan Office. Come in, UMC."

A pause ensued, in which the oscilloscope lines continued waving.

Then suddenly a woman's voice came over the com, and the lines vibrated in sync with it.

"Well, the code checks out. But I'm wondering what the infamous Anthony Kim is doing aboard . . . Festoon? I'm not even familiar with that ship."

Anthony smiled and said, "Hello, Gabby."

He turned to Wink and said, “Gabby is the human coordinator for the Ultima Mule Building in Port Ryan. She’s the one running the show over there. You could say she’s the receptionist.”

“What are you doing, Mr. Kim? Lootie tells me you’re docked off of Nefos One, which has been offline for a while now.”

“Nefos One has been attacked. All personnel are dead. So is the crew of the Festoon, as far as we can tell. They set up a drive snare for Pulsar, the ship I came in on. It’s taken the Captain and me a while to get to the point where we could call for help, here on the Festoon.”

This time a much longer period of silence occurred.

When sound returned, a video feed accompanied it. Christopher Raleigh stood beside a woman in her 40s.

Older, middle-aged now as he crested the half-century mark, Chris remained in good shape. Gray streaked his dirty blond hair, giving him the distinguished look of an elder statesman. But his sharp blue eyes remained bright as ever despite the passage of time.

Gabby, the woman in the picture, remained seated. She was an unusual example of a real receptionist, Wink thought, since most companies used bots. Attractive and slender, she too looked like she worked out regularly.

“We’ll send some people right away, Tony. What do you need from us?”

“We need to get Pulsar back up and running right away. The Captain needs a new Wu Drive, as well as a standard one, and possibly a Machro as well. I haven’t had a chance to examine it yet.”

“We’ll get them to you. I’m on it. I’ll requisition some terrestrial ports from LuteNet to get everything out as soon as possible. Gina Wilcox is in town. I’ll ask her if she knows anything about that ship you’re on, and why they might have set up an ambush for Pulsar. Send me visuals of the dead guys when you can.”

He turned to the receptionist and said, “Gabby, make sure the Governor is aware of what’s going on. I know this is technically not in Lute’s sphere of influence, but it is in our solar system. He needs to know about it.”

“On it, Boss.”

“We’ll get you fixed up, Tony.”

He raised a hand to end the connection. Anthony stopped him.

“Chris?”

“Yes?”

“Send a crew of clean up bots, too. There’s a *lot* of blood.”

4.13

A new day dawned on Phaethon and Tom Savage drained the last of his cup of coffee. He sat on the front porch watching Robert the Rooster strut out of the Chicken Coop 1000 as if he owned the entire farm and all the eye could see.

The chicks followed him out, chirping happily. They scattered as soon as they walked out the door. Tom noted with satisfaction they had visibly grown since he brought them home.

Out in the field of lush grass by the river, the horses trotted off, enjoying their freedom after another overnight stay in the stables.

He sighed and set his cup down as Gwen walked out the door with her own steaming mug of morning brew.

She bent down and kissed him on the lips.

“Syrup day today?”

“Yup. Care to join us?”

“No.”

He chuckled.

“Okay. Take my mug back into the kitchen for me?”

She frowned at this suggestion.

“Sure.”

He smiled at the lack of enthusiasm in her voice.

They both heard a plaintive mew from behind the door. She opened it and Mr. Biddles strolled out to join them, happy for a rare chance to go outside.

“Well, I’m going to take Timmy and get after it. Maybe we can have syrup for lunch, if it’s done by then.”

“You do that,” Gwen said, sinking into one of the fancy outdoor Holton chairs with her coffee.

Biddles hopped up in her lap, purring. She stroked him, head to tail.

“I’m going to go out later this morning and see if Haley obtained any power packs for us. Then I’m going to catch up on the episodes of Moon Love I haven’t watched, yet.”

“Be careful you don’t lose IQ points watching that schlock.”

She stuck her tongue out at him as he walked down the front porch steps and out into the field.

Timmy, the X-99 battle bot, stood still as a statue several meters away. He had been guarding the farm all night, and this was his usual post in front of the house.

“How you doing, big guy?”

The bot turned his “head,” really a flat rectangular sensor with rounded edges, at Tom’s approach.

“I am operating near peak efficiency.”

“Good, good. I need you to collect sap buckets today.”

“Affirmative.”

Tom smiled and touched the implant under his ear.

“Lisa? Please port Timmy and me to the front of Silas and Lola’s house.”

One second later, both popped out of existence.

They popped into place facing the front of a house that looked remarkably similar to Tom's, but in a different location. Here, trees surrounded the structure rather than open grassland. Also, the old flatbed truck was parked out front.

"Alright. I'll just go get them and we'll get going."

He bounded up the steps and rapped on the front door.

No one answered.

He knocked again, harder this time.

Still no response.

Tom put his ear up against the door, frowning.

"What's that noise?"

He heard a steady thumping sound inside the house.

Tom knocked again.

"Silas? Lola? You in there?"

The thumping stopped.

A full minute later he finally heard footsteps on the other side of the door.

"We'll be right out, Mr. Savage! Just give us a bit to get ready!"

Tom sighed and walked back down the steps to rejoin his robot.

He looked up at the impassive blank face.

"I work with nymphomaniacs, Timmy."

"Affirmative."

"Well, we don't need them to start. Why don't you begin collecting buckets from the trees? Bring them back here to the porch."

Timmy dashed off. He raced to the nearest tapped tree and returned with a bucket full of sap. Then he repeated it, legs blurring as he quickly brought in buckets from tap after tap. In short order, all the nearby trees were stripped of their buckets.

Minutes later, Silas and Lola walked out their front door to a porch littered with buckets.

“Oh, hey!” Silas said. “Y’all are already goin’ to work. Okay, this is good. We’ll just start boilin’ the sap. Lola darlin’, let’s get the tubs set up.”

The “tubs” were in fact three oval 500-liter metal livestock watering troughs Silas had obtained from the League City bazaar. Around back of the house, he and Lola had placed them up on bricks with electronic heat sources underneath each one.

They both picked up two buckets of sap and walked around back. Tom followed suit.

“Hey Timmy, start putting the buckets on the back porch.”

The bot diverted his current haul and raced around back, dropping off a new set of buckets and running away again before Lola rounded the corner with the men following. They began dumping the buckets into the first tub, liquid steaming as soon as it hit the metal.

Soon, all the buckets were emptied into the larger tubs. They bubbled as the sap heated up.

“Well, alrighty. We’re gonna monitor this and keep addin’ buckets when the sap boils down. This is gonna take a while, likely all day. Maybe into the night.”

Tom looked at the couple, earnestly staring back at him.

“You don’t need to stick around, Mr. Savage,” Lola said, sweetly. “I’m sure it’ll be pretty boring around here.”

Silas nodded.

“Oh. Okay, well . . . if you guys don’t need anything, I’ll guess I’ll head back to the house.”

Both Silas and Lola brightened up at this prospect. They stood up, looking rather enthusiastic for him to leave.

“I’ll, uh . . . drop in around lunch and check up on things.”

“Okay,” Silas said. “About noon?”

“Sure. Noon sharp. Would you two like to eat with us?”

“We need to watch things over here . . .”

“I can bring Gwen, we can all eat over here.”

“Okay. I guess noon would be a good time for a break,” Silas said, looking at his wife.

Lola nodded, smiling back.

Tom said his goodbyes and walked to the front of the house where the battle bot stood, silently watching.

“Come on, Timmy. Let’s give those two lovebirds some privacy.”

4.14

A new day dawned over League City and the man operating the orbital control center in the basement of the Courthouse yawned as he clocked in for work.

He slumped down in a chair and closed his bloodshot eyes.

“Too much alcohol. Too little sleep,” he murmured, regretting his decisions the previous night.

The nightclub was called Slamdunks, and a particularly fetching young woman wearing a stretchy, knitty, leathery outfit had caught his eye. They danced for hours, and he spent far too much money on her.

Unfortunately, she slipped away when he took a much needed restroom break.

Or perhaps fortunately, he thought. A woman like that, he would have gladly sacrificed his job for . . .

An alarm blared and holos lit up around the room. He stared up in astonishment at a huge ship now in orbit around Phaethon.

The graphic showed a lone ship in Dock Space One, with a name floating above the icon: *PRS Elsa Cole*. Underneath that, the words *Albatross-class* flicked into place.

The man's jaw dropped.

“Albatross-class? What is that?”

A hailing tone sounded in the small, windowless room, and the operator snapped out of it.

He reached out and flicked a holo button, opening up a comlink on the standard frequency.

“PRS Elsa Cole, you are in the first docking space orbital position for Unaligned Planet Phaethon. Uh . . . honestly I'm surprised to see you here, Cole. Please state your intentions.”

The man desperately flicked at another button, trying to summon someone from Hizzoner's office. This early in the morning, he doubted anyone was there. But he had to try. Hizzoner would need to know about this, one way or the other.

“Phaethon, this is Captain Umberti Falco of the Planetary Republic Navy. We are here on a humanitarian mission. We request to port down supplies and necessary personnel to distribute them.”

The operator flicked the holo button repeatedly, irritated. No one answered on the other line.

“Uh . . . I'm sorry, Captain. You seem to have caught us completely by surprise. It's morning here . . .”

He felt stupid as soon as he said it. Of course the Captain would know what time it was in the capital. No doubt their appearance had been timed for first thing in the morning.

“Uh . . . I am going to have to go up the chain in order to receive proper clearance . . . for you you to, ah, send things down.”

And up the chain meant talking to somebody, anybody in Hizzoner's office. But probably whoever he got ahold of would kick it up to Xu. And Xu, apparently, was not in yet, this early in the morning.

So the big shiny Naval . . . battleship? Navy ship . . . would have to wait until someone found Xu and he could tell them what to do.

“Not a problem, Phaethon. We will maintain orbit. At some point we would be delighted to rotate our crew down for a look-see. Although we’ve been in hypertime for several hours, to us it’s felt like almost two months. My people would love to explore your planet, if that’s not too much trouble. Or at least visit League City.”

“I, uh . . . I will see what I can do for you, Captain. Please stand by. Uh . . . this might take a while. The powers that be will probably want to talk about it. We, ah . . . we are rather deliberative down here, you understand.”

“I understand. We will stand by on this frequency, Phaethon. Thank you.”

The comlink cut off and the operator leaned back in his chair. This time he stared at a holo from an orbital camera, showing him the actual ship up there.

“It’s huge.”

A long black cigar shape floated above the planet. He wondered how much power it took to teleport that thing across the galaxy.

Then he found himself wondering how many solar torpedoes it could pull in all at once.

“What in Sam Hill *is* an Albatross-class ship?” he whispered in awe.

-+-

“The Albatross-class is our newest model, Mr. Thallus. How have you enjoyed the voyage so far?”

Captain Falco walked off the bridge and promptly met his sole passenger, Ashley Thallus. The young man had been surprisingly unobtrusive the last seven weeks. Falco half-expected the Zeitung reporter to pester him with questions and constant requests for interviews.

Thankfully, the young man did neither. He had long hair, for a man. Certainly longer than anyone else’s aboard the Cole. It was thick and fell down over the back of his neck, a rich deep coppery brown.

“I must say, Captain, it’s been boring. But I suspect in your line of work, boring is preferable to the alternative.”

Falco stopped and smiled at the boy.

Because that is what he considered Ash to be, a 22-year-old boy who had never seen war.

Granted, most of Falco’s crew hovered around the same age. But they, at least, had trained for war. They prepared for it. They were the Republican Navy.

This boy was a civilian. Worse, he was a reporter. And reporters always felt like they were the equals of whoever they reported on, in Falco’s experience. Even the Chancellor. Even Captains of Navy ships, he thought remembering some hostile moments with a woman working for La Galaxia.

He could sense a lack of proper awe and respect from Ash, something given to the Captain by everyone else onboard the ship. Something he took for granted from everyone else.

So, Falco did not like the handsome young man smiling at him with ease, his hair too thick and long for the Captain’s liking. His energy and optimism and youthful good looks undiminished by the horrors of war . . .

“Yes. Boring is a good thing. That’s a good way to put it.”

“Will we be going down to the surface now?”

Falco glanced up at the boy with a sharp look.

‘We?’ he thought. So presumptuous.

“They’re trying to sort it out down there. We’ll know more later. They probably have to convene a council or something. These frontier planets have little in the way of procedures planned out for the unexpected and it seems we took them by surprise, showing up as quickly as we did.”

And we never should have left this early to begin with, Falco thought. This place doesn’t need humanitarian assistance yet. And I probably just said too much to the boy.

But if the reporter gleaned some deeper truth by the words, some greater understanding about the Captain's personal misgivings regarding this mission, he did not show it in his face. Nor did Ash press the Captain for more info.

Maybe I'm being too hard on the boy, Falco thought after a few seconds passed with no pressing questions forthcoming.

He smiled tentatively and said, "Have you managed to take a tour of the Cole these last several weeks?"

Ash chuckled.

"No, sir. I'm afraid almost the entire ship is off limits besides this main corridor and my cabin."

That response made the Captain smile with genuine warmth.

Maybe I need to reassess my opinion about this boy, he thought.

"Well, come along, Mr. Thallus. Now that we've reached our destination, I can spare you the time for a personal tour. Perhaps you can get a useful interview out of me for your company. You know, I've always been a fan of the Zeitung. It's my favorite newsfeed."

"Thanks. I've always been a fan of the Navy. You know, I had an uncle who served aboard the Paul Revere."

"Ah! The Midnight Rider. I knew that ship well. Captain Draymore was a heck of a man. I can see this interview is going to take me back in time, as well."

4.15

“The albatross remains one of the greatest birds of Old Earth. Certainly one of the largest, with wingspans up to three and a half meters, and bodies measuring a full meter in length.”

“They have something of a bad reputation, though, right?”

The two men stood in an elevator pod as it whisked them away from the prow and toward the ship’s midsection.

Ash had indeed never tried to go anywhere off limits to him. He had spent most of the voyage in his VIP cabin, watching holos. Opportunities to mix and mingle with the crew had occurred during chow time, and he got along well with everybody. But, they kept him at arm’s length. He was a civilian, they were Navy.

Not just that, they were about the business of running the ship. All he could do, literally, was get in their way.

So, Ash tried to stay out of the way. And no, he had not pestered anybody for an interview.

“You’re thinking of *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner*, by Samuel Taylor Coleridge. In that poem, the narrator’s punishment for killing an albatross was to wear it around his neck. In fact, the albatross was never really considered unlucky until after the poem. It remains, as I say, one of the

greatest of birds. And you know how we love to classify ships, especially Navy ships, after birds. We have the Hawk-class, Sparrow, Eagle, and so forth. And during the war, Republican Shipworks introduced everyone to the Condor-class, the first type designed with enough power to handle massive amounts of solar material teleportation. The Albatross-class is approximately one and a half times larger.”

“But, uh . . . we’re not at war.”

The elevator pod stopped, finally. Ash thought it had been going a long time. He found himself marveling at the size of the ship. It had been hard to appreciate how big the Cole was while confined mostly to his quarters and the mess hall.

The door swished open and the men stepped out. Falco led Ash down a long corridor. Here, far fewer people walked about. A couple men and women stopped and saluted the Captain as they passed, looking more than a little surprised to see him here.

“The Cole was built for the next war, Mr. Thallus. You’ll note she was named after our late great Chancellor from that time period. She was assassinated by League elements *after* the war was over. I believe that happened under your boss’s wife’s watch, if I’m not mistaken.”

Ash gave him a look.

He debated how best to respond to that.

“That seems harsh, Captain. I believe Director Del Rio was confirmed to her position as head of AOJ after that incident. If the assassination of Chancellor Cole was her fault, or if she could have done more to prevent it, she would not have been promoted.”

Ash was not entirely certain that statement was accurate. But he thought it was. It made sense to him.

“Maybe. Maybe. Were you even born when all that went down?”

Another barb.

Ash bit his tongue.

Instead of the sharp remark he wanted to say, he said, “What are we here to see, Captain?”

Falco smiled, but he dropped the more aggressive tone, as if Ash had passed a test of sorts.

The two continued walking.

“Sorry. The Navy has a long memory, and I research the persons my ships are named after extensively. Director Wilcox Del Rio *was* present that day, and yet the assassin fulfilled her objective.”

“She was invisible. The assassin, I mean. Cole did not follow proper protocol, either, from what I’ve read.”

Falco raised his hands in a gesture of defeat, smiling.

“Enough about that. The point is, we will be ready if the League becomes belligerent once more. And if some assassin tucked away somewhere receives a Triskelion Code again, or something like that, the Republican Navy will be ready to respond thanks to the Cole and other ships like her.”

They stopped before a set of large double doors, painted white with a big red circle at chest height. A red slash crossed the circle from the upper right side going down to the left, making the universal “Do Not Enter” symbol.

Falco swiped a finger through a small biometrics holo floating on the side of the entrance, and the giant double doors silently slid open.

As they walked inside, diodes flicked on in sections, revealing a massive white-walled hold.

“This area contains the bulk of our Space Marine forces.”

Cubicle boxes with thin, white metal walls three meters by three, were stacked up ten high. They stretched . . . far. Facing out, the fourth wall of the boxes were open. All of them were filled with bots.

“There must be . . .”

“Ten thousand bots here,” Falco said, nodding. “Latest model, the X103. PLAIR, please activate Number EC-00001 to greet our guest.”

The AI's voice came over both their implants.

“Certainly, Captain Falco.”

The robot closest to them, on the shelf level with the floor, activated. Servos whined and it took a step out of the cubicle onto the long platform running along the wall. Then the bot stood to its full three-meter height and turned toward the men.

Grenade launchers were built into the top of both arms, black holes ready to dispense explosives at carefully calculated trajectories.

A heavy rifle was strapped on the unit's back, larger than more typical ones designed for normal-sized humans.

“The 103 follows many of the same design elements as the classic 99. As you may be aware, older bots in use at the start of the war were vulnerable to head shots. There was something of an arms race during the early years of fighting. By war's end, though, our side had developed superior bots for fighting, and Marine casualties dropped significantly. One of the big improvements with the X99 was a reinforced sensor for a head, allowing the units to “see” significantly better than the old models. If that sensor was blown off, the X99 would remain relatively intact, although perhaps inoperable. Functions could be restored, though.”

He smiled at Ash, to see if the reporter followed.

Ash stared at the gleaming metal bot before them. Rather than the gunmetal gray found on older bots, 00001 and all his companions gleamed shiny bright, their titanium alloy shells sparkling in the light.

“These newest models have all their sensors built into the chest, the heaviest armored part of its body.”

A holographic head blossomed, like an electronic flower. It opened up, expanded and stared back at the men, expressionless.

It looked human, like some gladiator of old. Flat nose, high cheekbones, square jaw.

“The face of a warrior,” Falco said. “This is the equivalent of a Marine Sergeant, so his head looks different from the others. The ‘privates’ all have the same face. Makes it easy to distinguish them.”

The Captain glanced at the reporter and smiled again. Ash stared at the robot open-mouthed.

“Any questions, Mr. Thallus?”

“I have so many questions. Are they autonomous? Why do they need a ‘sergeant?’ Why do you have so many? Is this the only hold filled with thousands of battle bots, or do you have more? Just what war are you prepared for, Captain?”

Falco chuckled, delighted to have made an impression on the young man.

“You know, I was briefed before this trip and told that you would be accompanying us. I confess I’ve been a little resentful to have you shoved on me without much of my say-so about it. But you’re alright, Mr. Thallus. You’re alright. I’ve been told to be completely open with you, and I hope that by seeing some of what the Elsa Cole has to offer, you can perhaps put in a good word for the Republican Navy back home.”

Ash still looked slack-jawed and over-awed.

“You’ve certainly made an impression.”

“Well, I tell you what. When the people down on Phaethon get their act together and allow us to port down the supplies we’re bringing them, I’ll let you accompany our away party. They will all be Marines, and I’m sure they can answer many of your questions. Is that good?”

Ash nodded, his eyes glued to the gleaming robot with a holographic head staring back at him.

“It’s good.”

4.16

Gwen popped into place next to SCU-3 and the large charging bay.

She smiled at the sight of two new Adirondack chairs waiting for her. A tiny solitary black bot seemed to be waiting too, perched on the very top of one chair's back.

She bent at the waist to get a better look. As she came closer it waved at her, then popped out of sight.

"Hm. Lisa, are you porting MicaBots around now?"

"When the distances are great, and it is more efficient, yes. My sensor network is complete for this entire area now, as well as in League City."

"Wow. So, the bots don't have to carry planks from the sawmill all the way out here to make chairs and stuff?"

"That is correct."

"Cool. Our construction can speed up even faster now. Of course, most everything is built already."

She sat down in the new chair and sighed.

"You know . . . I think these might be more comfortable than the ones I bought in League City. Hmm."

Her implant pinged with the notification of an incoming call. Gwen took it and heard Haley's voice come in from thousands of kilometers away.

"Hey, girl."

"Hey, you. Watcha doin'?"

"I just got back from the bazaar, selling recharged power packs and buying old ones. People are really surprised I'm willing to buy the old ones. Of course, I'm giving them peanuts. But, still. It's something."

"Well, alright then. Have you made any money?"

"Oh, yeah. There is definitely a market for recharged ones. I think we could raise our prices and we'd still be able to sell everything I've got."

"Well, no point in being greedy, I guess. Okay, whenever you're ready, send over what you brought in today."

Moments later, the air popped under the force dome as two dozen power packs of various shapes and sizes appeared near the charging platform.

Gwen sighed.

She said, "Wow. That is a lot. You have been busy, girlfriend."

"I know, right? Send them back and I'll sell them tomorrow. I guarantee you I'll sell them all, too."

"Has anybody figured out what you're doing? Have you sold someone their own power pack back to them, fully recharged?"

"Yes. I think so. I'm pretty sure I've done that a few times, actually. But you know how it is. Power packs all look the same. You can't tell one vehicle's from another. Or any of the small ones. I mean, I guess if someone put their initials on one, and then saw me selling it the next day at the bazaar . . . but nobody's done that. Heck, nobody even thinks about a power pack until it goes out, you know?"

"Well, hey. Why don't you have Lisa port you over tonight for supper?"

"Um, maybe. The time difference gets me, you know? Different time zones. And I'm kinda busy at night. My sleep schedule is all wonky."

“Okay, whatever. We’d like to see you sometime, though.”

“Sure! We’ll get together soon.”

Gwen disconnected and sighed again. She picked up the smaller power packs and placed them one by one on the charging platform. When she removed them, she placed them in a separate pile for Lisa to port back to League City later.

As she started on the bigger ones, she paused and looked through the transparent force dome out into the desert.

She used her enhanced vision to double check a very slight movement out in the sand.

“I see you, Big Ugly!”

The sand dragon raised its snout slightly, seemingly surprised the human behind the force field made eye contact with him.

He snorted, making puffs of powdered dust blow out of his nostrils.

Other than that, he did not respond. The force domes kept the threat of him and other sand dragons in the area to a minimum.

“Come to think of it,” Gwen said, “that’s probably why Lisa is using teleportation more. She doesn’t have to turn the dome off to get things inside.”

“You are correct, Gwendolyn.”

“Good.”

Gwen smiled as her eyes drifted over to the even larger, and heavier, power packs.

“Can you teleport these vehicle ones onto the charging pad for me?”

The first popped out of existence, only to reappear where Gwen pointed.

“You know, Lisa. You’re alright.”

The portable AI mulled over a proper response for half a second.

“Thank you, Gwendolyn.”

4.17

It took far longer for Captain Falco to receive an answer than he expected.

When PLAIR notified him of an incoming comm, six hours had passed since his first conversation with Orbital Control. Local time was past noon.

As expected, the food was accepted. Falco knew the planet did not really need it, yet. He had done his research before they even left. Still largely agrarian, as frontier planets tended to be, most of the population on homesteads were subsistence farmers. Everybody would have a garden, terranesque livestock variants would be raised, and domestic fauna could be hunted.

He suspected the planet was a long way from starvation riots. However, and this was another thing the Captain knew without anyone telling him so, their mission was political.

He was unsure entirely of all the machinations involved, but he figured the State Department was in on it. And no doubt Naval Intelligence had something to do with it.

And of course, he received his orders from the Chancellor himself. So, Harrington House was involved.

Everyone knows what's going on except the lowly Captain actually carrying out the objective, he grumbled to himself.

One of the things taking so long, Falco suspected, was League City's insistence the Captain did not use teleportation to transfer the goods.

This made things harder on the Elsa Cole's side. With teleportation, the Captain could have simply unloaded the supplies, bid League City officials good day, and return home.

But to make a terrestrial port, he would have had to send down a sensor for PLAIR, and therein lay a political snag.

Phaethon was unaligned, and would remain so until the populace voted on which system to enter. Falco suspected, based on the fact their capital was named League City, that a strong element would clamor for joining Star League.

And since Star League had never really recovered from their loss of territory during the war, he figured they would have agents embedded down there, working on seeing to it that the election went their way, whenever it occurred.

However, the larger (and in Falco's mind superior) choice was obviously the Planetary Republic. Territories rarely, if ever, voted to leave it. And why would they? The Republic had a light yoke and everybody generally prospered.

Then, of course, there was the new kid on the block, the Planetary Alliance. But in Falco's mind they were still a bunch of lawless hicks. He doubted any new planet would seriously consider the Alliance. But, stranger things had happened.

The point was, Falco thought, there were a lot of political undercurrents. And if PLAIR was allowed to drop a sensor on the tarmac of League City's spaceport, it could be seen by some as placing a potential claim on the territory.

Of course, this was an absurd notion. PLAIR would never make a claim on an unaligned planet while delivering humanitarian supplies. But Falco could understand that local politics might be immune to reason. They would see a sensor, even a temporary one, as a way for Republican factions to put a thumb on the scale for their side in the election, whenever it occurred.

In fact, now that he thought of it, one of the primary reasons for this humanitarian mission might be to gain brownie points with the locals. When the election occurred, Republican advocates could point to the Cole's humanitarian mission and make the claim that Harrington House was looking after Phaethon even before they knew which system the electorate would favor.

Satisfied that he had sussed out at least part of the hidden reasons behind his mission, the Captain gave the orders for a transport to be loaded with supplies along with a fire team of human Marines. They would be armed with pistols, which he doubted would be seen as aggressive. It was a frontier planet, and from what he understood, everybody walked around armed.

Also they would have heavy rifles and egg grenades, but those would remain on the transport and not be visible to the locals unless the team came under attack.

He wished he could send down one battle bot with them. The majority of his ship's Marine contingent involved bots. But that would exacerbate things, he thought.

Besides, if things went south for the fire team, he could always ignore the locals' wishes, drop a sensor and port down a dozen battle bots.

He'd be excoriated, and there would be a hearing and perhaps fatal consequences for his career. But if it came down to it, he would not hesitate to risk a diplomatic incident to save his people if they ran into more trouble than they could handle.

But he doubted it would come down to that. These were Marines, after all. And even though the Marines relied on mechanized units more than ever these days, the humans they enlisted remained a force to be reckoned with, individually or *en masse*.

The officers quickly pulled a corporal and three privates for the job. They were ready to go in minutes, standing at attention outside the landing bay where bots loaded up crates of emergency foodstuff.

The Captain saluted them when he walked out of the elevator pod, Ashley Thallus accompanying him.

Falco said a few words to their CO, then nodded at Thallus. The reporter carried a duffel bag slung over his shoulders, and looked like he planned on disembarking permanently.

He smiled and walked forward to introduce himself to the corporal. All five then entered the little craft. Moments later, it lifted off vertically and nosed through the hazy red force field covering the opening to the landing bay.

Outside, it pushed away from the huge Albatross-class starship and its nose dipped down toward the planet's surface.

4.18

“**H**ang on, Mr. Thallus. We’ll have you on solid ground in a matter of minutes!”

Ash opened one eye and tried to glare at the woman piloting the cargo and personnel transport.

The craft was the size of three subway cars clustered together. Only the nose was smaller, a little cone with two seats and controls up front, and more behind it.

The Marine flying this contraption was named “Newton.” No first name, he was just introduced to her as “Private Newton” before being told by the corporal to strap in.

Apparently he was given the privilege, as their only passenger and indeed the only civilian on the Elsa Cole, to sit up front.

“You ridin’ shotgun?” Newton had asked when he boarded, flashing a big smile with shiny white teeth.

She looked to be of African descent, and younger than Ash.

“You, uh . . . you can fly this thing?”

“Am I certified for it? Is that what you mean?”

She cackled, sounding uncomfortably like a witch in some Halloween holo.

“Mr. Thallus, I have over a hundred hours in this thing.”

“Oh. Well, good. That makes me feel better.”

Privately, Ash assumed that a hundred hours was a lot of flight time. He really didn't know. But he strapped in.

After the other three Marines strapped in behind them, Newton lifted off from the landing bay's surface. She expertly guided the transport through the force field covering a 100 meter wide hexagon on the side of the Cole, and nosed the craft down toward the surface.

Only then did she turn back to Ash and crack another wide smile.

“On the simulator.”

“What's that?”

“I've got a hundred hours flying this tub on the simulator. I've never actually flown one of these *new* transports in real life.”

She cackled again at the look of terror crossing Ash's face.

“Quit picking on the civilian, Private.”

Newton rolled her eyes at Corporal Latari's directive. But she returned her attention to the control panel, hands hovering over a holographic flight stick. She aimed them down for the planet, then acknowledged the coordinates PLAIR flashed on the front screen by tapping on them. She sat back and let the transport fly them the rest of the way down.

“Relax,” she said in a softer tone. “These things practically fly themselves. They just need a human at the controls for regulatory purposes.”

Ash tried to smile and convey that he was not, in fact, nervous. But at that moment they bumped into the outer edges of Phaethon's atmosphere.

He looked down, out the side holo. The atmosphere below looked opaque, a light dusty brown. He could see no sign of land or ocean or anything else on the planet's surface.

“Good thing PLAIR knows where we’re going.”

He grimaced as the transport shook again, skating down into thicker air. The temperature up front grew warmer as friction on the outside of the craft increased.

Then, all the holos showed a light brown . . . nothing.

“It’s like fog, ain’t it, Newt?”

The pilot whipped around in the seat to snarl at a red-headed young man sitting behind her.

“Don’t call me that! I will whip your ass, boy! That is not my name!”

The “boy” was a strapping 185 centimeters of muscle, with carrot-colored hair and freckles on top.

He chuckled, pleased to have set her off.

“Shuddup, both of you. Turn around and fly the transport, Newton. McCain, keep yer trap shut.”

Neither one acknowledged the corporal. But they both clammed up.

Ash decided there was a considerable undercurrent of tension, and the teasing and snapping provided an escape valve for some of that.

Despite the “easy” nature of this assignment, going down and dropping off a bunch of food, he could detect concern amongst the Marines.

They probably go in expecting nothing to be easy, he thought. Maybe that’s how they’re trained to survive.

He found himself wishing he had some military experience under his belt. But Ash was just about as civilian as someone could be. He did not even have a family member who served during the war, other than that one uncle on the Paul Revere. His parents had managed to stay out of the service.

The dust blocked out everything. He had no idea where they were, or how far they had to go. The only thing that changed were the numbers on the front holo, showing their location. These seemed to be drawing closer to the static ones below, showing their destination coordinates.

“It is like fog,” the fourth Marine said, finally speaking up and breaking the silence.

This man was named Escobar. He too was young, maybe 16 or 17. He was also big, though not as tall as McCain, and looked like he spent a lot of time in the ship’s gym.

“Yeah, but it’s *dust*,” Latari said. “Hope none of you are allergic to it.”

“I think it clears out, closer to the surface.”

“We’ll see, Escobar. We’ll see.”

The minutes passed with more vibrations, the numbers on top quickly closing in on the static ones below.

Then, suddenly, the holos opened up as they dipped below the layer of dust.

Land rolled out in front of them, evidently farmed judging by the quilt work patterns of cultivated fields stretching out as far as the eye could see.

“There it is,” Newton said, pointing. “Twelve o’clock.”

Everybody looked ahead and found what she pointed out. A low-slung skyline rapidly approached, a modest city with buildings no higher than five stories.

They slowed down, and Ash could make out a huge round tarmac, surrounded by a concrete wall. The transport headed straight toward it, the coordinate numbers almost matching now.

By the time they crossed over, the vessel slowed to a crawl. Below, they could see a crowd of people waiting for them, and half a dozen flatbed trucks parked and ready to transfer their cargo.

The landing craft stopped midair. The coordinate numbers matched perfectly now. Slowly they descended, like an elevator.

When the landing craft bumped on the concrete, Newton ran through a series of shutdown switches and opened the passenger door as well as the cargo bay’s.

“Look alive,” the corporal said, standing up and adjusting his sidearm in its holster.

“We’ve arrived.”

4.19

Ash let the Marines step off the transport first, at Corporal Latari's insistence. The Marines were armed, he was not. They did not expect anything to happen, but remained prepared for the worst.

Privately, Ash suspected they had little to fear from what looked to be a crowd of town officials and merchants.

But he was just along for the ride. The Marines stepped off and took up positions on the four corners of the transport. Latari faced the corner closest to the passenger door, and greeted the official-looking man standing there waiting for him.

"I'm Joachim Xu, Hizzoner's plenipotentiary."

"Corporal Hiram Latari, Planetary Republic First Marine Corps, assigned to PRS Elsa Cole, Captain Umberti Falco commanding."

"Pleased to meet you," Xu said, shaking the young man's hand. "I presume you have food and medical supplies to give us? I must say we are in a good position at the moment. The embargo is . . . still new."

"Yes, sir. We have a load of supplies and one civilian for you."

Latari turned and gestured toward the ship, Ash stepped off, carrying his backpack.

Seeing all the attention focused on him, Ash made the best of it. He walked down the short ramp and made his way directly to Xu.

He stuck out his hand.

“Ashley Thallus, staff reporter for the Zeitung.”

Xu looked stunned.

“A reporter? What . . . what are you doing here?”

“There’s been a lot of interest in Phaethon back home, Mr. Xu.”

Ash let his hand hang in the empty air a moment before finally withdrawing it. Mentally, he put Xu down on his list of people not too pleased to meet him.

“I’m just here to gather stories and tell our subscribers what’s happening. I’m interested in the human angle. Frontier planets are far outside the scope of everyday life back on Diego and elsewhere.”

Xu shook himself, as if someone else grabbed him by the shoulders and made him snap out of it.

He said, “Of course. Welcome. The Courthouse will extend to you every courtesy. I don’t think immigration papers will be needed for a visitor, although I must say we’ve never had a . . . reporter . . . visit us before. Maybe a visa? Why don’t you meet with our immigration official right over there.”

He pointed to a rotund little man holding a virtual clipboard, who suddenly looked very glad he had come along with the retinue from the Courthouse.

Ash moved toward the man, who beckoned him to one side.

Latari said, “Let me show you what I’ve got, Mr. Xu, then you can decide how you want to offload it. My superiors wanted me to mention that the Republican Navy would prefer if this food was not sold for a profit, but rather is distributed free of charge to those in need. Of course, once it’s off my transport, I can’t control what you do with it. But I have to inform you that it is freely given with the intent it be freely distributed.”

“Certainly. No, we have no intention of turning a profit on the Republic’s generosity.”

Xu glanced at the six merchants standing within earshot, their trucks parked nearby. They all turned away from his glance, refusing to make eye contact.

“Good. I’m glad to hear that. You’ll find that each package of preserved emergency food is labeled with a hologram that reads, ‘Not for resale.’”

The faces of all the merchants fell as they followed Xu and the corporal to the stern of the transport .

One of them in the back elbowed his companion and whispered, “Maybe we can sell them to restaurants.”

“Mostly, this is emergency food, so we’re talking about grains and other high carbohydrates. It’s not really that tasty, but it will keep people alive.”

The merchants frowned at this. Two of them peeled off from the group, abruptly abandoning plans to participate.

Xu saw them and excused himself from the corporal for a moment.

“We need your trucks, gentlemen. Please do not leave.”

Reluctantly, they returned to the group and continued walking to the rear loading ramp.

Latari nodded to McCain, who stood guard at this corner of the ship. He led Xu and the others up the ramp and they stopped at the top, staring into the transport’s hold.

It was stuffed with crates, packed from the deck to the ceiling. They were all marked, “FOOD. NON-PERISHABLE.”

“There you are, gentlemen,” Latari said. “Enough to feed your city for a month, with rationing. I trust you have some loadbots? You know, this would have been a heck of a lot easier if you had allowed PLAIR a temporary sensor for terrestrial teleportation.”

4.20

Ash spent the next half hour speaking with the lone immigration official out on the tarmac.

After some hemming and hawing, the man found a rarely used form for a visa. But then he struggled to fill out his part of the paperwork, and there were no prior copies available that would show him how to do it.

The man looked red-faced and embarrassed about the whole ordeal. Ash decided to throw him a bone and simply apply for immigration. He figured he could always go home. He seriously doubted PLAIR would have issues taking him back. And besides, the process might provide subject fodder for subscribers back home.

Minutes later, Ash became the newest immigrant to Phaethon. The customs official, clearly relieved about the paperwork issues, shook his hand warmly.

“Let me be the first to welcome you as a new citizen of our fine planet, Mr. Thallus.”

“Thanks.”

He looked back at the transport. By this time, most of the food stock had been unloaded. The merchant’s bots busily stacked crates on their individual trucks.

They were old bots, Ash noticed. Squat and square, designed to lift pallets and boxes, they tromped in and out of the transport's hold, ferrying out crates.

Some of the trucks left, fully loaded. Xu asked the merchants to place the food in municipal spaces in the Warehouse District. Since the city technically owned all the warehouses, the guard at the front entrance would know which ones were vacant and could be used for storing it. Then he would make sure and keep track where the food was located, in case it was ever needed.

Ash walked up to the Marines, now assembled near the passenger compartment door once more.

"Well guys, thanks for the ride down here. I'm gonna stick around for a while and see if I can come up with any good stories."

"If you see a pig with a wooden leg," McCain said, smiling, "it probably saved a lot of people. You know, they don't eat pigs like that all at one time."

"I know that joke!"

He shook hands with everyone. They made him promise to look them up if he ever made it back to Octavia, Plairmont in particular. He said he would.

With that, the Marines filed back inside. Those standing nearby backed up as the transport's rear door closed and her engines fired up.

Newton brought the transport straight up, three hundred meters. It hovered there for a moment, then shot away, steadily gaining altitude. The ship quickly disappeared in the brown haze above.

Ash looked across the empty expanse of concrete and decided to politely ask one of the merchants for a ride.

"Ain't got no room up front, but you're welcome to ride on the back. We're headed to the Warehouse District, and then the bazaar."

This sounded fine to Ash.

"Is there a hotel somewhere?"

“Oh, sure. We have a couple of those. One’s a few blocks off the bazaar for farmers comin’ in from out of town and such.”

Ash thanked the man and climbed up in the back of the truck. He sat near the end, leaning back against a box. The truck’s load bot sat nearby, staying completely silent since they were not designed to hold conversations or be very anthropomorphic.

The merchant climbed up front with the two men he had brought along. The door slammed and the truck rose half a meter in the air, then slowly picked up speed as it headed for the front gate.

Ash watched hectares and hectares of flat, featureless concrete slide away. Few remained at the transport’s landing site. Xu and his people, including the immigration officer, had already left.

Moments later, they pulled into the nearby Warehouse District. Ash listened to a brief conversation with the lone man sitting in front of the main entrance, telling the merchant where to put the food.

When they rolled through, Ash saw the guard, a bored looking fellow who raised an eyebrow at the sight of someone sitting on the back of the truck.

They went further in than Ash expected. At last, the truck pulled into a warehouse already filled with other stuff. He could see lots of clutter in the dim light, including some wagons that looked like they stepped out of the 19th century, and all kinds of boxes. Some of them were even made out of wood, which Ash thought might be unusual.

The merchant came around back and gave the reporter a bashful smile.

“We, uh, are gonna leave a few crates here and, uh, test the food for quality and . . . try to discern its long term, uh . . . freshness.”

Ash nodded, and stepped out of the way as the merchant ordered his bot to unload three of the boxes.

Ash felt mildly impressed that man would steal the supplies so brazenly. But he said nothing.

The merchant met his eyes as the bot climbed back onboard, and he shrugged.

“It’s not really stealing. This is public food. And like I say, we’re gonna test it.”

Ash nodded and smiled back politely.

“Who am I to judge?” he said softly to the mute bot as the truck backed out of the warehouse.

Moments later they pulled into the municipal warehouse designated for storage. Here, most of the other trucks had already unloaded their portions of the Cole’s food supplies.

Ash found himself wondering if all the merchants who showed up to help unload the food had helped themselves to a sample of the bounty.

He decided they probably all had indeed pilfered some.

“Diogenes would have a hard time out here, I bet,” he murmured to the load bot. “Or maybe that’s just the type of people who would ‘volunteer’ to help unload a bunch of free food.”

At last they came to an outer road, the city on one side and open fields on the other. Ash got a good look at his new home.

Finally the truck approached the bazaar, and parked in a large concrete area set aside for vehicles.

The merchant came around back and addressed him.

“Whelp, we’re here. At the bazaar. The hotel’s nearby. You might be able to ask around and find a room in someone’s house for cheaper. Wouldn’t hurt to ask.”

Ash thanked him again, hopping down off the truck. He shook the man’s hand and wandered over to the vendor area.

He pursed his lips when he saw the sheer number of stalls and tables, all splayed out in symmetrical order.

“Now, this,” he said with a note of appreciation in his voice, “is a marketplace.”

4.21

Wink met the greatest living pirate in one of the space station's reception rooms.

At least, that is what Christopher Raleigh was known for. In reality, Wink thought, these days he was more of a corporate tycoon.

By most estimations, he was the richest man in the galaxy. It was said if you could think of a lucrative enterprise, chances were good that the Raleigh family held stock in it, had provided the venture capital for it, or was thinking about buying it out.

The investment companies Christopher Raleigh owned were massive, stretching across all three governmental systems. It also shielded his name from direct ownership.

Here, Wink felt a little hazy in his understanding, having never taken a business course and not really grasping how corporate structuring worked. But he knew what the average person knew, and that was that Christopher Raleigh was rich. Filthy rich.

He was also a very private individual. No one came close to the man if he didn't want them to.

So it was with a bit of awe that Wink found himself shaking the great man's hand.

In his 50s, and looking like he was still in his prime, almost, the tall man with dirty blond hair and bright blue eyes seemed like he could sweep the feet off any woman he saw.

Not that he would, Wink thought, being famously married to one of Tetrarch Thrall's daughters, who he "rescued" off a ship Raleigh attacked during the war.

"Christopher Raleigh. Glad to meet you, Captain. Sorry for this spot of trouble we seem to have put you in."

The introduction knocked Wink out of his reverie.

"Ah . . . it, uh . . . obviously was not your fault, Captain Raleigh."

"Please, call me Chris. I'm only Captain aboard the Ultima Mule or Sky Viper. Both of which are here, by the way. They comprise my own private armada. This was a good chance to take them out for a spin, actually. And travel is almost instantaneous thanks to Tony's Subtle Services."

"You never really leave Chris's employ once you start with him, Captain McKelway. Let me just warn you upfront."

Chris laughed at Anthony's remark.

"Go on and tell him the rest, Tony. That's because I keep finding stuff for you all to do."

"The real reason is," Anthony said with a rare smile, "you pay better than everyone else."

"That's true, too."

A droid stepped into the room, one of the newer models. This male version looked human, Wink thought. The only reason he knew it was a droid was because it had one of the seven standard male faces used by Verberger Bots and Automatons Corp.

The droid wore a dark blue turtleneck and matching pants. A logo on its chest showed a skeleton's face inside an old-fashioned space helmet, with a cigarette dangling from clenched teeth.

This, Wink knew, was the old battle flag emblem of the Ultima Mule Company during the war. It represented space piracy, or at least privateering, and a casual disregard for standard system law with the cigarette, since tobacco remained illegal in most places.

“Captains, all biomatter has been scrubbed clean in Nefos One, Pulsar and Festoon. All ships and the station are fully sanitized. All corpses have been bagged and ported into Sky Viper’s hold.”

“Very good,” Chris said. “We’ll bury them on Lute rather than jettisoning them here. No sense in polluting Nefos with their remains.”

Not that it would matter much, Wink thought. Nefos was roughly the size of Jupiter. A handful of human bodies would be like specks of dust to it.

But he understood the environmental consideration. Plus, there was a certain respect for the dead. The bodies deserved proper interment, despite their owners’ actions while alive.

“Now, our next step will be to get Pulsar up and going again. I’ve brought in a repair crew with replacement parts. With your permission, they will begin working on her now that the messes have been cleaned up.”

“Absolutely. Let me just inform my pilot. How much do you think we’ll owe you for a new Wu Drive and a new standard one? And any repairs to the Machro if it was damaged?”

Wink tried to ask this with a straight face, but dread filled his eyes as he said it. What little savings he and Jinxie had managed to accumulate with the sale of the second battle tank to Tom Savage were in danger of evaporating with extensive and expensive repairs.

“I think in a court of law, I would ultimately be found responsible since you were operating at my behest and this occurred during your best efforts to fulfill the terms of service. No, I will be paying for your repairs out of pocket.”

“That’s . . . very generous of you, Captain. I mean, Chris.”

Chris waved it aside.

“I’ll be extracting it with interest from whoever set this up.”

He turned to face Anthony and added, “Obviously, we’ve got a traitor in our ranks.”

“Yes. And an outside entity intent on using that betrayal.”

“Lute has a lead for us, now that she’s had a chance to run facial scans on all the bodies. She’s telling me at least some of these guys are involved with an organization calling themselves the X’s and O’s.”

Anthony nodded, knowingly.

He locked eyes with Wink and said, “Anarchists.”

4.22

“**Y**ou are familiar with our operations on Phaethon, obviously.”

Several hours later, much of the work aboard the ship was done.

Wink thought about the old adage asserting anyone could do a job cheaply, quickly and good, but could only choose two out of the three.

Chris had apparently chosen quick and good. Wink had no idea how much the tycoon had spent on these repairs, but he knew they could not have been cheap.

First, all the components had been rapidly procured, then the two UMC spacecraft popped out two astronomical units or so to Nefos from Lute. Work on the repairs then began immediately, using mostly robotic crews.

Had Wink tried to have the repairs done himself, it would have taken much longer. First, he would have had to convince a repair company to get out here, somehow. Either that, or have a tug tow him into Lute’s orbit, since Lute was the closest inhabited planet.

From there, he would have been at the mercy of the local repair companies. He did not know anyone on Lute.

A more likely scenario, he thought, would be to pay for a tug all the way home to Petra Roe. It was the second closest planet, after all. Still, even

there, repairs would not have been cheap.

Pulling himself back to the present, he nodded.

“I met Tom Savage, and Gwen. We’ve done business. I’m privy to some of their private affairs.”

“Like a clandestine AI network on Phaethon, among other things.”

Wink raised his eyebrows at this statement. How much did the older man know? He had made it as a statement rather than a question.

“Yes. Tom has a number of . . . projects going on.”

Chris chuckled, in much the same way Tom would.

Wink stared at the man and saw a resemblance.

“He’s related to you, isn’t he? Is he your son? Nephew?”

“He is my son,” Chris said proudly. “And that’s another secret you can keep under your hat. The fewer people who know he’s actually a Raleigh, the easier it is for him to keep working on our solar projects on Phaethon. Now, let’s go for a tour and look at your new drives.”

Outside in the corridor, they met Jinxie.

“Oh, hey. I was just coming to join you guys.”

“Come with us, we’re going to look at the new Wu Drive.”

She joined the men as they walked toward the ship’s midsection.

“Good. No offense, but those bots you use kinda give me the creeps. They don’t talk or make facial expressions or anything.”

“When they’re programmed for a job, they are completely focused on that job. If you catch them during downtime you can engage in some small talk with them. But this version has a limiter. If you will recall your history lessons, you’ll know that the AI got out of hand in some early versions of very human-like robots.”

“Yes. We know the League was controlled by a kidnapped Verberger model for a while, although they don’t like to talk about it. One sure way to get a Leaguer with a big mouth in a bar somewhere to shut up is to remind him his people were once led by a bot.”

“Right. To prevent that, this generation has a limiter built in. They will never develop singularity, nor will they get to the point where they believe they’re human. They are specifically programmed to know who and what they are, and what their place is in society. So, you can talk to one but both of you will know you are not conversing with a real human.”

“Seems reasonable,” Wink said. “That’s one of the reasons for standard faces, too. You can always recognize a bot.”

“Right. Although, if you had the programming capabilities, and a way to change faces, you could generate some mischief I’m sure.”

The expressions changed on both Wink’s and Jinxie’s faces.

“That’s why he’s rich,” Jinxie whispered as Chris ducked into the engine room. “He can think of things like that.”

Wink nodded as they followed Chris inside the cramped engine room.

Here, the Wu Drive looked unremarkable, a long rectangular shape taking up most of the space.

“I was the one who came up with the ‘Wu trap’ during the war.”

“Yes, sir. That was how you captured the Aquamarine.”

Wink knew his history, in particular which ships were captured or destroyed during the war and which ones made it through. The capture of the Aquamarine was indeed historic, marking the first time a disabling net was successfully deployed upon a ship appearing in a pre-planned spot in space.

Most teleportation routes between planets were mapped out by the AIs, and if someone knew where a ship would appear, they could set a trap for it to disable the drives.

“That’s also where you met your wife,” Jinxie said with a smile. “On the Aquamarine.”

“Very good!”

Chris looked surprised and amused that she knew that tidbit.

“What happened after that, of course, is that everyone tried to use it. Both the League’s navy and the Republic’s set up traps for one another and it was folded into their military procedures. But then, countermeasures were developed. Wu Drives and engine rooms were shielded from that point on, throughout the rest of the war. On a civilian ship like this, no one bothers to shield things anymore.”

“Because there’s little threat of someone laying a trap for them?” Wink said.

“Exactly. There hasn’t been a war, not an official one, in years. Setting up a trap like that is expensive, and illegal. And warding an engine room against it is expensive. It’s not worth it for your typical merchant or business ships.”

“What you’re saying,” Jinxie said, pointing to the fresh layer of material coated over the drive and the walls, “is that we are now shielded.”

“You are now shielded. In the rare chance someone tries this on you again, it won’t work. We’ve got a ‘fool me once’ scenario here.”

Wink gave the older man a serious look.

“I know this was not inexpensive. Thank you.”

Chris made a dismissive gesture.

“Let’s talk about an exclusive contract with UMC to deliver goods back and forth between Phaethon and Lute. Now, I’m not sure you’re going to want to use your Machro-drive for every trip, or you two are going to age out a whole lot faster than my son and his girlfriend will, back on Phaethon. Toward the end, you’ll be old like me and they’ll still be young.”

Both Wink and Jinxie nodded. This was a well-known consideration when using a human crew to travel in hypertime.

“So maybe you can deliver most things in real time. Or we can work something else out, if you’re willing to trust one of my droids to fly the ship for you.”

Wink and Jinxie exchanged another glance.

He turned back to the former space pirate, now the galaxy's most successful corporate tycoon and said, "I think we can do business together."

Jinxie nodded vigorously and said, "Absolutely."

4.23

Wink and Jinxie walked through their final checklist for departure.

Chris would be flying the Ultima Mule and Sky Viper in tandem with them, for two hops over to Lute. The original plan involving a transfer of cargo at Nefos One had gone completely awry. Any efforts at subterfuge were completely in vain at this point.

Wink felt comfortable with the arrangement, especially in the presences of the legendary Ultima Mule. A Hawk-class, the veritable workforce of navies for the last three decades or so, the Mule could probably handle any hostiles they met.

And if not, the Sky Viper was an Eagle-class ship, with even more firepower.

Pulsar was dwarfed by these two battleships, but Wink felt safe going with them. All three popped away from Nefos One simultaneously.

Two seconds later, they ported into orbit around Lute, the fabled planet of pirates.

Nowadays, it served more as a commercial center, engaging in trade with the other two systems. The Lutian Alliance claimed five planets these days, beyond the original pairing of Halcyon and Lute. The Alliance's annual gross domestic product often rivaled that of the League's, although the

League remained larger even in its current diminished state after losing so much territory in the war.

Wink and Jinxie stared down at Lute from their spot in orbit on the bridge, holding hands.

“It’s beautiful. Have you ever been down there, Wink?”

He nodded.

“Yeah. As a kid. The family came here on vacation once. How about you?”

Jinxie shook her head.

“Maybe Chris Raleigh will take us to that private resort you read about in the news every now and then.”

“Do you think so?”

She sounded so hopeful, he hated to burst the bubble, especially since he brought it up. But he felt compelled to be realistic.

“Nah. I doubt lowly employees, or contractors in our case, receive the royal treatment.”

“Oh. Well, he was nice enough to fix up our ship. I like him.”

“Successful businessmen are often ruthless. And I guess he is, in the boardroom. But he sure seems nice in person.”

A comlink opened and Chris’s voice filled the bridge.

“Pulsar, we’re going to port up your cargo using Lootie’s external sensors on the Sky Viper. Stand by.”

Jinxie switched the front holo to a view of the hold. Boxes of equipment, crates and a couple shipping containers all popped into place.

“Teleportation is certainly easier,” she said. “Maybe we should let Chris install a sensor for LuteNet. I wouldn’t mind the AI controlling the ship in hypertime. We could go do something else.”

Wink shrugged, noncommittally.

“That’s kinda tying ourselves to the Ultima Mule Company. I mean, don’t get me wrong. They’re legendary. Captain Raleigh is a living legend. And I think we’re coming into a big payday. But I seriously doubt a major system’s AI is going to let us do anything outside the established boundaries of legal shipments.”

“No more smuggling, in other words.”

“I wouldn’t use those words.”

“No, but . . . you’re right. We’d have to go legit. Ironically, working for a legendary pirate company.”

“Yeah. I dunno.”

He crossed his arms, looking defensive.

“I’ll have to think about it.”

“Okay, you two. Pulsar is fully loaded. Do you feel like coming down and getting some fresh air on a real planet for an hour or two before going back? I know It’s been a couple months since you’ve set foot on *terra firma*.”

Wink looked at Jinxie and raised his eyebrows.

She smiled and nodded.

He said, “Sure, Chris. Can the Viper see us in our embarkation room? We’ve got a disinfection sequence there we can use.”

“She can. Let me know when you’re ready, and we’ll port you down to Mule Tower.”

“We, ah . . . don’t need to go through Customs?”

Chris chuckled.

“Nah. You’re my guests. Come on down when you’re ready.”

“It’s good to be the king,” Jinxie murmured softly as they walked off the bridge together.

4.24

Wink and Jinxie appeared in a large reception area filled with . . . treasure. That was the only word Wink could think of to describe it.

The high-ceilinged area had marble floors and columns with white gold accents. Natural light combined with recessed lighting to provide rich and warm illumination. On either side, floor-to-ceiling bookshelves extended the length of the room. They were all filled with books, that most curious of artifacts.

But the various nautical items on the floor, each highlighted in their own shaft of light, caught the young people's eye.

"It's like a museum!" Jinxie said in wonder, giving the room a better one-word description.

They approached a large wooden ship's wheel, and bent down together to read the plaque on a pedestal nearby.

Jinxie said, "Oh! This was on the Aquamarine! He must have kept it as a trophy."

"Yeah, that was a Mammoth-class luxury ship, if I recall correctly. It must have been huge. This . . . this is a good trophy to take from it."

"I'm glad you think so."

They turned at the sound of Chris approaching.

He smiled at them and said, “I had to give up one of my shares for that ship to my quartermaster, who claimed this wheel first. She drove a hard bargain. But, it was worth it. Go on, give it a spin.”

Jinxie carefully grabbed one of the many wooden spokes and pulled lightly. The wheel spun freely.

“Now, let’s step over to one of the conference rooms and discuss the terms of our contract. I realize you don’t have a lawyer bot, but the key things you will be agreeing to are not very hard to understand in layman’s terms. Basically, you are giving us the right to use your ship for transporting certain goods while retaining ownership and control of the vessel.”

“Those are very generous terms, Chris,” Wink said as they walked toward a glassed-off room with a giant mahogany table and a dozen black leather chairs.

Chris opened the door for them and everyone took a seat at the table.

“Yes, but there’s an ulterior motive behind the generosity. Right now Phaethon is embargoed because of how they treated your ship. All three systems are refusing transport except for humanitarian purposes. So, the League Navy has sent out their newest ship, partly as their own sign of generosity, partly as a display of strength, and partly for purely political reasons.”

Wink’s brows furrowed as he wondered how Chris knew this.

He must have sources, Wink decided.

“Lute has no official military, just shipping companies. Don’t call us pirates, thank you very much. Anyway, Lute has joined the League and the Republic in this embargo in retaliation for the attack on your ship. And that puts us in a bind, as you know. We’d like to send a lot more cargo to our research station over there, and we need to be able to transfer goods at a moment’s notice. So, we’d like to use your ship.”

“But of course, you don’t need a contract for that,” Jinxie said. “Not one that would involve bringing us down here to talk about it, anyway.”

“Exactly. As you have surmised, what we would like to do is take over your ship so that you don’t have to be present on every run. Because we want all the runs to occur in hypertime. And if we do twelve runs in a day, that would be something like two years that you two would age.”

“Before the Machro-drive, drone ships were out of the question. They always wanted a human onboard in case critical decisions needed to be made.”

“Yes. That stemmed from the early days of teleportation space travel. And literally decades went by without mishap. The routes are all pre-planned. Ships teleport one astronomical unit every second, and they appear in the middle of space where nothing is there. Literally decades went by without mishap. The Machro-drive showed the need for drone ships, and UMC invested heavily in them. That is in fact how we have been supplying Tommy up to now.”

“So . . .” Wink said. “You can’t continue while the embargo is in place.”

“Correct.”

Jinxie said, “But, our ship is not set up for drone operations. And if you put a sensor in for LuteNet to take control, she isn’t going to send the ship to Phaethon under the terms of the embargo she signed onto.”

“Also correct. Which is why we’ll use a droid pilot. You two can relax and stay here or on Petra Roe, Phaethon, wherever you like. The droid will fly your ship for us in hypertime, and aging will not be an issue for it.”

Wink and Jinxie looked at one another, each silently checking to see if the other approved.

Chris said, “Of course, you will be compensated for the use of your ship. We did take *some* off for the repairs we spent on it. But not much. I said I’d cover those, and I will. Mainly, we took off for the enhancements we gave your ship while repairing it. And I think that’s fair.”

He produced a holo document and turned it toward the couple, gently shoving it in their direction. It floated across the table

They leaned forward and read the numbers listed on the document, then glanced at one another again.

Jinxie had the look of someone whose money problems were suddenly a thing of the past.

Wink nodded.

He said, “Where do I sign?”

4.25

Chris led them to the elevator pods next, and took the couple up to the roof of Mule Tower.

On the way up, he said, “We renovated recently and added our own private restaurant on top. Employees can still use the cafeteria, of course, but they can come up here for some fresh air if they want. It has a nice view, too. Port Ryan has really grown in the last twenty years. All of Lute has prospered since the end of hostilities, which surprised some people since it provided such a boost to our economy. Once peace broke out, some people thought we’d sink back into the doldrums. But the Alliance helped a lot, and we trade with the other two systems, as well. So the economy has been humming along nicely since the end of the war.”

The door to the elevator opened on the roof and they stepped over to an area set up with small white outdoor tables and chairs. At the moment no one else was here. An android in a black and white uniform greeted them with a smile and led them to a table near the roof’s edge.

Here, a transparent barrier two meters high prevented anyone from falling off while at the same time offering an outstanding view of the city below. Port Ryan stretched out in all its municipal splendor, showing a thriving metropolis with thoughtful city planning involved in construction. Many of the structures below looked new, or at least refurbished, and they displayed

a uniform pattern along the streets rather than a haphazard, slapdash approach.

The android hostess and server was a female model with an attractive face, again one of seven standard versions from Verberger.

“The female models are actually more expensive than the male ones,” Chris said, noticing Wink’s gaze lingering on her.

“Why is that?” Jinxie said, her own face falling. “I think I know the answer.”

“It is true they are anatomically correct,” Chris said. “But more than that, people buy them for specific purposes in which they would prefer a more attractive, female version. It’s cultural norms, I suppose. When you walk into a building, many people expect to see a woman waiting to greet you. That irritates a small minority of people, almost all of whom are women. But it’s still the prevailing norm. And, many companies are willing to pay for an attractive female android to fill that role, instead of settling for an older, less expensive unit, or a male unit.”

The android came back, smiling, and handed each of them a menu.

“What would you like to drink?”

Wink and Jinxie both asked for water. Chris asked for iced tea.

When she left them, Chris said, “Poshbird is a local specialty, of course. We have our own farms here on Lute. You can always say you’ve eaten poshbird on Lute if you have a dish. On the other hand, if you prefer things with hooves, our steaks are delicious. May I suggest the ribeye, cooked medium-well. All sides are locally produced.”

When the bot returned they placed their orders. Chris had swayed the couple to get poshbird. He did not have to do much convincing, as the dish was a favorite across the galaxy. The android did not write anything down, simply nodded and acknowledged the orders.

Conversation remained light until the android returned with the food, steaming hot from the kitchen below. She placed the plates in front of them and wished them all *bon appétit*.

Halfway through the meal, Chris's attention drifted to the air traffic above Port Ryan.

Wink noticed most of the cars and trucks stayed far from their skyscraper. Mule Tower was the highest building around, and not many flying vehicles came their way.

One slipped out of the controlled corridor, though, and headed straight for the building.

Chris put his fork down and pressed the implant under his ear.

"Lootie, tell me that car is under control."

He listened as the AI responded, then his eyes flicked back to the couple across the table from him.

"Are you two armed?"

4.26

T rue to Chris's premonition, the car aimed straight for the roof of the building.

Wink and Jinxie were not, in fact, armed. They hardly ever went around Pulsar armed, and when they went planetside to pick up or drop off goods, guns were rarely warranted.

As the car steadily approached, Chris pushed his chair back and stood up.

"Get under the table. They're blasterproof."

"Who has blasterproof tables?" Jinxie said.

Chris smiled at her, and pulled out a nasty looking black pistol from a holster tucked into his waistband.

He stepped onto an empty chair nearby and stood on top of one of the tables, aiming up at the approaching car, now drawing near.

He squeezed off a shot and the bolt slammed into the car, rocking it.

"I think we better follow his advice," Wink said, taking a final bite of poshbird.

He went down to the floor, underneath the table.

Cursing, Jinxie joined him.

The car swooped overhead and pivoted midair before settling down vertically.

Chris turned on the table with it, squeezing off two more shots.

The windshield burst open with the third blast, unable to let all the energy pass through. Someone inside lurched forward, blood splattering across the passenger side.

The doors flew open and two men in back rolled out, holding rifles. They turned and fired off a stream of bolts in Chris's direction as he jumped off the table and walked steadily toward the car, shooting.

The windshield burst again, on the driver's side this time. The door swung open and a bloody corpse slid out of the seat.

The two gunmen regained their balance. Both ran for cover. Chris shot at the one on the right, squeezing off two shots. They missed, sailing into the barrier on the far side of the roof, dissipating.

The one on the left lined up a shot on Chris. He jerked his head, almost with a sixth sense, and saw the muzzle aiming his way.

On the edge of the restaurant section, he had almost walked out of the tables. He dove to the right, under the last tabletop just as a rifle blast sailed over his head.

Chris stood and flipped the table, presenting a round barrier shield to the gunman. He put one arm over the top and returned fire, squeezing off two rounds at the man on the left.

One hit the rifle square in the snout, making a small explosion. The man cursed and dropped it, then dove for cover as Chris's follow-up shot came for him.

The man on the right fired again, letting loose on full-auto this time. Bolt after bolt slammed into the tabletop, pushing it back against Chris. He stopped firing for a moment to hold his barrier in place. Bolts flew overhead too, and to the left and right.

He waited, grim-faced, shoulder against the underside of the tabletop as bolts smacked into it. No longer white, the top looked dark brown and black from scorch marks now.

“Chris is a bad-ass,” Jinxie said, lying on her belly next to Wink. “And he’s older than my dad.”

“Can it, Koontee! You’ll run out of charge that way!”

The shout came from the man on the left. The gunman on the right stopped shooting futilely at the tabletop.

As soon as he stopped, Chris lifted his gun around the edge and squeezed off a round without looking.

The shot caught the gunman, standing in the open, right in the face. His head burst open like a melon.

Chris stood to his full height when he heard the body collapse to the floor. He glared at the man with a broken gun on his left, stepped out from behind the overturned table, and headed his way, holding the pistol at waist height.

The man lifted his hands.

“Now, look . . . let’s be reasonable here.”

Chris kept a stern face as he approached.

The man backed up a little, but the roof barrier behind him kept him from retreating very far.

Chris came within striking distance, and slugged the man in the jaw, dropping him.

He walked back to the restaurant area, locking eyes with the android.

“Grab the living one and place him in a detention cell.”

She nodded and moved toward the gunman on the left, still unconscious on the floor.

Wink and Jinxie stood up, carefully, as he approached.

“I apologize for the interruption,” Chris said when he returned to their table.
“Now, if you’ll excuse me, I’ve got to go interrogate somebody. You probably don’t want to see that, so I’ll let you return to your meal.”

4.27

Ash found the marketplace fascinating. All the comforts of home could be purchased in the area closer to the city streets. Out on the edges, agricultural implements and farm animals reigned.

After wandering through the plywood “shops” near the front, he made his way inside the traditional stores lining the edges. Here he found furniture and other heavy goods, more than enough to set up a house.

In his mind he started forming his first story, aiming to give readers an idea of what a frontier planet looked like, at least from its capital city.

Around noon, he decided to sample local fare. While plenty of fresh groceries were available out in the bazaar, apparently trucked in from nearby farms, he elected to try one of the many cafes lining Commerce Boulevard.

He was surprised at how cheap everything was, in comparison to Octavian prices. Even in the slum areas of the eight boroughs back on Diego, everything was more expensive.

Of course, he thought, all this was homegrown. But he did spy one thing on the menu that was not: poshbird.

When he asked the waitress about it, she produced one of the ready to eat instaheat packages.

“It’s only 50 credits,” she assured him.

Then she laughed at the appalled look on his face.

“In Octavia, those are only five, if that much!”

“Well, sir, this is not Octavia. And our prices are comparable to what you’ll find elsewhere. These are from a recent delivery, the last ship that made it in. And we won’t be getting anymore anytime soon, what with that embargo in place.”

He passed on the poshbird and opted for a locally raised plate of baked chicken.

He watched people walk by while savoring the food from his seat on the sidewalk. In many ways, League City looked and felt young. The buildings were all new, but finished rougher than a comparable municipality’s structures back home.

The people, too, were easily sorted into townies and out-of-towners by their dress. Farmers, in particular, had a certain look promoting their profession, usually involving overalls and flannel shirts, straw hats and boots. This close to the bazaar, they walked along the sidewalk, gazing at storefronts along with the rest of the people here.

Ash decided he needed to get out of the city at some point and visit some farms, maybe interview the country folks. He wanted to get a fuller picture of this planet and how it worked. The cities would become more dependent on homegrown food without regular shipments showing up. The rapidly diminishing supplies of poshbird would no doubt go up in price even more, he thought.

Finishing his meal, he left the waitress a five-credit token for a tip, which he figured to be quite generous. Although, reflecting on it, he realized it was only a tenth of a plate of poshbird.

Walking away from the bazaar, he headed deeper into town, eschewing the black taxis lined up on the street.

Six blocks later, he accepted the offer of a lonely rickshaw boy, who offered his services apparently without any real hope Ash would take him up on it.

The boy merged with traffic, jogging along at a stately pace in the far-right lane. Rickshaws were not allowed on the sidewalks. He struck up a conversation with Ash over his shoulder.

As far as Ash could tell, the boy struggled for enough money to make it every day. He paid a fee to a company for the privilege to use the rickshaw, turning it in every night.

“How many rides do you have to give before you pay back the rental?”

“Oh, it depends on how long they are. Could be as little as three. Sometimes seven or eight.”

“Do you make that before lunch?”

“Usually. If I can get out to the far side of the bazaar before the sun comes up, I can help move things around for the farmers. Sometimes people buy stuff really early and want to take it back home. Those are the best days. Unfortunately, every other boy in a rickshaw is out there, too, so I don’t always get the best riders early. After lunch can be lucrative, but I’m usually pretty tired by then.”

“Why don’t you grab the rickshaw after lunch then, and start fresh?”

The boy flashed him a grin over his shoulder.

“Aw, mister. There ain’t rickshaws left to rent after six in the morning, much less after lunch.”

The boy brought him to the center of the city, and Ash got his first view of the Courthouse. This was the grandest building in town, perhaps the entire planet. And it still paled in comparison to any established planet’s building. He went over in his mind how he would describe it for the folks back home.

The “nice” hotel was on the Courthouse square, and his driver pointed it out to him.

“You know, I think I’ll stay at the merchant’s hotel, closer to the bazaar.”

“Good choice. It’s a lot less expensive, although maybe not as nice as this one.”

“Could I trouble you to pull me back to the bazaar? I’ll pay for the extra distance.”

“Sure!”

In a renewed burst of optimism and energy, the boy made a U-turn and headed back down Commerce Street.

Half an hour later, Ash checked into a room at the League City Farmers and Merchants’ Inn, one block from the bazaar.

Feeling overwhelmed by the time adjustment, he walked into the room, took his shoes off and collapsed in the bed, falling asleep almost immediately.

4.28

Ash woke up to a growling stomach. He wandered downstairs, the clerk at the front desk had given him a third floor room, and walked back out to the street.

The sky looked considerably dimmer now. He still had not quite adjusted to not seeing a blue sky when he looked up. Tracking the sun was problematic, too. Evening was marked by a noticeable decrease in light, he supposed.

Street lamps clicked on as he walked, heading back toward the inner city. He found the sign for a place he noticed earlier while riding on the rickshaw, with an arrow pointing up a set of metal stairs hanging onto the side of a building in an alley. This led him to an upper floor restaurant, which seemed considerably swankier than the sidewalk café where he ate lunch.

There, a host met him wearing a black jacket and tie, and a frilly white shirt. He led Ash to a small table for two, tucked away in a dark nook. The host snapped his fingers and a holo menu appeared, tied to a little half dome device in the center of the table.

Impressed with this high-tech touch, Ash dutifully swiped a finger through the pages of the holo menu, noting the extensive and expensive imported wine list.

His eyes lit up with the local fare, though.

“I’ll have a glass of this red from Westheimer, please.”

“Oh, sir. You really should try one of our bottles from Italia. That will be a much better wine. Our local vintners are just getting their feet wet, and they haven’t had as long to hone their craft. That one has only been around a couple years or so. He’s not quite there yet, if you know what I mean.”

Ash nodded in understanding, but insisted on the Westheimer anyway.

The man stopped protesting and disappeared inside the kitchen. Moments later, he poured out a glass from a freshly opened bottle.

Ash swirled the wine and took a sniff. He did not consider himself an expert, but like many an Octavian, he knew wine. He knew fine dining. Some young people had even done away with kitchens in their apartment units, since space was so limited and they never cooked meals anyway.

He had not done so, not yet. Although it was certainly true he either ate out every night, or ordered food to be delivered.

The *maitre d'* was correct, he decided. The wine was young, and not fully developed. In a few years maybe the bottle would have aged to provide a richer flavor.

“Are these imported grapes or local variants?”

“That particular vintner is working with some cross breeds. Our local varieties do not produce good wine. The hope is, by crossing them with old California stock, we might get something suitable out of them. In a few years. I can bring that bottle from Italia out, if you would prefer something more palatable.”

“No, this is fine. Tonight I want a purely local experience.”

“Ah, yes. For a rare treat, however, if you so desire, we *do* have some poshbird available.”

“Yes, I saw it on the menu.”

At 85 credits, he really thought that was highway robbery, but he did not say that out loud.

“No, I’d like a one hundred percent locally sourced meal from Phaethon, please.”

“Ah, yes. In that case, might I suggest the prime rib? Local beef, raised ten miles outside the city on a family farm with an excellent reputation.”

“That sounds good. Crossbred? Or imported stock?”

“Local bovines. They’ve been domesticated. These would be calves grown on the farm, although their parents once roamed these surrounding grasslands, wild. The farmers are to be commended for all their hard work. The beef is excellent, sir. Quite succulent. It is comparable and can hold its own against anything Pearl has to offer.”

“Okay. That does sound good. The potatoes are local variants as well?”

“They are locally grown from imported starter stock.”

“That’s fine, thank you.”

An hour later, Ash felt very full.

The beef was excellent. He washed it down with two more glasses of Westheimer red. He decided after the third glass that it did not taste bad at all.

The meal was expensive, but he paid the bill and tipped well. By the time he left, more tables were filled, mostly merchants and their wives from what he surmised.

Outside, he carefully made his way down the steps to the alley below.

He paused after the last step, and belched.

Then he froze as cold, sharp steel pressed against his neck.

“Don’t move,” a voice behind him said. “Hand over your tokens.”

4.29

Mugged on my first night here, Ash thought.

He froze in place, painfully aware the razor-sharp knife pressed against the front of his neck could easily slice into something important if he moved so much as a centimeter in any direction.

Slowly, ever so slowly, he eased his hand into his front pocket.

He felt grateful that he had just left several tokens in the restaurant, and no longer had as many on him. Still, a couple were hundred-credit pieces, and he felt loathe to give them up.

On the other hand, he did not want his neck cut, either. And that took precedence at the moment.

Just as he was pulling his hand back with the tokens, he heard the thump of feet landing hard on concrete.

The man behind him heard it, too. He turned to look and pulled the knife away from Ash's throat.

Ash moved forward a step to get away from the mugger, and turned around to see what was going on. Light in the alley was dim. A figure seemed to stand just two meters away, dressed all in black. He could make little out . .

.

Then a woman's voice spoke from the darkness.

“Drop it, scum.”

The mugger snarled and lunged, slashing out with the knife like a claw. The shiniest thing in the darkness, it reflected very weak light from the windows above.

The woman moved, avoiding the thrust, then she grabbed the man's wrist and pulled, making him lose balance with his momentum.

He stumbled past her and she gave a vicious kick to his kidneys, knocking him to the ground in pain.

He grunted, holding his side with his free hand, scrambling to regain his feet.

Before he could recover, she rushed in, practically invisible, and delivered blows to his neck and nose.

He fell back down, on his butt.

She jumped, and with the full power of her leg muscles delivered a massive strike on his face from the soles of her boots.

His head rocked back and he fell over, knocked out cold.

She bent down and picked up the knife he dropped, making it disappear somewhere on her person. Then she turned and faced Ash, who stared into the inky darkness with his mouth open.

He could not see everything that had happened, but he saw enough. He stared at the dark feminine form cloaked in shadows before him, his mouth and eyes wide open.

She stared back at him, as if in appraisal. He could barely make out her eyes behind a full facial mask and hood as they traveled up and down his body.

When they came back up, she locked eyes with him for one second more. Then she turned and ran down the alley.

Ash snapped out of it. He headed down the alley after her, intent on talking with the woman.

He had so many questions. What was she doing here? Why was she dressed all in black? Where did she learn to fight like that?

But she was no longer in the alley. He came out on the other end, street lamps pooling light on a deserted corner, and looked both ways. But no black-clad masked woman could be seen anywhere.

Dejected, he turned and walked back toward Commerce Boulevard.

Above him, standing horizontally three stories up, hands on her hips, Haley Stonecipher watched him go, as Ash wandered back to his hotel.

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Later that night, Ash finished his first article for the Zeitung. Intent on getting it out before the Elsa Cole left orbit, and while he could still make use of her quantum matrix connection, he hammered out the verbiage late into the night, shaking off the soporific effects of the wine.

League City had a local newspaper, one that printed on holo for those who had a terminal. It even used copy from the wires which included the Zeitung, and he knew he stood a good chance of having this story picked up locally, too. So, he wanted to get it right.

He had lots of notes from his seven and a half weeks aboard the Cole, but that was boring. He gave a nod to Captain Falco, who had shown polite consideration toward the end, but paid more attention to the Marines he rode down with, even though he had far less time to get to know them.

Mostly, he wanted to discuss his experiences in League City. He wrote about the local food, the people, the waitstaff, the rickshaw boy and his financial woes, the state of agriculture on the planet, the dusty atmosphere in the city with the homegrown buildings and simple architecture.

Then he ended with the account of his near-mugging, and being saved at the last minute by a mysterious figure cloaked in darkness.

He finished dictating the article, his eyes focused on the past rather than the hotel room.

“ . . . Then she disappeared, a night shadow swallowed up by the dark.”

4.30

“I got the labels!”

Tom walked into the Vicks’s house carrying a big cardboard box with Gwen trailing him. They stopped in the living room and looked around.

Every square centimeter of flat surface, it seemed, had a little bottle filled with syrup on it.

They were flat glass bottles, holding 300 milliliters each, with a red screw-on poly lid. These had been purchased from a supplier in League City, then transferred between warehouses.

Of course, from the privacy of his own warehouse Tom had Lisa port everything back to the farm. Over the next two days, he helped Silas and Lola transfer the freshly “sugared” syrup from the larger tubs to these smaller bottles.

They had no mechanized or fancy way of making the transfer, doing it all by hand using tubes and funnels. Now, they had over 1,000 1/3 liter bottles filled with light brown syrup. The bottles dominated the living room, and most of the rest of the house.

Everybody had sampled it, and they agreed the syrup tasted pretty good.

It was definitely not maple syrup, though. No one could remember exactly how maple syrup tasted, but they all knew this wasn't it.

Lola thought it was sweeter than maple syrup, and more akin to honey although it didn't taste like honey, either.

They had debated long and hard what to put on the label. Finally, Tom made a decision.

He opened the box from the printer back in League City and revealed the new labels, holding one of them up for the others to see.

It read, "Uncle Silas's Phaethonian Syrup. Made with Love."

"Aww! I like it!" Lola gushed.

"Uncle Silas?" Silas said with a dubious expression on his face.

"Sure. 'Uncle' is used in a lot of food products. Or, 'Aunt.' But, you know. You're an uncle."

"I dunno. I mean, that's my name on there."

"Well, Silas, it was your idea," Gwen said, smiling.

"Well, maybe so. But . . . it's Mr. Savage's money what got the ball rollin'."

"Half of it came from your homestead, Silas," Tom said. "And all of it came from your knowhow. I would not have thought of tapping the trees for sap. Nope, it's Uncle Silas's syrup. No doubt about it."

"Phatheonian' was a good idea," Lola said. "That dances around the maple syrup that's not really from maple trees thing."

"They're definitely not maples," Silas said. "For one thing, maple trees produce sap in far colder weather than this."

Tom said, "Well, at least it's the same principle. Okay. Let's get started applying these labels to all the bottles. Come on, if we split it up we can knock it out pretty fast."

As she sat down to help, Gwen grumbled a bit.

“Maybe we can invest our share of the profits in something automated. This ‘made by hand’ stuff is for the birds.”

-+-

By the following morning, their first batch of Phaethonian syrup was bottled, labeled, and boxed up. They loaded up the truck with Timmy’s help well before the sun came up.

Lisa popped the loaded truck away, then teleported the two couples to the warehouse in League City thousands of kilometers away.

Here, dawn had already arrived. Haley lay sacked out on a cot in the corner of the warehouse, sleeping through all the incoming teleportations and displacement of air.

She woke up when Lisa ported in breakfast, though, and everybody started opening packages of pan sausage, biscuits and gravy.

Haley had no more power packs left to sell from yesterday. Today would be an accumulation day, only.

When everyone finished eating, they squeezed into the truck’s cabin. Tom opened the warehouse door and Silas drove the truck out. Minutes later they were on the outer loop, heading for the vast outdoor marketplace.

Tom negotiated with the city’s agent and rented four tables near the middle. They drove between other trucks, merchants busily unloading their wares, and found their designated spot. The five of them jumped out of the truck and began unloading boxes.

Lola brought along a tray of bread from home, cut into small squares.

“We’re gonna have to give out samples, at least at first,” she said. “Silas, you tell people it’s made local.”

“The ‘Phaethonian’ part on the label should help with that,” Gwen said.

When they were all set up, Gwen turned to Haley, who still had circles under her eyes from lack of sleep.

“Come on, Haley. Let’s go shopping. You can tell me all about what’s going on here in the city.”

“Nothing’s going on.”

“Right, right. Let’s go.”

She pulled Haley away from the tables and they wandered off, looking at the merchants’ goods and talking quietly to one another.

4.31

“So, I’ve been, you know, kind of fighting crime here. That’s all. And since most crime happens at night, I’ve been staying up late.”

Haley stifled a yawn, as if remembering she had had very little sleep.

“That sounds unsustainable,” Gwen said, stopping to inspect several tables full of candles. The merchant smiled at her as she stooped to sniff one marked, “Vanilla.”

“Did you make these all yourselves?”

The candle monger shook her head.

“No. They’re all imported from Clarion, actually.”

Gwen gave the huge lot a critical look. The woman had rented eight tables.

She did not want to say it out loud, but candles were obviously not a big seller. Otherwise, the lady would not still have so many. Perhaps she would have fared better outside the city, in more rural communities.

“We might have to pick one of these up for the house on the way back.”

She made the statement to Haley, but also for the woman’s benefit as they left her tables. A slight look of disappointment had crossed the merchant’s face.

“She’d probably trade you for a bottle of syrup,” Haley said quietly, “if you really wanted something.”

“Shoot. For a bottle of syrup, I’d expect at least ten candles. And that’s being generous. You can make those yourself, you know.”

“Have you ever made candles, Gwen?”

“No. But I’ve heard you can do it. It can’t be *that* hard. Just boil some wax, pour it in a tube, stick a wick in it . . . and *voila*. Candles.”

“Where would you get the wax? And the wicks? And the tubes to pour them in?”

“Haley, I already said I’ve never done it before. I don’t know.”

Gwen waved aside these considerations and headed toward the stalls at the front of the marketplace.

“Come on, I want to be near a good restaurant before lunch,” she said.

“Don’t tell Tom, but I’m getting tired of poshbird. I think I’ll be eating up anything else he has available. We’ve still got some pot pies and stuff. But for once it’ll be nice to have a prepared meal, not something from a heated tray. You know?”

Haley shrugged, good-naturedly. She was not tired of boxed platters yet, herself.

She said, “Anything beats skinned rabbit roasted over a spit on a campfire.”

“Oh, that’s not bad. If you’re hungry enough.”

The two smiled with shared memories of their time in the wilderness with the Fae Phalanx.

Later, they found a table at one of the outdoor cafes and ordered an early lunch, splurging on beef medallions with a mushroom sauce, rice pilaf and asparagus.

Gwen said, “Mm. See? Now this is what I’m talking about. I could port to League City every day at noon for this kind of lunch.”

“Why don’t you? I mean, we have suffered for a long time out in the middle of nowhere, Gwen. This whole planet has, in a way. Unless you live near League City. All the imports come through here, and the locals get first dibs.”

“It might be nice to do that,” Gwen said, dabbing at her lips with a cloth napkin. “If there’s nothing going on at the farm. I’m committed, Haley. To Tom, really, more so than the farm. More so than Phaethon, even. If he goes back to Lute, or Diego, or wherever tomorrow, I’ll be on the ship with him.”

“Wow. So, you two are pretty serious.”

Gwen shrugged and said, “When you know, you know.”

“That’s awesome. I’m happy for you. I still haven’t found Mr. Right, yet. Although I did kind of meet somebody last night.”

“Oh really? Who was this mysterious stranger?”

“Well, I don’t really know, to be honest with you. I think I can find him again. I hope I do. He came out of Folderol’s late last night . . . that’s that nice second floor place a couple blocks from here. Anyway, I was up on the roof watching over the main street when I heard some talking down in the alley. He was getting mugged. I kinda put a stop to that.”

“You didn’t get his name? No way to contact him? Was he cute?”

“Oh, yeah. He’s my type, alright. I don’t think he got a good look at me, in the dark. Obviously he doesn’t have our enhanced vision or anything. Anyway, yeah. I’m pretty sure he’s staying in the Farmers’ and Merchants’, so if I keep an eye on that place I can catch him again, hopefully. Anyway, I know it’s all hopium, right? But at least I’m closer to eligible guys here in the city than I was leading the Fae out in the woods.”

With the thought of the Fae again, and all their friends who were killed recently in those woods, both women grew silent for a moment.

Gwen said, “Well, we’d probably best head back before the men start looking for us.”

She plunked down enough tokens to pay for both meals with a decent tip, then they headed down the sidewalk back toward the bazaar.

They came to a newsstand on the corner, where the local holosheet was sold. In bold letters marching around the column on the corner, the news ticker read, “Zeitung Reporter Visits City . . . Saved By Mysterious Figure . . . Shares Adventure with Readers . . .”

“What is this?” Gwen said, pointing at the ticker. “That’s not your guy is it?”

“I dunno.”

Haley deposited a one-credit token into a slot on the column and a holosheet appeared. She took it and pulled it close. Gwen leaned over to look at it, too.

On the front page, a huge headline screamed above a lengthy story, with a byline for Ashley Thallus:

NIGHT SHADOW STRIKES!

4.32

“I think it’s so sweet, you say your syrup is made with love.”

An older woman, a little overweight, smiled at Tom. At the moment, he was the only person present manning the tables.

His potential customer clutched three bottles of syrup in one hand, holding them by the neck. Her body language indicated she really wanted the syrup. Lola’s idea of offering free samples had been brilliant. Most people had bought at least one bottle after sampling it and being assured the product was a genuine native food item.

This woman looked determined to buy three bottles, but she was obviously a merchant and used to haggling. She actually appeared to be enjoying it. Plus, she seemed attracted to Tom, dropping signs here and there that he would be more than welcome to spend some time at her booth, which was not very far from here, after all.

Tom had been polite and professional, and not in the least bit attracted to her. Not to mention the fact that even if he was, he had already committed himself to Gwen and had no intention of cheating on her, or even pretending to flirt with someone, even for a sale.

In some cultures, he thought, her body shape would be highly appealing. Cultures where food remained scarce, he knew, could see body weight as an

indicator of success. Conversely, cultures where food remained plentiful sometimes perceived slimmer builds as attractive.

He did not begin to understand the dichotomy, or all the nuances involved. All Tom knew for sure was that he felt attracted to Gwen.

And so far, the older merchant lady had been unable to talk him down from his five credit a bottle minimum.

He brushed aside her gushing compliments and said, “No, really. They are made with love. Uncle Silas and his wife . . . let’s just say this syrup is *literally* made with love. I’m not kidding.”

Her eyes grew round, suddenly very intrigued by the story behind the syrup and not just the strapping young man selling it to her.

“Oh, my. Literally? Five credits, you say? But that’s 15 credits a liter. That seems rather *steep*.”

He did not like the way she said, “steep.” She made it sound dirty.

But Tom kept a straight face.

“Per bottle, yes. And that doesn’t actually begin to cover our time and expenses making this stuff. The next batch will likely be even more expensive. We’re just trying to get the word out, right now.”

“All I have is a twenty-credit token on me.”

She pouted at him, acting about half her age.

“I’ve got change,” he said, raising an eyebrow.

The sale completed, the rotund woman wandered off with her prizes, looking very happy.

Tom heard her murmur to herself, “Made with love!”

“Is everybody sex obsessed on this planet?” he wondered out loud. “What is it about the frontier that attracts high libido people?”

Gwen and Haley showed back up while he muttered to himself.

“Wow, we sold a lot,” Gwen said, noting that about half the bottles were already gone.

“Yeah. Not like hotcakes, but we’ve done alright. A couple restaurants bought some cases. That helped.”

Haley said, “Where’s everybody else?”

Tom shrugged.

“Out doing their own shopping. Hey, is that the local paper? Wow, it’s holographic. You know that Little York would never have something like that. At least not for a few years. They’d be lucky to have a paper newspaper.”

He pulled the floating holo closer and glanced over the front page.

“Night Shadow, huh? What is this, a tabloid? What’s a Zeitung reporter doing out here, anyway?”

He pulled the holo down and stared over it at Gwen.

“Don’t your parents own the Zeitung? Isn’t this the guy your mother said to keep an eye out for? Ashley Thallus. What a name. I’m pretty sure that is the guy she said she was sending your way.”

“Oh. Do you know him?”

Gwen looked from Tom to Haley, who asked the question, her ears reddening.

“No. And yes, that is the guy I’m supposed to help, if he makes contact.”

“Well, maybe I can make contact,” Haley said. “I mean, we’re friends, right? And I can always have Lisa port him to you if he needs to be in Little York or somewhere.”

“Right. No, that sounds like a good idea, Haley. You should make contact with him.”

Tom turned from one to the other, as if watching a tennis match.

His eyes narrowed.

“What’s going on? Wait a minute. There’s something I’m missing here.”

“Don’t worry about it, dear,” Gwen said, sliding her hand through the crook in his arm.

She successfully redirected his attention until the others came back.

4.33

“It turns out the car with four gunmen in it was not filled with guys from the X’s and O’s.”

Once again, Wink and Jinxie sat in the conference room off Chris’s trophy hall. This time, Anthony Kim joined them, having wrapped up his work on Nefos One.

Chris stood, pacing back and forth at the head of the table while the others sat, listening to him.

“At least,” he added, “not exactly. They were mercs. Lootie’s tried to check into it, but they keep private books, as you would expect, with an air gap. Makes it difficult to trace stuff. Not impossible, though. The short version is, if you put two and two together, you start to see some telltale patterns that suggest someone involved in the X’s and O’s hired these mercs to put a hit on us. Or you. Or just me. But all signs point to it being you.”

Jinxie said, “What, just because they couldn’t get our ship, they came after us? That’s hard to believe.”

“Well, under interrogation, our lone survivor from that little scuffle up there . . .”

Wink snorted softly. An attack by armed men, in which Chris singlehandedly took out three of them before disarming the fourth, hardly

counted as a “little scuffle” in his mind.

“Well, let’s just say he didn’t know a lot. But he knew he was to take out everybody on the roof. One bit of the directive he revealed involved ‘getting the young people.’ And I’m certainly not young. So, that leads me to believe you two were the primary targets.”

“I’m glad you were there and that you had a gun,” Wink said.

Chris nodded, but he wasn’t really listening.

He said, “Tony, what do you think? Do you think the X’s and O’s hired these mercs and sent them to take out the ‘young people’ as a revenge move for not dying at Nefos and handing over their ship?”

Anthony nodded, slowly.

“It certainly seems that way. But while I think that’s a valid line of inquiry, it’s not the primary one we should be concerned with.”

“No? What’s the primary one? What am I missing?”

“The question you should be asking is related to the one at Nefos. There, we wondered how the gang lying in wait knew that Pulsar would be appearing there. And when. Now, down here on Lute, at Mule Tower no less . . . somebody knew you and the kids were upstairs eating lunch on the roof.”

The discussion stopped.

Everyone stared at Anthony.

He stared back at Chris, expressionless.

“You’re right. Of course, you’re right.”

“Who knew you were up there? I’m presuming they did not hack into Lootie. Who knew Pulsar was coming in? The answer to both questions points to the person responsible. I would imagine fewer people knew you were in the rooftop restaurant than those who were aware you’d be receiving a spaceship at Nefos One.”

Chris sighed, with a look of deep disappointment on his face.

He opened his personal holo.

“Lootie, please play back any recent footage you have of Gabby Womsley. In particular we’re looking for conversations with outside entities about the Pulsar.”

“I am sorry, Christopher. I have no security footage at all of Gabby Womsley from her personal desk, going back 90 days.”

Chris’s eyes narrowed.

“How is that possible?”

“I am showing a kill file executing on the subroutine covering Mule Tower which disabled the security camera for the receptionist’s office during that timeframe.”

Chris took a breath and controlled his pulse.

“Okay. Do you have any snippets stored in memory, in which you overheard anything Gabby said about the Pulsar or her crew, or about sending someone to the rooftop restaurant, or to Nefos One?”

Half a second passed, during which the AI searched all her memory banks.

“I do have a meeting in a small restaurant in Port Ryan, about 12 kilometers from Mule Tower, which occurred five weeks and three days ago. I will play back the pertinent portion. It is audio only.”

The sounds of a restaurant filled the conference room. Glasses tinkled, silverware scraped plates, chairs scuffled back and forth, all with the background buzz of light conversation.

Then, two voices came into audible focus, a woman and a man.

“I can send over what I find out, when it happens. I’m pretty well insulated. All the info for UMC comes across my desk, and no one pays any attention to me. It should be easy.”

“Good. This is very good, Gabby.”

“Stop.”

The playback halted at Chris's command.

"Do we have an ID for the male voice?"

A picture of a swarthy man with a dark brown complexion appeared in Chris's holo. Underneath floated the name, "Banner Danwell."

"Thanks. File that for later, if we need it. Resume the audio."

"When you do, use one of these comlinks. It will bypass the local AI. And of course, if you're not being recorded, there should be nothing to worry about."

"Thank you, Banner."

"Of course. We will have a prominent posting for you in Allegory. I'll see to it personally."

When the playback stopped, Chris and Anthony locked eyes.

"Allegory, I presume, is their Utopia they're trying to build?" Chris said.

"It would seem so. I've never heard the name before. One supposes they plan on changing the name of Phaethon, if that's the case."

Chris sighed.

"Alright. Lootie, please forward these concerns to the Chief of Police. Inform him of what we know, that this fellow named Banner Danwell is likely conspiring to kill people. Try to convince him to detain Danwell. The Chief will probably say something like half the people in Port Ryan are trying to kill someone. Tell the Chief he tried to kill me. That might help. Then see if you can find Mr. Danwell. Hopefully he's wearing an implant tuned to you."

"He is not."

"Okay. Well, if you find him, alert Chief and have him detained."

"Will do, Christopher."

Chris turned his attention back to the people in the room.

“Let’s go downstairs and confront Gabby with what we know.”

4.34

Wink did not care either way, but Jinxie decided she really wanted to see this. So, the couple found themselves riding the elevator pod all the way down to the street level along with Anthony Kim and Christopher Raleigh.

No one said anything on the way down. Wink thought nobody looked happy, except maybe for Jinxie who seemed delighted to be in the thick of things.

The door opened and they walked out into the building's lobby.

It was empty, with blasterproof windows and a large door facing the street. Security had been upgraded and enhanced multiple times since the war years, and some of the problems UMC had faced in those days.

The lobby itself looked affluent but subdued. Dark woods and gold inlays provided subtle hints at the money involved with the corporation represented by this real estate.

Facing the main door, a receptionist's station waited, manned by a real person. Wink and Jinxie saw Gabby Womsley in the flesh for the first time.

Wink remained unimpressed. She was in her 40s and working a job usually covered by some kind of automaton.

He found himself wondering if she had been a charity hire. If so, what a mistake that was proving to be, he thought.

Gabby looked up, startled to see someone come out of the elevator, much less the head of the corporation himself.

“Oh! Mr. Raleigh! Hello. What . . . what can I do for you?”

“Gabby. It has come to my attention that you have been telling people in the X’s and O’s all about our business. In particular my new contractors with Pulsar, Wink McKelway and his pilot, Jinxie Malone.”

Her face turned dark red. She turned to the two young people behind Chris and shock registered on her face.

“Mr. Raleigh! I’m . . . I’m sure I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

Chris made a mental command. His personal holo appeared and started playing the voice file from the restaurant Lootie left him.

“That’s you and somebody named Banner Danwell. And no, it’s not doctored in any way. Lootie can attest to the fact it is raw audio, and her sensors have you at the restaurant when this was made.”

Gabby’s face changed. Wink found himself amazed as he watched. She went from the surprised, shaken woman, unsure exactly of what her boss was talking about, to one of conviction, certainty, and an underlying sense of anger.

“Do you understand what anarchy really is, Mr. Raleigh? It’s a rejection of all forms of government. It’s true freedom. It’s a society based entirely on voluntary cooperation. And that’s what we’re building on Phaethon!”

“I understand what anarchy is, Gabby. It’s chaos. It sounds so good on paper, but it can never work. There has to be some rules. There has to be some organization, or it all goes to hell pretty darn quick. Even diehard libertarians will tell you that.”

Gabby shook her head.

“You don’t understand. None of you truly understand. But you’ll see. The X’s and O’s will show the way. Wait until we gain Phaethon. Then you will

see the start of something great.”

The front doors slid open and a Port Ryan police officer walked in. Behind him, three modern androids followed, all with identical faces, blue uniforms and badges.

The policeman locked eyes with Chris, who nodded at him.

In a voice tinged with sadness and regret, yet nonetheless resolved to go through with it, Chris said, “Officer, please arrest this woman for conspiracy to commit murder, and anything else LuteNet suggests. We will be pressing charges.”

The officer nodded and motioned for two of the androids to approach.

Gabby stood, indignation written all over her face.

“You’ll see, Chris. Anarchy is coming. Anarchy is coming everywhere!”

The bots gripped her, one on either arm, and picked her up. They smoothly brought her to the human, pinning her arms behind her back while he applied force cuffs.

The officer nodded once again to Chris, and followed the bots out the door to a van waiting for them on the street. Gabby was placed in back, the two androids accompanying her. The human officer and the other bot climbed in front, and the van took off, ascending straight up.

Chris sighed and touched his implant.

“Lootie, please send down one of our standard bots to fill in as receptionist.”

“Will do, Christopher.”

He looked back at the others with pain in his eyes.

“This would be a lot easier if it weren’t for the fact that my son is on the planet they have their eyes on.”

4.35

Anton Berris knocked on the door to a small room in the basement of an apartment building.

He was in the projects of League City, and it bothered him that so many apartments were empty now. He and Reynard Gliph had personally seen to the immigration of thousands of people, mostly young unmarried men, to Phaethon.

Once there, they had been directed to stay in this city. The municipal powerbrokers felt compelled to provide them food and shelter. Ultimately, the Courthouse wanted as many immigrants to Phaethon as possible, and young men were seen as a valuable commodity.

And they were to the X's and O's, too. But Gliph used them too early, Berris thought. His move on the city, the riots he led not long ago, devastated their numbers.

This was a frontier planet, and even the merchants walked around armed. They were willing to fight for their rights and property. They weren't cowed subjects of socialism, like the Leaguers, willing to let anyone from the government walk over them in return for social security. They weren't even Republicans, jaded to their rights and freedoms and unused to fighting for things.

No, frontier planets self-selected individuals willing to fight. And practically every merchant in town defended their turf with guns that night.

And they had bigger guns than the rioters.

We're never going to recover, Berris thought, as he waited patiently at the door. Inside, he finally heard a chair scraping and the softer sounds of people moving around.

At last the door swung open and a very young girl walked out. She did not even look Berris in the eye, but headed for the stairs.

"Come in," came a tired voice inside.

Berris closed the door behind him and walked up to Reynard Glyph, sitting in a wooden chair and zipping up his pants.

"You need to focus, Rey. Now is not the time for pleasure."

"It's always time for that, Anton. Always. Now tell me why I don't have my spaceship, yet."

"I don't know," Berris said, quickly refocusing to the issue at hand.

"Obviously our people ran into some trouble."

"How do you know that? You see, that's the problem with our current lack of communication out here. A Republican Navy ship is in orbit. See if you can send a message through their network. Find out what's going on out there. We should have our ship by now."

"We are hamstrung," Berris said, agreeing with the old man.

"We are very hamstrung. I can't exactly hand out orders across the galaxy while I'm here. Neither can you."

"Yes. About that, Rey. I'm thinking it might be time for me to leave."

"Leave? You can't leave here. You practically just got here. We're going to take this planet for our own. Don't forget the plan, Anton."

"I'm well aware of the plan. But, as you say, we need access to the outside. And we can't do that here. Not easily. But if I go back, if I head to Lute or Diego, I might be able to coordinate our people there better. When we get

things the way we want them, I can come back. With Pulsar, or with another ship that has similar capabilities. Then, we can take over this planet together. Just like we planned.”

Gliph stared at the younger man, unblinking, brows furrowed.

“You want out.”

“No. I’m committed to the cause. I just want to go where I can do the most good, Reynard.”

Gliph held the younger man’s eyes for a while longer.

Finally, he waved him away.

“Go on, if you want to. I don’t care. I’ll find someone else to work for me here. You go where you think you need to go. I can’t stop you.”

Berris said nothing, but he nodded and returned to the door. Out in the hallway, he turned to shut it behind him.

“Oh, Anton?”

“Yes, Rey?”

“One more thing. You’re going to have a hard time leaving right now. We’re under an embargo, you know.”

“Don’t worry, Rey. I have a plan.”

4.36

The Elsa Cole prepared for departure.

The return trip was not to be in hypertime, for a number of reasons. One, of course, involved aging the crew another seven weeks while real time passed by in hours. But the real reason involved testing all the new ship's systems in real time.

The voyage out to Phaethon had given the Navy an opportunity to put the ship through a thorough trial over a long distance in a short amount of time. The trip had not been her maiden voyage, but the Cole was still new enough that she had not traveled very far.

Going back home in real time wouldn't really prove anything, other than to the Navy brass that things worked the same. It would check off a box, and not much else.

But this was peacetime, and here was an opportunity to take a new battleship out and . . . make sure everything worked the way it was supposed to.

So Captain Falco told himself.

Falco sent a comm down, telling Orbital Control they had one more load of goodies to deliver. This shipment mostly consisted of medical supplies,

mainly shots of nanobots. Could they have permission to send the transport back, with the same contingent of Marines?

As usual, the official reply came from Hizzoner's office, who Falco presumed to be the mayor of League City, and perhaps therefore the most powerful politician on the planet.

Then, a request came back to Falco.

Control said they had some citizens requesting asylum in the Republic. Hizzoner wanted to know if Captain Falco would allow them to ride back up in the transport and take them to Diego?

The question surprised the Captain.

His initial reaction was to say something along the lines of the Navy was not a passenger service.

But of course, he bit his tongue. Instead he promised to forward the query back to Plairmont and see what they said. He imagined it would go up the chain of command and eventually land on the Chancellor's desk. Perhaps State would want a say in the matter, too.

Within an hour, he received his answer back. By all means he was to accept any and all individuals wishing to leave Phaethon and bring them to Diego. A special Customs and Immigration task force would be assembled to process the refugees.

He gave orders to prepare the VIP quarters. That reporter's cabin would be used again on the way back, along with some others. Then he gave orders to the Marines, and the same fire team as before loaded up the transport and made the journey down to the spaceport.

Corporal Latari stepped out of the transport and found two dozen additional people waiting on the tarmac.

He supervised the unloading of crates, this time marked "MEDICAL." Then he sighed as he looked across the crowd.

Most were women, some older. That made sense, he thought. A frontier planet is not really a good place for someone old. Maybe some of these

were widows?

A couple of younger couples were there, with kids. Maybe they were tired of living on the edge of civilized space and wanted to go home. The rest were men of varying ages.

Latari did not have enough seats up front for everybody.

“Please sit on the floor of the cargo area. We have a force bar along the walls. It will hold you in place. This measure is for your safety. If we hit a rough patch in the atmosphere going up, you won’t go flying around the hold and get hurt. I realize sitting on the floor is uncomfortable, but know that it is only temporary. Far better accommodations are waiting for you on the Cole.”

The refugees dutifully placed their luggage down, then sat on the floor. McCain made sure force beams secured the bags, too.

Newton helped young moms get comfortable with their children. Moments later, they were ready to leave.

One man sat closest to the door, with a young woman beside him.

The girl, in fact, had been with Glyph most recently. Anton Berris picked her up on the way to the spaceport, and insisted she accompany him. He replayed those events in his mind.

Once he pulled her from her room in the projects, he ducked into an alcove in the apartment building and swallowed a large white capsule.

“You may or may not be familiar with a framer, my dear.”

The young girl said nothing. She proved to be very quiet, and very submissive. She obeyed every order Berris gave her without question, even the one about accompanying him to the spaceport and all the way to Diego.

Her name, he discovered, was Indigo. She had not yet shared her last name.

“A framer modifies a person’s face. It was a Thespar innovation, I believe, heavily used by assassins and agents during and after the war, on both sides. This is the modern equivalent, something that has been perfected over generations of bioengineering.”

She gasped.

As he spoke, his features altered, physically rearranging themselves.

He smiled at her with the face of a different man.

“It changes almost everything. Face, fingerprints even. You’ll notice my voice print is different. Iris scans will show different eyes, and that’s the most difficult part. The only things it can’t change are height and DNA. But, I’m betting we won’t have a DNA test on Diego. The Republicans favor iris scans, figuring they can’t be beat, so there’s no point in additional testing.”

She trembled, looking in the different eyes of a changed man.

“I expect you to treat me in the same way you treated our leader. Do you understand?”

She nodded, still trembling.

“Yes, sir.”

He snapped back to the present as the transport vibrated, lifting up vertically several hundred meters.

At last they moved forward and the floor tilted up as they gained escape velocity.

Beside him, Indigo squeezed her eyes shut, trembling in fright.

Berris smiled.

“Next stop Diego,” he murmured to himself.

4.37

Wink and Jinxie milled about with the merchants as medical supplies were loaded onto trucks. They waited patiently for their opportunity to approach the lonely immigration official.

The Pulsar had made another trip to Phaethon, and arrived by making a risky terrestrial appearance as its final destination.

The thinking was, had it arrived in orbit as usual, the Cole would have seen her. Since they wanted to stay on the down-low, they showed up well inside the planet's atmosphere, above the continent of Anatolia in fact. Here, enough of the planet would shield them from Cole's sensors.

The ship appeared in the atmosphere and made a bumpy landing at the farm, out behind Tom and Gwen's house.

When they arrived, Tom explained to the couple what he needed, and they agreed to it. One of the few rules on Phaethon that he felt he had to follow involved the acquisition of land via the homesteading system.

"I'd love to have both square kilometers on either side of me, for the sake of privacy. But I can't buy them from the Courthouse. I can buy them from you, though."

"We're not immigrants to Phaethon. That's a problem," Wink pointed out.

“You *can* be.”

When the transport took off to return to the Cole, and there was no way the Marines onboard could tell the immigration official that the couple had not, in fact, come down with them, Wink and Jinxie approached the man.

Wink said, “Hi. We’d like to immigrate.”

The official looked shocked.

“Oh. Did you . . .?”

He pointed up in the sky at the little transport, now fast disappearing in the distance.

Jinxie nodded, which was the only lie they told.

The official quickly produced the appropriate holos, and they began filling everything out.

They hitched a ride from one of the merchants, who dropped them off at the bazaar. This proved to be distracting, as Jinxie found the amazing variety of goods for sale quite fascinating. They had to walk past every booth, and looked at about a quarter of all the tables when Wink suggested it might be good to get to the Courthouse before closing time.

Reluctantly, she left with him. They made their way to Commerce Boulevard and hailed a taxi. Minutes later, they walked through the large wooden double doors of the government building.

The receptionist greeted them with a smile and pointed them to the rotating globe in back. They returned minutes later with the coordinates they wanted.

“Oh. You know, that area has become very popular recently, for some reason.”

The couple gave 400 credits in tokens to the receptionist. She handed over deeds to their square kilometer homesteads.

“I think that land’s useless,” Jinx said as they walked down the Courthouse steps. “Half of it’s desert. You can’t grow anything there.”

“Lots of things grow in the desert. Besides, we’re selling it to Tom anyway. I’ve never done a real estate deal before, but something tells me this one will be very lucrative.”

They took another taxi, and this time gave the driver a warehouse number.

He nodded, knowing where to go, and they took off down the streets again. Minutes later, they stood in front of Warehouse 14, knocking on the door.

Tom opened it and smiled.

“Come on in, you two. Did you get the homesteads?”

They nodded and Wink produced the deed for his place, letting it float in the air between them.

“Great! Would you like to go see your land before you sell it?”

“Sure.”

Moments later, Jinxie popped into existence on a field of sparse grass and sand.

Wink popped into place nearby, followed shortly by Tom.

Tom waved in both directions.

“As you saw on the map, these parcels extend about halfway into the desert. Half a click that way is all green, and the river makes for the southern border to your place. Half a click the other way is all desert, which actually suits our purposes well. My offer is ten thousand credits for each homestead. I want to secure my borders, so to speak.”

Wink nodded while rubbing his chin.

Jinxie looked at him and frowned. She nudged him in the side.

She said, “Say yes.”

He said, “What if we only sold one homestead to you, Tom? What if Jinx and I . . . built a house on the other one?”

“Are you crazy?” Jinxie spluttered. “We don’t know anything about homesteading! We’re smugglers, not farmers!”

He looked at her and grinned, shrugging.

“To be honest, I don’t think Tom knows much about homesteading, either.”

“That’s a fair statement,” Tom said, smiling wide.

“Well, he knows more about it than we do, which is zero!”

“I was thinking, you know, it could be a home base of sorts. Someplace we could always come back to.”

“That’s what the ship is for, Wink.”

“A ship’s not a good place to settle down. A homestead . . . even one that’s half desert . . . a homestead is a good place. We could sell Tom one of them and build a house on the other. We don’t have to farm or anything. Not necessarily. We could just . . . live here.”

Jinxie sighed and put her hands in her back pockets. She turned to look out in the desert. In the distance, haze covered the horizon with a smudgy brown line.

“He’s got that look in his eyes that says he’s already thought this through and come to a decision,” she said to Tom.

She took a deep breath and exhaled slowly.

“Okay. But we’re not gonna build here. Let’s do it closer to the river.”

Tom reached out and shook Wink’s hand.

“I’ll send ten thousand credits over to your account right away, if you’ll just sign over the other deed. And don’t worry about building a house. We can have one up for you by morning, if you’re not too picky about floor plans.”

4.38

A man sat in the closed doorway of a shop on Commerce Boulevard, four blocks down from the bazaar.

Riots had been squelched, unrest no longer festered on the street. Many vigilante merchants had given up patrolling the rooftops with guns, preferring to sleep the night away instead.

But the city still lacked an adequate police force. Without guns on the rooftops, the streets below quickly repopulated with criminals.

Some were part of the X's and O's, intent on exacting revenge in this part of town where they lost so many.

Some were just common criminals, out looking to score a fast credit or two.

The man sitting in the doorway bided his time. He was in no particular hurry. He kept his eyes open, watching the pedestrians passing by.

At last, near midnight, a merchant and his wife left a restaurant nearby. They both laughed at some joke as they strolled out onto the sidewalk and headed toward the doorway where this predator waited.

As they passed, the man stuck his foot out, tripping the merchant. He stumbled, falling to his hands and knees.

The man in the doorway jumped up, pulling out a gun.

“Uhn-uh.”

He aimed his weapon at the merchant’s head as the man slowly regained his feet.

“Don’t touch your gun. Just toss your tokens down.”

Scowling, the merchant reached into his pocket slowly and pulled out a fistful of tokens. He dropped them deliberately. They scattered everywhere.

“Very good. Now, your wife is going to get down on her knees and pick all of those up for me.”

His finger squeezed the trigger . . .

A slight pop came from the shadows in the doorway behind him. A black-gloved fist lashed out, striking him in the back of the head.

Another hand reached out and jerked the man’s arm up.

He squeezed off the shot, sending a bolt of energy sailing up harmlessly in the air.

The mugger stood there for a moment, dazed. Then he collapsed to the ground, unconscious.

“Night Shadow!”

Haley stopped and stared at the merchant’s wife for a moment.

Then she realized the woman was referring to her, and she remembered that the reporter, Ashley Thallus, had taken the liberty of naming her crime-fighting persona.

She did not respond. Instead, she pulled out some old-fashioned zip ties. Bending down, she roughly pulled the mugger’s arms back and bound them together with three thick black ones. Then she lashed his legs together, too, near the feet.

Satisfied the man could not move very far without help, she turned back to the couple, staring at her open-mouthed.

“Call the police. Don’t let this guy get away.”

The merchant's wife nodded, enthusiastically.

Haley turned, and slipped into the nearest alley, where Lisa could teleport her away without anyone seeing.

The merchant shouted, "Thank you!"

But Haley was already gone.

-+-

An hour later, someone rammed a stolen car into one of the storefronts near the projects.

This part of town had ironically seen less crime than the bazaar side. But three teenagers decided the small grocer in their neighborhood would have plenty of money and packaged snacks they could steal.

The little black taxi they hopped into when the driver took a restroom break slammed into the storefront, breaking glass and making a lot of noise.

The boys jumped out and shouldered their way through the mess, heading for the counter.

Lisa saw everything, of course. Seconds later, Haley popped into place in the darkened back part of the store.

She moved to the front with the grace of a cat, clad all in black.

The first boy who saw her screamed.

She struck with a series of blows to his face, connecting with his jaw on the last one and knocking him down.

The other two came running. One brought out a chain, the other one had a bat.

They rushed her.

She kicked at the bat boy's knee and he crumpled.

A quick squat avoided the chain swishing over her head. On the far side of his swing she stood up again and rushed him, slamming into his chest and knocking him off balance.

He scrambled with his legs as she crashed him into the store counter. Weakly, he tried to fling the chain over her back. It connected, but not enough to cause much harm.

Haley grabbed his hair and slammed his head into the counter repeatedly.

The chain slipped free from loose fingers.

She stood up straight and mentally checked herself for injuries. So far, she had nothing more than bruises.

She reached to the back of her belt and pulled out several more zip ties, then set to work binding the young men for the police.

When she was finished, she went to the back of the store again, ignoring their moans and curses.

Lisa popped her away, and she collapsed on her cot inside Warehouse 14, falling asleep immediately.

4.39

Haley woke up late.

“Ouch.”

The bruises she sustained the night before made themselves felt this morning. She painfully made her way to the coffeemaker, checking the time along the way.

“Aw, dang. It’s late. No way I’m going to get any good tables now.”

She opened a heated platter labeled, “Breakfast Tacos,” and gobbled down a meal. Taking a cup of coffee in one hand, and hefting a box full of syrup bottles in another, she climbed up into the truck and drove out of the warehouse.

Some time later, she handed over some tokens for three tables at the bazaar.

“One good thing about showing up late,” she grumbled as she drove over to her designated spot, “is you don’t feel compelled to rent a lot of tables.”

She set up her wares, including a sign indicating fresh power packs for sale or trade, and another one for Phaethonian syrup.

Haley did brisk business at first.

“Oh good, the power pack lady. I’ve been looking for you all morning. Here are two dead ones I’ll sell you.”

She handed over tokens to the lady and threw the used units into a box. They were small, ones she could handle easily. Fortunately no one had a big one to trade this morning.

She quickly sold out her inventory of recharged packs. No one asked where they came from. She was willing to give a song and dance to avoid a direct answer if they did. But everyone seemed to accept her as yet another merchant among the vast array of sellers out here. They took her fresh power packs for granted in the eclectic mix of products available.

When they were gone, that left the syrup, which did not sell as briskly as the power packs. Eventually, as the morning progressed, fewer people made it out to her isolated spot in the bazaar.

She found herself dozing off in the warmth of the day as noon approached.

-+-

Ash strolled among the tables in the bazaar, looking at everything.

He too had awakened late in the morning, having worked last night on another story for the Zeitung. Apparently the super heroine, as he was now referring to Night Shadow, had been very busy last night.

Ash showed up a few minutes after each of her exploits, taking stills with his optic nerves tied into his implant. These images, of criminals bound tight with zip ties, would be spreading across the galaxy right about now along with the verbiage from his article.

It made for good copy. His editor back home said there were Night Shadow clubs forming in Octavia, and she was apparently a rising star among students in the universities. Word of her had spread to the League, too, and he told Ashley to be on the lookout for competing reporters making their way to Phaethon.

But they both doubted that would happen anytime soon. Even if someone managed to get in under the embargo, they would almost certainly not be

able to come over in a Machro-drive equipped ship like Ashley had.

He found a table full of syrup. Always on the prowl for local fare, his interest piqued.

“Uh, excuse me?”

The merchant at the syrup table was very attractive. A young woman wearing a straw hat, she leaned back in her chair and snored softly.

“Hello?”

He rapped lightly on the table.

The snoring stopped.

Haley opened one eye, and it slowly came into focus. Then she opened the other and sat forward.

Realizing she had been asleep, she wiped a hand down her face.

“Sorry. Oh! You’re Ashley Thallus!”

He smiled, partly in pleasure at being recognized, partly in surprise.

“I, uh . . . I didn’t know I had any fans out here.”

“The local paper publishes all your stuff! Well, at least the last two articles you put out about . . . that crime fighting woman.”

She couldn’t bring herself to say “Night Shadow.”

“I’m glad you liked it. I noticed on your sign you said the syrup is made locally? I’m really here on Phaethon for local color stories, and I’ve been trying to eat Phaethon-grown stuff at all the restaurants. Could I buy a bottle? I’d like to try it. Maybe I can plug it for you back on Diego, if you ever want to try and export it.”

“Sure, absolutely. Take one. Free of charge.”

“Oh, no. Ha ha. That would obligate me. I’ve got ethical standards to follow. No, here’s five credits.”

He gave her a small token.

She pocketed it and handed him back a bottle of syrup.

“Uncle Silas, huh? ‘Made with love.’”

He popped open the top and took one of the chunks of bread she had left out on a plate for samples. It was a little stale by now, but he ignored that and poured a drop of thick syrup on it.

“Hm. Not bad. In fact, it’s pretty good. Not quite maple . . . I’m not sure I’ve tasted anything like it.”

“Yeah, the trees that were tapped evidently produce sap even in warm weather. We’re still discovering things on this planet. It’s all still new, you know.”

“I’d like to talk more about it. Are you free for lunch?”

“Sure. Let me put everything up, and I can meet you somewhere.”

She smiled, and he smiled back. They agreed to meet at a restaurant they both knew in one hour, and he wandered off while she tidied up.

She sighed, watching his back as he weaved among the tables.

“I think I’m in trouble.”

4.40

“This . . . should be . . . everything!”

Tom grunted, pushing the extra large charging platform into place.

With this delivery from Pulsar, his farm now had three more SCU's, the black cubes cheerfully humming some distance away from the others.

He also had an exceptionally large charging platform now. The MicaBots had flattened out the rocky area around SCU-4, which would be specifically designated for very large power packs.

“I suspect,” Silas said, mopping sweat off his own brow, “these are for buildings and such.”

Tom nodded.

“Buildings and large vehicles like ships. Although, I don't think this planet has many seafaring vessels, yet. But if Lisa's estimates are anywhere close to accurate, a lot of places and a lot more things are going to start running out of power in a few months.”

“How are we gonna swap these out? A building will just have to wait in the dark for a while until we can get their power pack back to them? People might get suspicious.”

“Anthony sent us a standard model, freshly charged. We’ll use it as a seed, of sorts. Send down the big one, Lisa.”

A large displacement of air occurred behind them. Both men turned and found a flat rectangular power pack the size of a bed on the ground.

“Wow. How are we gonna move that without revealin’ Timmy to everybody?”

As if answering Silas’s question, they heard another pop, and a squat load bot appeared.

Dark yellow, the bot consisted of a cube, with another smaller cube on top for sensory functions. Powerful legs stuck out on either side of the larger cube, and strong long arms.

“Oh, that’s handy.”

Tom said, “Yeah. We’re going to need him to transfer the heavy stuff from the truck at the bazaar. I’m sure the X’s and O’s are looking forward to sowing chaos when the lights start going out. But thanks to this, and our new SCU’s, we should be able to help keep the power flowing.”

“It’s a big planet, Mr. Savage. Let’s hope they all don’t go out at the same time. Or anywhere close to the same time.”

“I think we’ll be alright, Silas. I think it’ll all work out.”

-+-

Gliph stewed in his private room.

Berris took Indigo, his favorite. It took him a while to figure that out. When she missed her regular time to show up in his room, he went looking for her. He had to ask four people before finding someone who knew what happened. She had left with Berris.

Berris also took with him several top lieutenants. These were men who obviously were more loyal to him than Gliph.

That put Gliph in a sour mood, and their departure hurt worse than Indigo leaving.

She was a tool, someone he could use. But the men were even more useful tools, in different ways. They helped control the people he led.

In fact, now he had no surrogates or others he could delegate tasks to. Berris had taken everyone good with him.

Well, now it is time to rebuild, he thought.

He left the room and walked upstairs. The watchman at the front door saw him coming up.

“Sir! What can we do? Can I get you anything? Is there anything you need?”

“Assemble the people. Have all the families standing outside their doors in five minutes. I wish to inspect whoever we have left in this building.”

Moments later, everyone stood outside their apartments in the hall. He started on the first floor, then made his way upstairs. Too many doors were empty. He did not bother trying to discern if they just did not want to come out and meet with him, or if nobody was there.

He suspected he knew the answer. Too many had died in the riots.

At last, on the fourth floor, he found someone worth talking to.

“Come here, child. What is your name?”

An attractive young girl stepped out from the doorway. No one joined her there, a sign she lived alone.

“Morgan.”

“Ah! Are you named after Morgan Lefaux, by any chance? Now there was a woman to remember!”

The girl shrugged. She looked slim, with straight black hair flowing down almost to her waist.

“Not that I know.”

“No matter. Come with me, Morgan. You shall be my assistant.”

Morgan did not question him, or hesitate. She left the doorway and followed him.

That pleased him, very much.

“Soon and very soon, Morgan . . . this planet will be ours.”

End of Book 4

NIGHT SHADOW

5.1

“So . . . we’re going to make a pitchfork, a shovel, a hoe and a rake. Let’s also throw in an axe, a sledgehammer, a regular hammer, a claw hammer . . . that’s a lot of hammers. What else?”

“Whatcha doin’?”

Gwen Wilder walked into the space capsule being used as a storage shed by Tom Savage. He turned from the MicaBots’ CPU, a holographic display showing a variety of garden implements floating in the air above the black cube.

“Hey there. Mica here tells me she has an excess of iron ore. Currently she’s storing it in an underground cavern near the main mine shaft entrance. She asked if I had any ideas for using it, now that Wink and Jinxie’s house is finished.”

“Mica? Is that what you’re calling it?”

“Well, yeah. I mean, ‘Micro Construction and Assembly Central Processing Unit’ is a mouthful.”

“No, silly. I mean actually giving it a name.”

“Oh. Well, ever since Lisa told me the MicaBots’ CPU is a ‘she,’ I figure she deserves a name. And ‘Mica’ is as good as any. Sounds kinda

feminine.”

Gwen narrowed her eyes as she studied her boyfriend for a long moment.

He said, “What?”

“You’ve been doing this a long time, haven’t you?”

“Doing what?”

“Giving names to very expensive toys you’ve been given to play with.”

“What are you talking about? Timmy? Yeah, so I named my guardian battle bot. So what?”

He shrugged.

“You don’t see it, do you?”

“What?”

“Other boys across the galaxy might name their toy car, or their toy droid or whatever. Mom told me about ‘Carl Copper,’ which was a little autonomous action figure that looks like a police officer and would go around boys’ bedrooms hunting criminals.”

“I’ve seen those.”

“They were popular years ago. And even though its brand name was ‘Carl,’ I’m sure boys everywhere named theirs whatever they wanted to. But you . . . you’re naming these experimental construction bots and surplus battle bots and other things costing millions of credits.”

He looked at her and grinned wide, ear to ear.

“You’re right. I guess I’m still a boy at heart.”

“That’s not the point I’m trying to make.”

“No, you’re right. This is fun. This is Adam in the Garden stuff, naming things.”

“No, I’m trying to tell you . . .”

She paused then, and noticed he continued smiling. He was enjoying this, riling her up. No matter what she said, he would deliberately take it the wrong way.

“Never mind. I’ll repeat my original question with qualifications. What are you doing, and why are you having ‘Mica’ create garden tools?”

His face turned serious.

“I’m thinking there might be a market for it. I know we’ve got recharged power packs, and we still have a few bottles of syrup left. But before we can sell off the extra produce from the garden, I’m thinking we can sell some tools at the bazaar in League City. This will help go through some of the extra iron ore taking up storage space, and we can keep the sawmill going for handles.”

“Okay. So, how long until . . .”

She trailed off as a series of popping noises sounded outside. They walked out the capsule’s iris to find a dozen of each implement Tom asked the CPU to make. Hundreds of garden tools, hammers and axes lay on the ground.

“Wow. That was fast.”

Tom nodded and said, “Yeah, we got an updated firmware chip that came in the Pulsar. Both the sawmill and the smelter can produce things faster now. Actually, I think she premade some of this stuff. Anyway, the handles are teleported to the implements all at once and the MicaBots assemble them *en masse*. Hold on.”

He ducked back inside and approached the CPU once more.

“Thank you! They look great!”

When he stepped back out, beaming, Gwen narrowed her eyes at him again.

“Why did you thank a machine for doing what you asked it to do?”

“You’ve got to be polite to them, Gwen.”

He gave her an odd look.

“Don’t you reassess *me*, Thomas Raleigh. As if you have to rethink my place in your world because I think thanking a machine is a little silly . . .”

He threw an arm around her shoulder and pulled her in for a side hug.

“You grew up almost as privileged as I did, Gwendolyn Del Rio. Don’t go reassessing *me*, either. We all have our quirks and picadilloes.”

“No, *your* mother was *not* head of system-wide law enforcement. I was not ‘privileged’ in any way. None that count.”

“Fair enough. Let me ask Haley to check on prices for these things next time she’s at the market. We’ll undercut the competition by a couple of credits and offload them quickly enough, I bet. That should keep some cashflow coming in until more power packs start going out.”

He made a mental connection, tapping Haley Stonecipher’s implant in League City. Lisa sent back a notification that Haley was offline.

“That’s odd. Is she asleep?”

“Yes she is, Thomas,” Lisa responded.

“Huh. This time of day? What is she doing, staying up all night and selling our stuff in the morning before she crashes?”

“Today, yes. It is a different time zone. And Ms. Stonecipher had a long night last night.”

5.2

Haley woke up slowly, pulling up her implant's internal clock.

“Seven? Aw, shucks.”

Quickly, she ran into a little bathroom unit installed in a corner of the warehouse. It used to be in one of the space capsules on Tom and Gwen's farm, but had recently been teleported into place here, giving her a much-needed powder room.

She came out moments later, and quickly changed clothes.

“I don't have anything . . . I don't have anything nice, nothing that's fancy. Well, I do have that one dress, but that's too fancy. He's not taking me somewhere *that* nice. I need to go shopping. Maybe the next time Gwen comes here I can take her with me.”

She pulled open two suitcases full of clothes and threw pieces out on the floor until she finally found something acceptable: dark suede tights and a soft, off-white knit top that bared her shoulders and showed a few centimeters of midriff.

She left the wall climbers and put on her old riding boots. The combination gave her a country flair, which was not unusual among the visiting merchants, many of whom hailed from the countryside or much smaller towns.

“Okay. At least they’re not cowboy boots. This . . . this will have to do. I don’t have much else that’s casual-but-nice. Dang it! I’m gonna have to invest some of this money I’m earning into some clothes if I’m going to start dating again. It was a lot easier riding around in the woods with the girls.”

She paused and stared at herself in a full-length mirror propped up against the bathroom module. Imported from Clarion, she had picked it up in the bazaar the day before yesterday.

“That’ll have to do. Omigosh, look at the time! Lisa? Can you port me somewhere near Arthurus? Somewhere I won’t be seen, obviously.”

“Certainly, Haley.”

A second later, she popped into an alley. Taking a moment to orient herself, she realized Lisa had her facing in the right direction.

The sun sank low, and light in the dusty sky was almost non-existent by now, a few minutes before eight. Streetlights turned on along Commerce Boulevard, but none in the alley.

Haley felt certain that Lisa’s sensors worked well enough to port her somewhere unseen. It was certainly dark enough, she thought.

When she reached the sidewalk along Commerce, she turned right and crossed the street. Before her, a completely glassed-in dining room offered patrons views of the outside, letting the diners preen and be seen.

In a marquee of holo letters above the windows, the words, “*Hic Iacet Arthurus, Rex Quondam, Rexque Futurus*” floated in glittering gold.

A line snaked out the front door, also glass, queuing down the sidewalk. A rather snobbish-looking man with a pencil-thin mustache stood guard at a podium just inside the doorway, questioning each person approaching and sorting them into two groups.

Some he motioned to enter, handing them off to be led to a table. But most were redirected to seats along the sidewalk, there to wait until called. A precious few bypassed the line. These he seemed to recognize and waved on through.

Haley watched the crowd, uncertain if she should get in line or simply wait. Then she turned and saw Ash approaching from the direction of his hotel, closer to the marketplace.

He waved when he saw her, and she waved back, smiling.

Her heart sped up a little, and felt like it tried to do some flip-flops.

“Quit that!”

When he came close, they both grinned at each other.

He said, “Wow, punctual! I’m surprised you beat me here.”

“I didn’t know if I should try and go inside, or what. So, your timing is perfect.”

“I have a reservation. I think we can just go straight in.”

“Are you sure? That guy at the door seems pretty strict.”

“I slipped him a big token earlier, when I checked this place out. I’m pretty sure we can get a table right away.”

He led her up the steps and they walked past the line. Pencil-mustache-man’s eyes lit up as they approached.

“Ah, Mr. Thallus! We are so glad to have you dine with us tonight. Pietro! See Mr. Thallus and his guest to their table.”

A younger man appeared, dressed in a tuxedo. He nodded deep, almost bowing, and beckoned for the couple to follow him into the restaurant.

Those in line outdoors glared at them as they went in.

In the middle of the dining area, behind the front tables along the glass wall facing the street, an ornate brass sarcophagus sat on a granite pedestal. The lid looked green and weathered, as if it had spent decades outdoors. A statue was carved in relief on top, displaying a knight lying in state, holding a sword on his chest with the blade extending to his knees.

“Oh, wow. I guess that’s supposed to be King Arthur?”

“Yes,” the young man said as they walked past the sarcophagus. “As our restaurant name says when translated, ‘Here lies Arthur, king once and king again in the future.’”

Haley flashed another grin at Ash.

“That’s a long name for a restaurant.”

The boy looked over his shoulder at her wearing a bored expression.

“We just call it Arthurus,” he said.

“I knew that. I’ve just . . . never been in here before.”

The young man brought them to a quiet spot in the back. Here, other couples sat in the shadows, enjoying their meals.

Evidently this was a swanky spot, Haley decided. Most of the women wore nice dresses and sported expensive jewelry. She would not have been out of place in her good dress, after all.

After pulling out a chair for her, and after Ash took his own seat, the young man snapped his fingers above the table, making holo menus appear floating in the air.

“Your server will be right with you.”

He walked away and they both flipped through the menus.

“This place specializes in British food,” Ash said. “But I understand almost everything is locally sourced, so I’m eager to try it out.”

“I don’t know that I’ve been to a restaurant actually specializing in British food before.”

“They don’t have the culinary reputation, do they? That’s reserved for the French and Italians. Maybe the Chinese. Oh, look. They offer mutton chops. Hmm. That’s tempting.”

“And haggis? Ew. Isn’t that sheep organs or something? And I’m pretty sure that’s a Scottish dish. Not British.”

“Is there a difference?”

“The Scots thought so. I had a great-grandmother from there. She’d be giving you what for if she was here right now.”

“Mutton chops for me, then. What’ll you be having?”

“I prefer cows.”

She glanced at him carefully, not turning her face directly toward him, to gauge his reaction. Steaks were far and away the most expensive items on the menu.

“Sounds good. You, uh . . . you wouldn’t mind sharing a bite or two, would you? It says here they’re locally raised cattle. I’d like to compare them with others I’ve had since getting here.”

She smiled.

“Not at all. You can have a bite of my steak.”

“Great! I’ll give you a bite of my mutton, if you want.”

“That’s okay.”

5.3

Glyph marched from the Projects to the Courthouse without incident.

He knew League City was short on law enforcement, but they saw two deputies near the Courthouse instead of the usual one. Both men locked onto the small crowd of thugs he led, including 15 people plus himself.

Reluctantly, he had to admit that Anton Berris was right. They lost too many men during the riots. So, seven strong women accompanied him, buttressing their numbers and almost doubling his strength.

Never mind that all the merchants, and he truly believed it was all, were not only armed but willing to defend their property to the death . . .

That's one good thing about socialist societies like the League used to be, he thought. Less emphasis on personal ownership.

Of course, I've never lived in a socialist society . . .

He set aside those thoughts as the surge of desire for a society of his very own built up in his chest again.

Tonight, he felt determined to make a difference. To assert to these people, these merchants, that the X's and O's were still a force to be reckoned with, even though their numbers had dwindled recently.

One of the deputies fell in step behind them as they turned down Commerce Boulevard.

By the way he held the little com unit up to his lips, Gliph figured he was keeping the others apprised of their progress.

Gliph ignored the deputy as he led his people marching toward the Merchants' District.

It was now approaching nine at night. Still early, he thought. But it was prime shopping and dining time. Merchants would not be manning their booths at this hour, they would be out spending money. They would be locking doors to their stores and wandering around here, the nicest part of town. Many would go out to eat rather than make their own meals at home.

That thought enraged Gliph. He and his people were stuck in the Projects. Never mind it was by choice, and it served a political purpose. In his mind, he deserved the nicest things this planet had to offer.

He felt determined to get them, too.

“This is good, people.”

The motley crew stopped at the corner of Commerce and Mustang Street, clustered on the sidewalk. People avoided them, going so far as to step out into the street to keep from drawing too close. Others at outdoor cafes, and those leaving nearby bars and restaurants stared at them from a distance.

Here, they stood near three big restaurants, with patrons waiting in lines out the doors. They were close to Arthurus, one of the swankiest places in town, which had a huge dining room with a window wall facing the street.

Gliph knew they would be seen by plenty of the merchant class from this street corner, enjoying their evening meals.

“You just thought you killed us all,” he muttered, scowling at the nicely dressed people out and about this late at night.

“Hand out the stuff, Perretta.”

A brutish-looking woman beside him nodded.

Having just reached 40, Perretta Kirchhoff stood taller and thicker than many women, with a face resembling a toad's, Gliph thought. But she made up with martial prowess what she lacked in looks.

He knew for a fact Perretta had killed at least one merchant in the riots, and was likely responsible for putting several more in the hospital.

Perretta put the bags she carried down on the sidewalks and took out several holo banner bars. She handed one out to each person in their group. The black cylinders were 15 centimeters long and five in diameter. Their messages had been preprogrammed.

"Don't turn them on yet," Gliph said.

His people nodded. None spoke.

The sheriff's deputy, standing nearby, whispered into his com unit.

A patrol vehicle appeared, a ground car since the only air vehicle in town had been destroyed recently.

Two deputies sat in the front seat. Gliph watched them, but made no move to acknowledge their presence.

"Everyone don their bracers."

Perretta nodded and pulled out force bracers from another bag.

Each protester had a gun, although their pistols were tucked away, hidden in waistbands and elsewhere. But the bracers were a new addition to the X's and O's arsenal. They had not used these much, in the riots or elsewhere.

Force bracers allowed people to lift things much heavier than they normally could. They also made punches stronger. Gliph had discovered that during a basement fight he set up with some men he did not like. He thought it would be amusing to watch them beat one another senseless. When he allowed one man to wear force bracers, that fellow killed the other two with his blows.

That incident gave Gliph this idea . . .

Everyone grabbed a set of bracers, sticking their arms through the stretchy sleeves and activating the electronics.

One of the two deputies, the passenger, left his vehicle and joined the other one on the sidewalk.

“Does everyone have at least one on?” Gliph said quietly.

The men and women nodded at him.

“Good. Let us begin. Turn your banners on.”

Everyone twisted the top of their banner cylinders. Holographic signs popped up above their heads.

“RESTAURANTS WASTE FOOD.”

“PRESERVE NATIVE ANIMALS. EAT GRAIN.”

“WORKERS EXPLOITED HERE.”

“FEED THE PROJECTS.”

“MERCHANTS THRIVE OFF WORKERS’ TOIL.”

“Stay calm. Stand still.”

The men and women stared out from their spots on the street corner, glaring at passersby.

They said nothing. Their signs spoke for them.

People eating near windows or from tables on the sidewalk stared at them. Cars slowed at the intersection so drivers could read the floating signs.

“Alright, that’s enough.”

The deputy who followed them here all the way from the Courthouse clipped the com unit to his belt and approached Gliph. The other one from the car joined him as they approached.

“Is there a problem, officer?”

“You need a permit to do this. And you don’t have a permit.”

“I have examined our municipal laws quite thoroughly, officer. I assure you, no permit is needed for a public assembly or protest in League City, or anywhere else on Phaethon.”

“Nope. You’re wrong. You need a permit, and you are all in violation of the law. I’ll let you disperse peacefully and nothing will happen. Otherwise, I’m gonna have to run you in, Mr. Gliph.”

“Officer, this is quite disturbing. I’m afraid I must vehemently object. I know the law.”

At that moment, a young man and three friends walked by the clustered protesters. They looked peeved at having to step off the sidewalk and into the street to avoid the group.

The young man sneered at the crowd as he passed the signs.

“Southsiders! Wotta buncha *losers*!”

Perretta snapped her fist out, connecting cleanly with his jaw and snapping it.

The young man crumpled, like a wall falling over.

His companions jumped back, looking down at their fallen friend. Then they looked up at the toad-faced woman with a sign over her head.

They piled on Perretta, fists swinging.

But her force bracers hummed. She broke a collar bone, then snapped a neck. Two men twice her size flew off her, like water off a dog.

The deputies started blowing their whistles, and all hell broke loose.

5.4

Diners deep inside Arthurus remained blissfully unaware of the trouble brewing on the streets, at first.

Plates clinked, the imported fine porcelain making little tinging noises as heavy silverware touched it.

Conversation remained muted, the couples unwilling to add to the ambient noise and break the subtle mood of this most intimate setting.

Those sitting in the giant bay window, the glass wall that extended out slightly onto the street, had an excellent view of the protesters, their holographic signs . . . and the initial assault by young men against a stout older woman.

But that fight went in the exact opposite direction anyone watching it expected. Toad-woman still stood in the middle of the street, slugging anyone coming close and shooting at those further away.

The volume level in the front of Arthurus rose as people made exclamations often heard at the outbreak of violence. Some at the far end of the glass wall stood up and moved closer to the door for a better view.

In the back, Ash and Haley feasted on figgy pudding for dessert, drizzled in orange marmalade. They noticed the commotion up front, and their attention left the food.

Ash said, “What’s going on, I wonder?”

“I don’t know.”

Lisa, what’s going on?

“An angry mob of protestors is attacking people on the street.”

-+-

The X’s and O’s swung into action, choosing targets. They broke apart, force bracers humming, pulling out pistols.

Three women walking together screamed as two of Gliph’s young women rushed them and started swinging.

A couple went down to the pavement, knocked out by enhanced blows. The third tried to run for it. She was tackled from behind and beaten senseless.

When her screaming stopped, the young woman on top of her looked up, smiling.

Above her head, a holobanner still floated with its message:
“MERCHANTS ARE FAT OFF OUR WORK.”

She jumped off the bloody body and ran after someone else.

-+-

The deputy who tried to break up the protest froze for a moment in front of Gliph. The entire situation had suddenly escalated at the drop of a hat, and it took him a bit to try and recover.

The pause proved deadly.

Gliph reached behind his back, drew a pistol, and shot him point-blank in the chest.

The deputy collapsed with a look of pain and surprise on his face, blood drenching his shirt.

His partner ran, ducking as Gliph shot.

The one in the patrol car did not hesitate. He stepped out, returning fire.

Gliph dropped and rolled, avoiding the bolts.

He pulled out an egg grenade and pushed the red plunger on top. With a sideways throw, he tossed it under the parked police car.

“Watch out!”

The driver ran out in the street, away from the blast.

The tiny bomb went off with a **WHUMPH!**, making the car jump half a meter.

It split open with smoke and fire.

The crowd on the street screamed and scattered like ants.

One of Gliph’s men raced after a cluster of shoppers running away, but they outdistanced him. He stopped and shot at their backs, knocking down two.

An older man crossing the street saw this and pulled out his own gun. He shot back from 20 meters, hitting the young man and killing him.

The corpse lay on the street, blood leaking from a skull partially blown off.

The holobanner floated lower and stationary now. It read, “DOWN WITH GREED.”

Another man chased people down the sidewalk toward Arthurus. There, some people in line were loath to give up their spots. They squatted to avoid blaster fire, but generally stayed in place.

He rushed at the couple closest to him, carrying a banner reading, “WORKERS EXPLOITED HERE.”

The woman screamed.

Her partner stood up, raising fists to his face, ready to defend them both.

The young man grabbed the fellow by the shirt, force bracers humming. He picked him up and threw him through the window wall.

His body crashed into Arthurus, glass shards flying. He knocked over a table and chair.

Diners screamed.

Those in back stood up, alarmed.

“Excuse me.”

Ash jumped out of his chair, activating his optical recorder as he ran for the front.

“I’m in Arthurus, League City. Someone has just come crashing through the window wall at the front! It looks like another riot is breaking out on the street!”

Haley looked around. No one remained in their secluded spot in the back of the restaurant. All eyes were on the front with the broken window and the sounds of gunfire out on the street.

“Lisa, get me out of here.”

She popped away, leaving her chair empty like all the others in the back of the restaurant.

-+-

Haley appeared in the middle of Warehouse 14, still in a sitting position. She stood quickly, regaining her balance. She walked quickly to her cot.

“I need to start wearing my stuff under my clothes or something.”

“I can attempt to teleport your outfit on, Haley. My finetuning has progressed to the point I can do clothes with a 99 percent chance of success.”

“Okay, Lisa. Let’s try it. Hurry.”

All of Haley’s outerwear suddenly popped away, leaving her in panties and a sports bra. Then her black outfit appeared, along with the wall-climbers and a mask covering her face.

She glanced at herself in the mirror.

“Great. This saves time.”

Haley jogged to the corner and retrieved a pistol and a small backpack.

Strapping them on, she said, “Next time include the weapons, if you can do it without messing anything up, Lisa. Okay, I’m ready. Put me close, but don’t let anyone see me come in.”

“I will place you on the roof above Arthurus.”

Haley popped out of the warehouse.

The scene changed for her as she suddenly appeared outside, the sounds of gunfire and screaming drifting up to her from five stories below.

She raced to the roof’s edge, activating the wall climbers along the way. At the ledge, she jumped over and reached down with a foot as she fell, catching the masonry.

The boots latched on and pulled her to the wall, securing her feet to the building’s face.

She kept running, heading down the side.

At the second floor, above the fishbowl, she spotted a man with a banner over his head, fists flying as he pummeled somebody outside the restaurant’s entrance.

Haley jumped and tackled him from five meters up.

5.5

Ash caught Haley's jump with his recording.

He was in a perfect place, scanning over the wreckage of the window at the front of the dining room. Then he moved closer to the shattered glass for a peek at the fighting outside.

Red and green bolts streaked across the street, showing up even better in the dim evening light. He turned and focused on a protester whaling on a hapless pedestrian, using force bracers to pummel the poor man to death.

The banner wobbled into view. The restaurant's fishbowl stood a little higher, its floor about half a meter above the sidewalk. "WORKERS EXPLOITED HERE" flooded Ash's recording view as the thug flailed on the man in line. A woman, (his wife?) screamed at the protester, throwing herself on the man to make him stop.

With a single shove he pushed her off, and she stumbled back a couple meters.

Then Night Shadow flew down from above.

She jumped, but fell so gracefully it may as well have been flying. She plowed into the protester, knocking the banner down along with him.

She landed on him with her full weight, slamming his head into the sidewalk, his body absorbing her fall.

She stood up, recovering quickly and standing in the middle of the holobanner. Her head poked out between “WORKERS” and “EXPLOITED.”

Ash’s mouth dropped as he stared at her.

Then a streak of red sailed over her head, piercing the banner.

She swung around and dodged, as three of the X’s and O’s fired on her at the same time.

She dove behind a car. Lisa ported her forward half a meter, just enough for a blast to miss her. To Ash, and on his recording, it looked like she jumped super-fast.

-+-

Haley hit the sidewalk rolling, then poked her head up for a quick look before hunkering down again behind the bulk of the vehicle.

“Ten o’clock,” Lisa said in her implant.

She pulled the gun out with her left hand and flicked it over to full auto. She held it above the car’s hood and squeezed off a burst.

A groan came from the street, along with the sound of a body hitting the pavement.

Haley popped her head up again and found the other two. One ran for the other side of the street, gun in one hand. The other struggled to catch up, bleeding from a scorched hole in his leg.

He turned and fired wild. The shot sailed over Haley’s shoulder and into the fishbowl, bursting more glass.

People inside Arthurus screamed and hit the deck. The bolt sailed into the seating area at an angle before splattering on the ceiling in the far back.

Haley aimed carefully and squeezed the trigger.

The gunman's head popped open like a watermelon, red liquid misting out.

The third one ducked into an alley.

Haley bit off a curse and raced after him.

Carefully stepping over broken glass, Ash squatted down on the lip of the giant window and jumped down to the sidewalk.

The shooting had mostly stopped.

He ran past screaming people in the street, dead bodies left behind, and all the other mayhem.

And he kept recording.

-+-

The gunman in the alley dove behind a dumpster.

Haley saw it in the dark with her enhanced vision. She figured he would come up shooting, so she slammed her back against the wall, her black outfit blending in with the gloom.

As expected, the man stood up behind the dumpster and sprayed the alley with blaster bolts, shooting blind. They flew out into the street. People yelled and ducked.

Ash moved out of the way just in time, avoiding the fusillade of angry red bolts.

A loud curse erupted from deep in the dark as the gun's power pack depleted. The Southsider tossed it in the dumpster.

Haley smiled and moved to the opposite wall, jumping lightly. She jogged up to the second-floor level, then carefully made her way to the dumpster, moving sideways along the wall.

The man looked peeved, nervous, and ready to run. She could see him plainly in the dark as she approached above him, on the wall. He

hyperventilated, eyes wide and waiting for her to show.

Carefully, she edged closer and crouched down with her gun sticking out. Silently, one foot after the other, Haley came down level with his head, just behind him on the wall.

A faint trace of light from the street lit up the barrel of her gun as she carefully brought it closer to his neck.

“Boo.”

He screamed and spun in place, knocking the weapon away.

“I guess I deserved that.”

She jumped off the wall on top of him, but this time without the full force of gravity she had before.

He swung with the enhanced power of his force bracers, knocking her in the side and cracking a rib.

She fell to the ground in a clump.

He swung down, hard.

She jerked, her body teleporting ten centimeters to the left.

His fist slammed into concrete with the full power of the force bracer behind it . . .

-+-

Ash stopped at the edge of the alley, unable to see in the dark. But he heard someone screaming in agony.

“Ohmigosh! That sounds horrible.”

He kept recording.

-+-

Haley lifted her palm and slammed it into the gunman's face, punching his nose and crushing it. He fell to one side, blood gushing out.

She rolled over and stood up, then jumped and landed on top of his head.

His neck cracked with a sickening sound.

Panting, she stood back up, wincing with new bruises.

"Are you alright back there?"

She glanced up and saw Ash, four meters deep in the alley, desperately peering into the darkness and trying to see.

Haley groaned slightly from the rib damage.

Her eyes narrowed as she looked down at the Southsider's force bracers. They were black, and even with her enhanced sight she could barely make them out in the dark.

Quickly, she pulled them off the corpse and tucked them into her backpack. Then she found her gun and retrieved it.

She whispered, "Get me out of here, Lisa."

-+-

Several minutes later, Ash wandered back into the restaurant. He could not find Night Shadow. She seemed to have disappeared in the dark. After searching for her in the alley for several minutes, he gave up.

Now concerned about Haley, who he had left behind, Ash made his way back across the street.

The deputies were out of commission, their car still smoldering from the grenade.

The leader of the disturbance was nowhere to be seen.

People milled out and about in the street. The bodies Night Shadow left in her wake were ignored for the moment.

Ash made his way inside Arthurus. No one guarded the door now. No one waited to go inside, either.

Glass littered the floor as he stepped in, his feet crunching it as he moved deeper inside.

Very few people remained. But there in the back, standing near their table, he found Haley.

“Hey. What’s going on out there? Seems like there was a lot of shooting.”

“Sorry. I had to go chase a story. I got some awesome footage. Night Shadow showed up again, and this time I got it all on video.”

“Great! How are you gonna file it with the Zeitung? The Cole is gone, right?”

He smiled, pleased that she was safe, and pleased with the bit of information he was about to share.

“Captain Falco left me a satellite relay. I have a quantum matrix connection attuned to PLAIR and my implant. I can send all my stories home immediately. I’m the eyes and ears for the entire Republic on this planet right now.”

Haley’s face dropped slightly, but he didn’t notice.

“Oh, wow. That’s nice, I guess.”

“You bet it is. Hey, I’ve got to get back to the hotel to file this report and upload the video. Can we meet again tomorrow?”

“Sure! I’ve got to go to sleep anyway. Gotta get up bright and early for the best spot in the bazaar, you know.”

They parted ways at the front door, awkwardly. But Ash was in too big of a hurry to notice or care. He walked down the sidewalk fast, intent on writing up his report and uploading the video.

Haley sighed, watching him go.

Her ribs hurt, and she had some marks on her body, but she had successfully hidden it all from him.

When he was out of sight, she walked across the street. Looking down, she saw a holo sign cylinder one of the protesters had dropped with the words, “MEAT KILLS” floating above it.

“I kill meat. And eat it.”

She reached down and picked the cylinder up, twisting the top to turn it off. Then she walked back down the darkened alley and let Lisa port her home.

5.6

In the quiet early morning hours, all remained calm and peaceful inside Warehouse 14.

Lights were dim. The air was calm. No noises could be heard except for the steady breathing of Haley Stonecipher as she slept in her cot.

A loud pop of displaced air announced the arrival of the old flatbed truck, breaking the tranquility. A variety of tools and garden implements were loaded in the back, along with various shapes and sizes of recharged power packs.

Haley groaned from her cot in the corner as she flipped over on her side, sliding back into her slumber after the unwelcome disturbance.

Another loud pop heralded the appearance of Tom, then another for Gwen. They both stood between her and the truck as lights slowly brightened in the ceiling above.

The couple smiled at one another, then focused on the comatose form of Haley, the blanket now pulled over her head.

Tom said, "Wakey, wakey!"

"Shut up."

"I guess somebody's not an early riser."

“She probably ‘worked’ late again last night.”

Haley said nothing, desperately trying to go back asleep again despite the lights and the annoying couple talking about her.

“I brought you some coffee,” Gwen said sympathetically, walking forward with a steaming cup.

Haley pulled the covers down, opened red eyes and stared at her approaching friend. Groaning, she finally sat up, casting off the last vestiges of sleep.

“I hope it has a bunch of pain killers in it.”

“Are you hurt? What happened?”

Gwen sat down on the edge of the cot and handed over the mug to her friend.

Haley took a grateful sip and said, “Oh, the usual. Beating up bad guys. One of them got me good in the ribs. Nothing to waste a hypo on, though.”

Tom stopped smiling.

He said, “Lisa, please bring us the first aid kit.”

Another pop occurred. This time a white box with a red cross on top appeared. He opened it and dug through the contents.

“Here you go.”

He walked over with a small medicine bottle.

“Thanks.”

Haley opened it and extracted a pill, then took a sip of coffee to help swallow.

“What happened to your knuckles?”

“Force bracers happened. When you hit someone, you really connect.”

“Hmm. I might have something for that. Here, take these.”

Tom pulled out a set of brass knuckles and handed them to her.

“Thanks. Where’d you get these?”

“They’re a little souvenir from the Projects. But I think you’ll be hitting people more than I will from here on out.”

After a few more sips, Haley looked more awake.

Taking another sip of coffee, she said, “What are we selling today?”

Tom said, “Tools. Rakes, pitchforks, shovels. That sort of thing.”

“Okay. How much are we asking for them?”

“There’s stuff out there I found the last time I went through the bazaar going for 12, 15 credits each. I think you should ask ten for everything. We can afford a price war. Offer a discount if someone wants to buy in bulk. Go down to eight each if they buy ten or more.”

“Ten?”

“Okay, offer a discount if they buy five or more. At least be willing to negotiate. Use your good judgment on pricing. They’re essentially free to us. Well, there was a cost for the multi-million credit MicaBot system that made everything. But you know what I mean. We’ll never get that back. But we can use this cashflow for the farm, so get what you can for them.”

“I can do that. And the usual assortment of power packs?”

“Yeah. Lisa says a couple buildings are about to run out of juice in this town. Now that you’ve got her sensors up everywhere, she can see things clearly. We’ve got a load bot we’ll send in on the truck when the time comes. Those heavy duty power packs are enormous.”

Gwen said, “This is changing the subject, but how did your date with Mr. Thallus go?”

Haley’s face brightened.

“He brought me to Arthurus! It was delicious.”

“Oh! I’ve always wanted to go there.”

Gwen turned and gave Tom a pointed look suggesting this would be a good idea for his future consideration.

He shrugged and said, “This is the first I’ve heard of it. You gotta tell me these things.”

“I’m telling you now.”

“Good. Because I’m not a mind reader, you know.”

“You’ll have to wait to book a table,” Haley said. “They’re closed for remodeling. A bunch of thugs showed up carrying holosigns. They were really out to disrupt business near the bazaar, though. And everything got shot up, including the insides of Arthurus.”

Gwen’s eyebrows shot up.

She said, “Did our favorite heroine make an appearance? I hope you were able to put a stop to things.”

“Yes. That’s why I’m sore this morning. Ash saw the whole thing. Took lots of video with his implant. I’m sure it’s all over Diego by now. Probably the other planets, too. We broke the date off so he could go back to his hotel room and upload everything.”

Tom said, “Lisa, do you have a feed for the Diego Zeitung? Or some way to get it?”

The AI spoke in all their implants.

“I do indeed, Thomas. There is a link with the Planetary Republic now thanks to a satellite placed in orbit by their humanitarian mission. The probabilities are high that the Republican Navy left behind this quantum matrix connection so that Mr. Thallus would be able to file reports for the media company employing him, as well as several government agencies.”

Tom’s personal holo appeared in the air, displaying for the women as well.

A musical riff heralding a news alert sounded, and an artificial anchor appeared, sitting behind a desk. The words, “Zeitung News Alert,” flashed across the top.

“This just in! We have fresh video of the masked crimefighter known as Night Shadow on the frontier planet of Phaethon! Take a look as she tackles violent rioters trying to disrupt lawful commercial activity. Our man on Phaethon, Ashley Thallus, just filed this report hours ago. We want to warn our viewers, some of what you are about to see is graphic.”

“The warnings just make people want to see it more,” Tom said. “Nobody actually turns away when they hear that.”

The scene opened from Ash’s eyes as he started to record, running for the front of the restaurant. Fishbowl glass littered the floor as he approached the huge broken window and gazed outside. Haley seemed to fly into a protester beating up a bystander, knocking him over.

“Oh!” Gwen said. “That’s a good move. How did you do that? And where did you come from? It almost looks like you flew down into him.”

“That was thanks to the wall crawler boots I told you about. Lisa initially put me on the roof, and I ran down the side of the building before jumping. It does look good, doesn’t it?”

They watched in silence as the rest of the fight unfolded via Ash’s eyes, until Haley disappeared in the alley chasing a gunman.

The artificial anchor dutifully reported the details Ash filed last night as the view returned to the news desk, casting Night Shadow in a very positive light.

When the recording stopped and Tom’s holo winked out, Gwen turned back to Haley.

“Does Ash know that was you, kicking butt and taking names out there?”

Haley shook her head.

“No. Lisa put me back inside the restaurant before he returned. As far as he is concerned, I was there the whole time.”

“Good. I’m not sure I’d trust him with your secret just yet.”

“Yeah. Nobody needs to know who Night Shadow really is, at this point. And you’re right. If he said anything about it, it would be all over both

systems in no time. I'm not sure I want to be famous right now."

"Doesn't this Thallus fella work for your dad?" Tom said to Gwen.

"Yes. Even worse, he also works for my Mom!"

"Wow. Isn't that a conflict of interest, having a reporter be an AOJ agent, too?"

"It doesn't matter to her if it is or not. That's never stopped Mom from doing whatever she needs to do in order to apprehend criminals."

"If you guys don't mind, I need to get ready and get out there before the good spots at the bazaar are taken," Haley said, putting her coffee down and heading toward the bathroom.

"We'll go with you today," Tom said. "I can help you unload all this stuff."

"Good," Gwen said with a smile. "I wanna go shopping."

5.7

Tom quickly found himself alone, setting up in a spot at the edge of the table section and bordering the open agriculture and livestock area. Their spot was near the edge where everybody parked.

This seemed an ideal place to sell garden tools as well as trade depleted power packs with people. Haley assured him that her regular customers would seek out the “power pack lady” no matter where they set up. But the tools were a new thing, and he wanted to be near where farmers would be seeking that sort of thing.

As soon as they parked the girls left, leaving him to fend for himself. Since Haley did this for them most mornings, he was glad to give her a break. Tom was able to park very close to their spot, so he left the majority of tools on the back of the truck, bringing only a handful of each to their tables.

When he set everything up, arranging things neatly on the tables, he took out the holosign cylinder Haley gave him.

Twisting the top, the words, “MEAT KILLS,” sprouted into existence above his head.

“Meat kills? The heck does that mean? *We* kill meat and eat it.”

He examined the cylinder and found a small red button set in the center. Pressing it, a holo QWERTY keyboard appeared.

“Here we go. Let’s see. ‘Shovels, Rakes, Pitchforks, 10C.’”

The banner floating above his head changed to the words he typed in. Satisfied, he moved the cylinder to the center table and left it there. Then he took a seat and opened up an e-book on his implant to pass the time.

He had not sat there long before his first customer approached, a farmer wearing a red plaid shirt, blue jeans and brown cowboy boots.

“Ten credits? The fella three tables down is selling his shovels for 15. Let’s take a look at what ya got.”

“Help yourself.”

Tom waved at the sample shovels propped up nearby.

“This all you got?”

“I got a truck full of ’em. Hammers, too. All kinds of stuff.”

The farmer picked out a shovel, lifting it experimentally. He pulled it close to his face where metal met the wood.

“Is this imported?”

“No, it was made here. Look at the grain on that handle. Anatonium Elm.”

The farmer frowned.

“Is that a thing? I ain’t never heard of ‘Anatonium Elm.’”

Tom shrugged at him.

“It could be.”

The farmer laughed at the nonchalant reply.

“I like you. How much of a discount will you give me if I buy ten of these?”

“I’ll go down to eight credits each.”

“Mix and match?”

“Sure. Take what you want.”

“I’ll buy some more and send them over to the Sugarland General Store. Lots of people are always needin’ good tools ’round here.”

-+-

After the fifth farmer walked away with an armload of tools, Tom’s competitor walked over, a grizzled older man with a gray beard flowing down to his chest. He walked over from a set of tables nearby with a painted plywood sign reading, “Pops’ Shovels and Axes.”

Below it in smaller letters it read, “Fill more with Pops Filmore shovels!”

Pops nodded at Tom but kept a neutral face as he examined a pickaxe on display.

Finally, he cleared his throat and said, “Where did you get these, if you don’t mind me asking?”

“Anatolia.”

“That’s a big continent. It’s like saying ‘Africa,’ or ‘North America.’ Where on Anatolia, exactly?”

Tom squinted at him, not particularly caring for the man’s tone.

“Little York.”

Pops snorted.

“There’s no production capability at Little York. There’s no production on all of Anatolia or Iliou. Not for this stuff. Not for anything other than leathermaking, maybe. The only place with a smelter is here on Glagia, out near New Galveston. I have one of only three forges on the entire planet. Even if you did have a forge in Little York, and I admit they’re not that hard to make, I know you don’t have access to a smelter. You don’t mine iron ore in Little York, either, I’ll wager. So, I’ll repeat my question. Where did you get these?”

Tom forced a polite smile.

“We do have a mine near Little York. Well, it’s several kilometers away, out near the desert, but Little York is the nearest town. And I have a mini-forge. That was imported recently, so you wouldn’t know anything about it. But the implements you see here were all manufactured on this planet.”

The man stared at him for a long moment. Tom met his eyes, refusing to back down.

Finally, Pops looked away, setting the pickaxe back on the table. The look on his face clearly showed he did not believe Tom.

He continued with the acerbic tone.

“I suppose a shipment of stuff came in that I don’t know about. But suit yourself if you wanna say these were made planetside. But I’ll tell you something, if you don’t mind me saying so. Imported or not, you’ll never make it around here giving away things this cheap. You’ll sell out quick and then all your inventory will be gone, and you’ll have nothing left. And then you’ll be broke. What do you think about *that*?”

Tom opened his mouth to say something, then stopped.

He struggled for a moment to control his tongue. With a visible effort, scrunching up his face, he backed down and bit off what he wanted to say.

Then, a beatific (although fake) smile came over his face.

Tom said through gritted teeth, “Thanks for the advice.”

The merchant studied him for a moment. He had seen the visible struggle not to verbally lash out. He could hardly miss it, since it played out on Tom’s face right in front of him.

But he nodded, satisfied.

“Happy to talk about it later, if you’re interested. I always set up in Section 196, right over there. Let me know when you run out of inventory and would like to reset your prices the next time you come into a bonanza like this. In fact, I may be interested in making you a deal. Wholesale, you know, for your whole lot.”

“Thanks. I’d appreciate it.”

Tom kept the fake smile plastered on his face until the merchant walked away.

He pressed the implant under his ear and quietly said, “Lisa, how many tools do we currently have in inventory?”

“The Mica tells me her units have completed 976, Thomas. In the mine cavern, we have 8,657 tool heads awaiting handles.”

“Handles?”

“Yes. The need for wooden handles far outweighs the supply of dead trees within a 100-kilometer radius of your farm, according to her scout reports. I sense additional candidate trees for cutting down in the public woods closer to Little York. We plan to port some of her scouts there next.”

“Okay. Are there any trash trees that nobody wants that we could cut down or something? That might help.”

“The label sounds subjective. I am not prepared to make a judgment over whether a tree is undesirable or not.”

“Okay, fine. Maybe we can obtain some wood here at the market and send it back to the mill.”

“That would be acceptable. Also, the scouts can extend their surveys out into the green radius around the Skoni Desert. It will just take time as that is an enormous area.”

“Okay. Sounds good. Yes, extend the search. We may also take some judicious cuttings of live trees, if we have to. Particularly if it’s a fast-growing breed that’s easy to farm. We can start planting them for harvesting later.”

“Will do, Thomas.”

Tom’s eyes wandered back over toward Section 196, where the shovel merchant found his seat again.

“It’s gonna be a while before I run out of inventory, Pops.”

He smiled grimly this time, letting cortisol and other stress hormones leech from his system.

One of the benefits of running a shop from an early age involved learning how to deal with customers, he thought to himself.

And the competition.

5.8

“So you’ve got the whole city gridded off with sensors for Lisa?”

Gwen and Haley left a high-end lingerie store, one of the indoor shops along the side and facing the booths of the bazaar.

Here the rent remained high, and consequently the prices at Elizabeth’s Private Chambers were higher, too. But both women felt the need for quality undergarments after two years of camping in the woods. And since they could afford it, they spent a fair bit at the shop. Each bought seven new sets of matching synthetic silk bras and panties imported from Italia. The smart fabric fit them perfectly.

“Yes,” Haley said. “In fact, it’s probably a good idea if Ash doesn’t see you.”

“You think he’d recognize me?”

“Yes, I do, Gwen. You’re the daughter of both his bosses, his real boss, your dad, and his secret boss, your mom.”

“They’re both real.”

“You know what I mean.”

“Okay, I guess you’re right. Lisa? Please let us know if and when Mr. Ashley Thallus comes near us, so I have enough time to get away.”

The AI's voice came over both their implants.

"Will do, Gwendolyn."

"You know . . . It seems like you're keeping a lot of secrets from him."

"Do you want him reporting back to your parents on you?"

"Oh, I'm not complaining about *that* secret. I'm just pointing it out."

"He doesn't even know that I know you. And we're going to keep it that way, for now at least."

They walked on, slowly weaving through the booths to see what the merchants were selling.

"I notice a lot of the higher quality stuff out here is steadily depleting," Haley said. "I think that's because there are no more ships coming in. I wonder if some of these shopkeepers who are only selling imported stuff will be able to stay open much longer."

"They'll have to start making bras out of local cotton," Gwen quipped. "As for us, we're almost out of syrup. I guess you'll be carrying more garden tools. Rakes and hoes for you."

"That sounds like a double entendre, somehow."

They continued their banter until the booths gave way to tables. Here they found less to look at that interested them, and they made their way to the far edge of the table area rather quickly.

At last, they returned to the lots near the parking area. Nothing remained in the section Tom had rented, except for a small pile of depleted power packs. Tom leaned back in a wooden chair, his feet up on a table.

"There you are," he said, leaning forward and slapping his boots back on the ground. "Ready to eat? I'm starving. What's in the bags?"

"Private, unmentionable items," Gwen said.

"Oh, well never mind, then. Are we eating here in town, or opening something up at home?"

Lisa's voice came over their implements.

"Haley, Mr. Thallus has left his hotel and is heading for the bazaar. I calculate an 85 percent chance he is looking for you."

"Thanks, Lisa. Do you know if he's eaten lunch yet?"

"He has not."

Haley turned to the couple and smiled.

"I think I'll have lunch with Ash. Our dinner was kinda interrupted last night. If you two want to eat out, maybe you could go around him and avoid us."

Tom and Gwen looked at each other.

She shrugged.

He said, "I guess we'll go home. I've got some ideas I want to talk about on the way back to the warehouse, anyway. And the truck's cab is more private than a restaurant."

The girls made their goodbyes. Gwen and Haley hugged, then Haley headed toward the center of the bazaar where Lisa suggested she would see Ash.

Gwen helped Tom pick up the dead power packs, and they joined a stream of other merchants heading for the parking lot. Most of the tables shut down around noon, so there was a rush to leave.

Back in the truck, Tom waited patiently in line before finally driving onto the outer loop. They headed to the Warehouse District in heavy traffic.

"So, what's your big plan?"

"I talked with our tool competitor, a man by the name of Pops Filmore."

"That's not his real name. No one names their baby 'Pops.'"

"I'm sure it's a nickname. Anyway, he tried to fuss at me for selling too low and undercutting him by insinuating I had a load of cheap imports. He could not accept the fact they're locally produced. And he kinda had a point if it weren't for the MicaBots, you know? I would not have access to the

mines without them. I told him the smelter was imported. He didn't believe me."

"Well, it is kind of a stretch that you'd have something like that. Especially since it did not go through the spaceport. I bet somebody keeps an eye on everything that's unloaded there."

"Yeah, I think that threw him for a loop, too. He was unaware of a recent shipment of rakes, hoes and shovels. But he was convinced that's where my haul came from."

"How much money did we make today?"

"I'll have to count it up, since a lot was in tokens. But it was somewhere around fifteen hundred credits."

"That's not bad. That's a month's pay back home, and you got it all in one morning."

"I know. But it got me to thinking. There is definitely a market for this stuff. I mean, it makes sense, this being a frontier planet and all. Some people negotiated to buy our tools in bulk."

"Did you sell them for what you told Haley to sell it for?"

Tom nodded.

"She wasn't there because someone took her shopping, so I ended up doing all the work."

Gwen flashed a grin at him from across the seat.

"Sorry. Nope, not sorry. We had fun."

"Anyway, yeah. I gave a discount for bulk sales. And I asked what they were going to do with so many hoes and hammers and such. It turns out shopkeepers from the small towns around here come into League City and load up on stuff. Then they cart it back home to their own general stores and farmers' markets and resell it all for a profit."

"Okay. That makes sense. What are you thinking, are you gonna hit up some of those other markets?"

“Actually, I’m thinking of selling in bulk to the general stores in all the big towns. It would help us do a couple things. One, we could eliminate our inventory issues. I’ve asked Lisa to tell Mica to stop making stuff for now. The only thing the bots are still doing is digging up gold ore. *That* they can keep accumulating.”

“It seems like the MicaBots get bored or something.”

“I think they’re just really efficient. This technology is going to be a Godsend for the next frontier world.”

“It’s already helping this one out.”

“Yeah, but this is the field test. The company is not getting paid by anyone for this. Anyway, the second thing I thought we could do is leave behind a sensor or three in every town we visit. That way, Lisa can start becoming a truly global AI.”

“Wow. That’s actually a really good idea.”

They drew near to the entrance for the Warehouse District. The guard recognized them and waved them on through.

Tom smiled at her as they approached Warehouse 14.

“I thought so, too.”

5.9

“It’s a good idea, but . . .”

“I know, I know. You’ve got a big butt.”

“That was funny when you were four years old, son.”

Tom smiled at the holo of his father, Christopher Raleigh. The older man’s image stood in the living room of Tom’s house as they held a conversation over the quantum matrix.

“You gotta admit. It’s still kinda funny, Dad.”

“In all seriousness, I do have a big ‘but.’ Lisa is a local AI. She’s a portable comprehension model. She’s probably close to max keeping track of your place, Little York, and now all of League City. You start dropping off sensors all over the world, and you’ll overload her.”

“Oh. Okay. I gotta admit, that’s a good ‘but.’ I didn’t think about it. I mean, I knew we were running low on sensors, but it didn’t occur to me there was a reason for the limited number you guys sent.”

Chris nodded, rubbing his chin and staring at the floor.

“We’re going to have to upgrade her if she goes global. Do you have her core secured in a safe space? We’ll need to do multiple cores if we want to do it right. At least two. For now, she’s not going to be handling much in

the way of finances or communications. That's one of the things that can chew up a global AI's processing power, and it's why you'll find dozens of cores on established planets. They keep track of the needs of millions of people."

He paced around his office back on Lute, still rubbing his chin.

"I'll procure some blanks. She's based on LuteNet, so I know there's some spares lying around Port Ryan somewhere. We'll get them to you on the next Pulsar shipment, along with a couple thousand more sensors. Then you can spread her eyes and ears around the world and she won't get overwhelmed."

"Great."

"I think you should also expand the use of the MicaBots."

"How's that?"

"Well, they've proven themselves locally. Now let's see how they do globally. The plant has manufactured quite a few more, about ten thousand. We're going to ramp up production and get at least half a million over to Phaethon eventually. At every town you visit, selling your garden tools, I want you to release a hundred or so of the MicaBots. They can scan the countryside for resources, just like they've done around your place and Little York. Then if we need to tap anything, Lisa can port over a few thousand to do whatever's needed."

"Wow. You're talking global domination, Dad."

"Well, not really. We'll avoid land that's claimed. Of course, that's going to be most of it in the settlements around League City. Almost all those homesteads are spoken for, I bet. But you're sitting on top of a literal gold mine over where you are. And I understand the third continent is even less populated. The planet's charter allows for the acquisition of resources in unclaimed land, provided doing so does no irreparable harm."

"That's true."

"Culling dead timber, deep mining for unclaimed metals . . . that's not considered irreparable. Clearcutting vast swaths of forest or doing

something like strip mining might be. We'll follow the letter of the law."

"Okay. So, when can I expect all these upgrades and add-ons? Next trip?"

"Next trip. Captain McKelway and Ms. Malone are back here at the moment. This will be their last flight for a while, since I'm sending along a droid pilot. He will take over from them so they can stop aging while Pulsar goes back and forth."

"Sounds good. Hey, I've enjoyed chatting, and I'm looking forward to the upgrades. But I gotta go check on how my hay is coming."

"Your hay?"

"Yeah, we're baling hay today. Getting ready for winter. Everything will die with the first frost, which is coming any day now."

"Well, I'll let you get back to it, then. Your mother will be mad she missed this call."

"Tell her I said, hi."

"Will do. Love ya, son."

"Love you too, Dad."

-+-

Tom walked outside and made a wide arc around the chicken coop where Robert the Rooster stood guard.

Robert gave him the stink eye and made a half-hearted charge at him. But Tom walked too far out of the big bird's way. Robert gave up thoughts of attacking him and went back to pecking the dirt for bugs.

Tom walked past Timmy, standing guard several meters in front of the house.

"Maybe Robert thought better about attacking me because the big scary robot was nearby."

Tom kept walking, heading toward the river. There, making perfect strips of symmetrical cuttings in the tall lush grass, one of his autonomous tractors moved steadily along, teeth from its rake whirling behind it.

The mower drone cut the grass with a thin beam of red light. Instead of blades, the rear of the unit had two wide arms stretching out with a three-meter span between them, set at a steady height of 15 centimeters above the ground. When the beam was pulled across the field, it sheared off the grass.

Pulled along behind the blade beam, a separate attachment raked the clippings into a neat row, aligning the cuttings into one large strip.

Tom watched the automated process carefully. The bot had steadily moved in a line for several kilometers along the river, including his and the neighboring land. But since no one else claimed this area, other than close friends, he had little to worry about. Lisa would keep track of how much hay was produced on Wink and Jinxie's homesteads, and he would pay them a fair share of the profits for what he reaped from grass on their property.

The other side of the river had even more to mow, and he figured he could do a similar deal for whatever he gleaned off Silas's land.

"That reminds me," he said out loud. "We need to take Lola to the Courthouse and let her claim another homestead. Speaking of which, where are those two?"

Hundreds of meters away, he saw movement in the first row of cut grass, closest to the river.

He saw Silas stand up, bare legged, then reach down and pull up his pants.

"Good grief! Are they *literally* having a roll in the hay?"

Lola stood up, too, and pulled her clothes back on. At this distance, Tom could hardly see anything, not that he wanted to.

He sighed and steadily trudged toward the amorous couple.

Silas and Lola saw him and waved. They headed his way.

The three soon met in the middle of the field. Silas and Lola were all smiles when they greeted him.

“We’re makin’ great progress, Mr. Savage!”

“I can see that,” Tom said, raising an eyebrow.

“I reckon the tractors will be done this side o’ the river by sundown. We’ll get ’em to do the other side overnight. Then it’s just a matter of lettin’ it all dry out.”

“Dry out?”

“Why, sure. You gots to let the hay dry out before you bale it.”

“Oh. Okay. Why is that?”

“Oh, well you see, there’s a chemical reaction that can occur if the hay is too wet. The bales compress the grass tight and if there’s moisture up in there, that reaction occurs, and . . . *boom*. Spontaneous combustion.”

“No kidding? So wet hay will burn.”

“Yup. We’ll let it dry it out nice and good before runnin’ the baler.”

“Okay. Well, you know more about it than I do. Uh . . . carry on.”

Tom turned and headed back to the house.

Under his breath he muttered, “My hay is made with love, too. Just like the syrup.”

Silas and Lola watched Tom’s back as he walked past Timmy and strode up to his front door.

Then they turned and headed back for the river, holding hands.

5.10

Glyph sat in his office, in the basement of one of the tenement buildings.

He mulled over the disaster from last night.

The primary objective, disrupting businesses and showing the city that his people were still a presence, had been fulfilled, he thought.

But the price was high.

As far as he knew, all but two of the “protesters” were dead.

And many of those were killed at the hands of this Night Shadow.

It had been a loss in equipment, as well. He was down 20 guns and some force bracer sets. That hurt almost as much as the people.

“We need more money.”

He stewed for a bit, wishing Anton Berris was still here. Berris usually took care of details like this, letting him focus on the big picture.

But Berris left on the Cole, taking Glyph’s favorite woman with him.

Dark thoughts whirled around his head for a moment before Glyph could refocus on the problem at hand.

Most of the money circulating in League City, both in token form and digital, originated from the local First Galactic Bank branch.

“It stands to reason, if we need more money, we should go there.”

He stood up and paced the floor, deep in thought.

“We deserve this money. These people are too stupid to realize that.”

All of his followers, in fact, turned over their belongings to the X’s and O’s when joining. Whilst recruiting in the major systems, mostly in the Republic, when Gliph needed more funds he would convince more people to join.

“Out here, nobody wants to be a part of history. And nobody wants to donate, either. Not voluntarily.”

He sat back down, his mind made up.

Satisfied with his planned course of action, he leaned back for some sleep.

Tonight would be a scouting expedition.

-+-

“It really is an interesting place.”

Ash and Haley walked together toward the Courthouse. They had eaten lunch at yet another place, with Ash savoring the locally produced pasta and meatballs from an Italian restaurant. The only thing imported, their waiter assured him, were the spices used to season things.

The rest of the afternoon they shopped the higher end stores and talked. Ash was a native Octavian, and could add the Diego hyphenation to his name, although that was not as common now as it was before the war.

“What kind of name is Thallus, anyway?”

“It’s Greek. My paternal ancestor who immigrated to the stars was from Corfu.”

“Never heard of it.”

“It’s a Greek island on Old Earth. He came to Diego early. My family’s been in the Republic 150 years now.”

“Wow. That’s neat.”

“What about you? Stonecipher sounds British. Or is it American? Australian?”

“I . . . don’t really know. I was raised in an orphanage on Clarion. This is the name given to me by StarCen, probably.”

“Oh. I’m sorry.”

“Don’t be. It’s just the way it is. Travel in the League is less restrictive now than it was before the war, or so I hear. I turned of age and tried my hand at a couple things. A lot of the kids I grew up with in the orphanage chose to become indents. Put in your ten years, receive a huge payout at the end. You know how it is.”

“But you didn’t go that route, obviously.”

She smiled, thinking back to those days.

“No. I was determined to stay free. The consent protocols had been hacked during the war. I was scared it could happen again.”

Ash’s face darkened.

“Thrall. Another one of his many evil deeds.”

“Right. They were fortified afterwards, along with the intersystem agreements and so forth. Nonetheless, I heard stories. Girls were coerced into doing things, even with the consent protocols active in their collars. And I wanted to stay free. So, after a few years doing drudgework in Stockton, I signed up to immigrate out here.”

“That’s great. Then what happened? You’ve been here for what, two or three years now?”

“It turns out that there is a big need for men with a newly colonized planet. But there’s an even higher demand for women, as you can imagine. With

more men comes the need for more women. Somebody once said, ‘It’s not good for man to be alone.’”

“I think that was God. I’m pretty sure that was God who said that.”

“So, when I got here, and this was a common experience for girls my age, every man who saw me propositioned me. I could not walk down the street like we are doing right now, not alone at least, without constantly being harassed. So I headed for the hills. It was a little better in Anatolia, when I got there, if only for the fact there were so few people on that continent. And I found some other girls who felt the same way.”

“That’s good. Band together for solidarity.”

Haley nodded.

“And it turns out there’s a lack of law enforcement on this planet. Phaethon’s charter has a proviso for people out in the boondocks enforcing the rules. Rangers are sworn in and operate as free agents. No boss. And that suited me fine. And thus the Fae Phalanx was born, an all-female ranger outfit.”

“Hm. Did you all get your vision and hearing enhanced? I mean, that’s what you said about your ears. I like them pointy like that. It’s neat. That would make a good story for my audience back home. They would eat something like that up.”

“I’d prefer to stay out of the spotlight, thank you very much. Me and my ears.”

“Sure, sure. I know how to keep a separate personal life, don’t worry. I won’t write about you or interview you or anything if you don’t want me to.”

She glanced at him out of the corner of her eye. They were dancing very close to some uncomfortable boundaries for her.

He turned and caught her looking, noting the expression on her face.

“I’m sorry. I can read the room. Please keep going. This won’t be in my report. I just want to get to know you better.”

She refocused on the street, and her face cleared.

“I trust you. There’s not much else to tell. Time passed. The Courthouse put a little money in our bank account every month. Enough to buy horses and guns and keep us fed, mostly. We had a nice group of girls. Primarily we were concerned with preventing the over-hunting of animals, things like that. Sometimes a group of idiots would come out on the sky train and try to clear a whole section of marked owls, for instance. They’re worth a lot in certain markets. And we’d have to step in and stop it. On occasion we’d need to go into town and kick some ass when things got out of hand. But for the most part, we stayed out in the woods.”

“Sounds almost idyllic. What brought you back to the big city?”

Haley glanced up at the sky. In her mind’s eye, she remembered the sinister gray bulk of a battle tank floating overhead, guns shooting.

“We were wiped out. A particularly bad group of men got ahold of some really powerful weapons, and they . . . killed almost everybody in my group.”

Ash’s mouth opened in shock.

“Good gosh. I knew the frontier worlds could be rough, but I had no idea. I’m so sorry. I . . . I don’t know what to say.”

She smiled sadly and reached out to squeeze his hand.

“Don’t worry. What’s done is done. To end a long story, some friends of mine have a farm out there in Anatolia, and they asked me to be their agent here in League City, buying and selling stuff. So, here I am. It pays better than being a ranger and I’m getting to enjoy the city, which has greatly improved from when I first came here.”

He nodded slowly, taking in her comments.

“Now that there’s enough women, I bet you aren’t getting propositioned all the time.”

“Oh, I still get propositions,” she said, flashing a brighter smile at him. “But I can afford to be choosy.”

5.11

Glyph did not have far to go to reach the First Galactic Bank branch. It was not on Commerce Boulevard, but sat catty-corner from the Courthouse on Julliard Boulevard. This was a strategic decision by the bank's administrators. They were near enough to the merchants, but closer to the seat of power.

Arguably, both were important to the bank's operations. Both needed money, and the bank supplied the government and the private sector with funds.

But the choice in proximity to the square displayed a physical reminder of the reality that the bank's continued permission to exist on Phaethon relied on those inside the Courthouse.

Consequently, the shop owners, bar and restaurant operators and everyone else near the bazaar on the edge of town had to make their way back to the center of League City if they wished to do any banking business.

First Galactic Phaethon Branch occupied a building taking up most of the corner of its street. While the Courthouse was one of the few made entirely from stone, the bank came close, incorporating an artful mix of granite and wood.

The bank building came close to majestic, falling short of the Courthouse. But the structure looked stately and imposing. Within a few years, provided

the flow of money and people continued through Phaethon, the bank would likely build a bigger, statelier building.

For now, on a fast-growing frontier planet, their current structure quite sufficed.

Gliph walked up to where his informant sat, a little man wearing a broad straw farmer's hat. This fellow remained the lone occupant of a bench at the corner of Courthouse Square near the taxi stand. His location offered an unobstructed view of the bank entrance across the street.

Gliph sat down beside the man and watched with him for a while. On occasion, someone would enter the building through double glass doors. Later, the person would come out again.

Finally, Gliph spoke without looking at the other man.

"Tell me what you've seen, Refa."

"There eez no large sheepments of money, from what I can tell, Meester Gleeph."

"Okay, no money trucks. I guess that makes sense. Where would they go? Tell me what else you've seen."

"The merchants, they bring the money een, you see? There goes one now."

Gliph watched as an older man turned and entered through the double doors off the street.

"How do you know that was a merchant? And how do you know he was carrying money?"

"I recognize heem. He almost shot me een the riots."

"Okay. I'll take your word for it. But he's not carrying anything. Don't they use bags or zippered cases or something to transport tokens?"

Refa shook his head, the straw hat slowly turning back and forth.

"That would be too obvious, Meester Gleeph. They hide the money on their bodies and walk eento the bank. They deposit the money. They walk out. Eeny money they take out, for change or what have you, they also hide.

That eez the way they have to do eet. Eet must be, for the physical tokens, you see.”

Glyph nodded, taking it all in while following the little man’s logic.

“Okay. So . . . how do we go about doing this? Do we jump a customer before he goes inside?”

“No, no, no, Meester Gleeeph. Haha, you are funny. No, we meet them long before they get to the bank.”

“Before? But how do we know who to pick? Who to choose?”

“I’ve been watching all day, Meester Gleeeph. I know who delivers the money now. I’ll know who to choose when they walk down the street. We’ll wait someplace safe and when I see a good choice . . . we will get heem.”

-+-

“I’ve never actually ventured much outside the Merchants’ District. I mean, I’ve been all around the city. But I mostly go between Commerce Boulevard and the Warehouse District, and not anywhere else.”

“Well, you’re in for a treat. I understand the Courthouse Café is a delightful local place. Or so my sources have told me.”

“What do they serve? Hamburgers and hotdogs?”

“Hamburgers for sure. Locally grown cattle. Not sure about the hotdogs. I haven’t found any hotdogs at all, locally produced or imported.”

“That’s probably not a big import.”

“You’re right. Anything frozen would be a pain to bring in. You’re looking at a two month trip from most planets, and it would have to stay frozen all that time, even if the ship had a Machro-drive like the Cole.”

Haley gave Ash a sideways glance.

“Are there many ships with Machro-drives these days? I’ve been away from civilization a long time.”

“Ha! No, they’re expensive. The military and maybe some very wealthy merchants are the only ones who can afford them. Here’s the place.”

They took a right at Courthouse Square and walked past the First Galactic branch. Then they took a left. A little storefront here had a handful of outdoor tables set up, and more inside.

“Out or in?” Ash said.

“In, please. All this walking’s got me hot. I think the weather’s supposed to change soon, but it hasn’t yet.”

Two and a half hours later, they left with full bellies and a lighter bank account for Ash, who insisted on paying from his work funds.

By now, the sun had set and most of the lights in the Courthouse were out.

“Shall we get a taxi?” Ash said.

“No, let’s walk. It’s nice out. Plus, I need the exercise. I sit behind a table every morning.”

Pedestrian traffic remained robust near the Courthouse. As they turned back onto Commerce, it lightened up with bright windows from the apartments on either side.

Most of the damage done during the riots had been repaired by now, although Haley noted some boarded-up windows, still.

They kept walking, both lost in their own thoughts for a moment.

As they passed an alley between buildings, they heard a sharp yelp.

“Help! Somebody help me!”

Ash did not hesitate. He turned on his implant’s recorder, and ran into the alley.

5.12

Haley touched her implant and said, “Lisa, you know what to do. Port me up to the roof and put on my outfit.”

“It is too late, Haley. The victim of this crime has already expired.”

“What? He’s dead?”

“Yes.”

“Well, then . . . where is the person who did it? I’ll go get ’em.”

“I am sorry, Haley. I do not know. I was not focusing on this alley when the incident occurred.”

“You weren’t . . . Oh.”

She made a connection with Gwen and Tom.

“Hey girl! What’s up?”

“Someone just got mugged in an alley here in League City, and they were killed. But Lisa didn’t see who did it. How could that happen? I thought she was an all-seeing AI.”

“I might know something about that,” Tom said. “Dad told me that since she’s just a portable model, we’re probably starting to max out her capabilities. Upgrades are incoming, but she might suffer some

performance issues until we get her new brains installed. At least, performance like being able to monitor every single thing she can sense simultaneously, no matter what.”

“Upgrades? Like what? You mean cores?”

“Yeah.”

“Well, that’s just great. She’s going to be subpar until we get her some new cores? How long will that take, once they get here?”

“I dunno. Hopefully not long.”

Gwen said, “Could you maybe ask if she saw who came out of the alley recently? Maybe you could track them that way.”

Lisa interrupted to respond to this suggestion directly.

“I am sorry, Gwendolyn. I was not paying attention to this area at all. I do not know who was in the alley, or who recently left it. When I committed processing cycles to the area, I noticed the victim expiring. That is all I am able to state with any degree of certainty at this time.”

“That’s fine, Lisa. Don’t beat yourself up about it.”

“Let me know when you get those upgrades in, Tom,” Haley said. “I don’t want this to happen again, if we can help it.”

“Will do. Everything should be here in the morning. Or whenever the Pulsar returns with Wink and Jinxie.”

“Okay. I’m gonna have to let you go. I need to help Ash.”

“Oh, is Ash with you?” Gwen said with a smile in her voice. “Are you two on a *date*?”

“I hope they’re not on a date,” Tom quipped. “Somebody always dies on their dates. At least, that’s what happened last time. Wait . . . too late.”

“Gotta go, bye!”

Haley cut the connection and jogged into the alley, using her enhanced vision to see in the dark. She found Ash squatting near a body several

meters in.

She said, “Hey.”

He looked up at her, his face distraught.

“He’s dead. Look at this. Blunt trauma to the head. Somebody conked him here. They obviously struggled. Then his throat was cut.”

Haley glanced at the body and immediately wished she hadn’t. A gaping slash in the neck resulted in blood gushing all down the poor man’s front.

“Why would somebody do something like this?” Ash said.

Haley glanced around the area. She noticed something round and sparkly a couple meters away.

She walked over and picked it up in the dark. It was a token. She turned and held it up for Ash, who could barely see it until a glint of light from a distant streetlamp caught the tiny coin.

“For the same reason people do a lot of things, Ash. Money.”

-+-

Refa Epsilon-Ramirez walked down a side street, several credits richer now.

He had done more than he said he would for Mr. Glyph, the revered leader of the X’s and O’s. Refa had a photographic memory, and had committed all the faces he saw going into the bank.

He was a simple man. In his way of understanding, anyone who needed to enter a bank, especially from the direction of the Merchants’ District, was rich. And anyone who was rich had a face worth remembering.

After saying goodbye to ‘Meester Glyph’ (the accent, like so many other things about him, was fake), he set off in the same direction all those rich marks headed after departing the bank.

It took a while for the perfect set of circumstances to present themselves. He saw two men and one woman he recognized from the bank out on the

street, but none went anywhere he could draw them away without being seen.

Finally, later in the evening, he found one of the men he recognized wandering alone and apparently headed home.

He couldn't be too rich, Refa thought, because he was headed toward the apartments closer to the Courthouse than the bazaar.

But in Refa's mind, anyone who had more money than him was "rich."

And he aimed to rectify that situation, as soon as possible.

He stopped at the entrance to an alley and leaned against the wall, waiting for the man to walk closer. His mark had zero situational awareness, apparently lost in thought, eyes looking down at the sidewalk.

As soon as he strolled past, Refa pulled out his blackjack and thwacked the back of the man's head.

His mark fell.

Refa was ready for this, too, and reached out to grab him.

Pocketing the blackjack, he hoisted the man up by the armpits and dragged him into the dark alley. No one saw it happen.

Things went well until the idiot regained consciousness while Refa rifled through his pockets, pulling out tokens.

How the guy recovered so quickly from that blow to the head, Refa would never know. Maybe he had some nanobots in his system?

At any rate, the mark recovered enough to put up a fight.

So Refa drew his blade and slashed the man's neck.

He stood up shaking, watching the man bleed out in the dim light. Then he went out the other end of the alley. He turned south, back toward Courthouse Square.

Back toward home.

He debated telling Mr. Gliph about his success.

Then he debated how much of the money he should turn over to the organization. Perhaps he could keep it all?

No. He still felt loyal to the man. He liked the idea of anarchy, at least what he understood of it.

In an anarchy, Refa felt convinced he could do things like this all the time and get away with it. There were no rules, right? That meant he could take the money he wanted from others who had it.

It would all be legal. He was just doing it now, getting a head start on it all.

His mind made up, he kept walking, cutting over at the square to avoid the hulking stone building and the deputy standing guard at its door.

He kept going until he came to the dilapidated apartment building where Gliph held court. Inside, Refa descended the stairs and at last made his way to his leader's basement door.

He knocked.

"Enter."

Refa swung the door open and found Gliph with a young girl in his lap, sitting behind a desk.

"Leave us, Morgan. We have business."

The girl stood up and left the room, closing the door behind her.

Refa said, "I found one of them."

He handed over 3,000 credits in tokens. The merchant he slashed truly had been rich.

Refa kept 782 credits for himself, the sum total of all the smaller tokens the man had in his pockets.

In Refa's mind, this was fair. He had been the one who had done all the work. In a way, it was like a tax or a tip paid for his service. He had no

problem shorting Gliph on the take. The man would never know what he never knew.

“Thank you, Refa. You have done very well tonight. I want you to keep working on this. Find the filthy capitalists and bring me their money. You will be greatly rewarded when we establish Allegory on this planet.”

Refa nodded and smiled.

He turned and saw himself out.

“I’m already rewarded,” he murmured to himself as he walked back up the stairs.

“For me, Allegory is already here.”

5.13

A new day dawned, and the CC 1000's door slid up. The metal slats pivoted, letting in light. Robert the Rooster stepped out and surveyed his domain, scanning for threats.

Several meters away, Timmy stood with his back to the house and chicken coop. His scanner pointed toward the river, but his senses extended 360 degrees all around him.

Robert had made peace with the robot. Perhaps not being able to injure the metal man had impressed the rooster.

He stepped further away from the door and the chicks raced out, now free to forage for insects, rodents and any other edibles they found.

Robert scanned the dusty sky, alert for any marked owls or other winged predators seeking an early morning snack.

Seeing nothing, he visibly relaxed somewhat, his head jerking with a final scan of the area before seeking out bugs for himself.

Timmy moved, making Robert jerk his head toward the bot. But Timmy walked past the coop and headed to the stables, closing the gate to the corral behind him.

Moments later, the horses moved out to the corral. Bessie, Gwen's mare, waited impatiently at the gate, but Timmy ignored her. He shifted into higher speed, cleaning out the muck in the stalls in a blur.

Rather than fight the horses near the gate, Timmy tossed a bag full of horse manure over the corral's fence. Then he exited the barn through the rear door and retrieved the bag, leaving the horses in the corral.

He moved off toward the garden, which already had plenty of fertilizer. Tom had started a compost pile, and it was quickly expanding with both equine and poultry waste.

Tom opened the front door of his house and let Mr. Biddles wander outside with him. He sat down in one of the fancy chairs with a cup of coffee and watched the chickens as they slowly spread out from the coop.

All the grass in front of the river was cut and lined up, ready for baling. The mower made three and a half meter strips as far as they could see. Tom counted eight windrows starting near the riverbank and extending toward his house. The grass away from the water grew less, and the windrows grew thinner with each subsequent strip.

The door opened and Gwen came out, wearing a very long t-shirt that came down over her thighs.

"No, sir. You may not go exploring today."

She reached down and scooped up Biddles, who protested the restriction by squirming in her grip.

She opened the door and deposited the cat back inside before shutting it again, quickly.

Then she sat down in the other chair near Tom.

"If Lisa is compromised, I don't want Mr. Biddles getting in trouble. She'd be unable to port him back inside in time."

Lisa's voice came over both their implants.

"I always monitor things closely on the farm, Gwendolyn. You have nothing to worry about in regards to feline safety."

She and Tom shared a look. Gwen raised her eyebrows and shook her head slightly, silently conveying her doubts.

Out loud, Tom said, “It certainly won’t hurt to keep the cat inside for a while, anyway.”

In the distance, a red truck crossed the bridge.

After swapping out the old flatbed truck several times, with Lisa teleporting it between the farm and the warehouse back in League City every morning, Silas decided to purchase his own vehicle. Tom continued making payments to Silas in gold coins from the mine, and Silas had found a vendor in League City willing to swap them out for credit tokens at a reasonable rate.

The model he found in a corner of the open part of the bazaar was an old red pickup truck. The bed had half-meter sides in the back, and the cab sat three on a single bench seat up front. The power pack was almost depleted, and he picked it up for a song.

Now, with a fully charged pack thanks to SCU-4, he had a truck that was good as new. The vehicle crossed over the bridge and stopped.

Silas and Lola jumped out, and he bent down near the first windrow, aiming an instrument’s laser at the grass and noting the readout.

They went to the next strip and repeated the procedure.

Tom took a sip of coffee and said, “How many times do you think they’ve done it in that new truck of his?”

Gwen slapped his shoulder with the back of her hand.

He said, “What? You know you were thinking it.”

After taking readings from all the windrows, Silas and Lola returned to the truck. They floated slowly over the cut grass, then picked up speed. As they neared the house, Timmy returned to his usual position.

Silas parked between the bot and the front porch, with plenty of space between them and the chicken coop so as not to alarm Robert. The couple climbed out of the truck, all smiles.

Tom looked at Gwen and raised an eyebrow.

She slapped his shoulder again.

“Well, Mr. Savage, I checked the moisture readings on the grass, and it’s already dry enough for us to start baling.”

“Oh really? I thought we’d have to wait longer.”

“I did too, since there’s little direct sunlight around here. But I guess we’re close enough to the desert that everything’s already dry. Anyhow, I can go get the baler drone a goin’, if you want.”

“Absolutely. You know what you’re doing more than I do, Silas. I’ve never baled hay before.”

“I’ll just go into the barn and get that drone a goin’. I know the horses would love to get back out there, so the sooner we get the bales made and stored, the better.”

Silas headed for the barn and corral.

Lola lingered for a moment.

“Where’s Mr. Biddles?”

“Oh, we’re keeping him inside for now,” Gwen said. “Lisa is a little overworked, and I don’t want to risk anything happening to him out here.”

“I am devoting adequate resources to the safety of the feline, Gwendolyn.”

Lisa’s words came through all their implants. Gwen rolled her eyes, refusing to argue with the AI but unwilling to yield, either.

They chatted about other things. Lola had not yet been teleported to the big city, so her entire experience had centered around Silas and their home lately.

Gwen listened politely to the younger girl’s chatter. She had rearranged the furniture Gwen had bought for Silas, and had some ideas about other things to purchase, too. She discussed the last of the first batch of syrup, and speculated about when the trees might produce more sap that could be harvested. She talked about the new barn the MicaBots had built behind

their house, and how maybe they could store some of the hay there. Silas had talked about buying them another horse so they'd have a spare one to ride in case something happened to the truck.

"We can let you have one of ours," Gwen said to this last item, "if you want another one."

"Oh, that would be very nice. We can afford to buy it from you. You've already done so much for us."

Tom said, "Nah, we didn't pay anything for it. It'd be poetic justice if you got another one of those guys' horses."

They heard a loud humming sound and everyone turned to watch the baler drone float past, just a few centimeters off the ground. Behind it, a hay baling implement floated along, ready to go.

Silas reappeared, smiling.

"We're in business! Just have to keep that thing loaded up with spools of wire, and it will do all the work."

"Good," Tom said. "Those suckers are expensive. I hope it doesn't give us any trouble."

Silas walked up to Lola and wrapped an arm around her waist. They all watched as the tractor floated out to the first windrow.

It stopped perpendicular to the line, then turned right. Moving slower, it headed down the windrow. The unit in back lowered and scooped up the clippings.

They watched the tractor move down the line for several meters. Then it stopped and the baler in back hummed a little louder. A rectangular bale one meter long, the green grass already fading into a rich yellow color, spat out of the back of the unit and landed on the ground with a gentle thud.

The tractor moved on, its baler steadily devouring more clippings.

"Mark this on your calendar, boys and girls," Tom said with a smile. "Our first bale of hay."

5.14

The first bale of hay disappeared moments later, as Lisa ported it into the far corner of the barn.

She continued teleporting the bales almost as soon as they came out of the baler. The two couples watched this process as the tractor drone pattered out of sight when the river bended back south on its slow turn toward Little York.

“I gotta say,” Silas said, turning to smile at Tom, “having an AI willing to teleport stuff for us is a lifesaver. That’s a lotta manual labor right there.”

“What’s she going to do when the bales get out of range of her sensors?” Lola said. “The mower yesterday cut for clicks and clicks, and even more clicks alongside the river.”

“I think we can get Timmy to grab those. He won’t mind.”

“I worry more about where we’re going to store it all,” Silas said. “I appreciate that new barn you built me, or had the little ants build for us. But this is gonna fill up both yours and mine, and we’ll still need more space. Can them little robots put up another one before that baler finishes?”

“We’ve got a warehouse in League City, remember? Whatever Lisa ports there we can keep until winter, then maybe sell it at a nice profit in the open-air ag market over there.”

“That’s not a bad idea.”

“Don’t forget about Mr. Asa,” Gwen said. “He might could use some hay for his cattle, if they run out of oats.”

Tom nodded and said, “I’ll ask next time we go by their place. We’ve got plenty. Cajun Cal might need some, too.”

“Oh, right. I forgot about him. Yeah, I bet he goes through the hay quite a bit.”

Silas said, “Whelp, we’re gonna go check on the trees.”

“Will we see you two for lunch?” Gwen said.

“Absolutely.”

Silas and Lola made their way back to the truck, giving Robert and the chicken coop a wide berth.

As they drove off, Tom turned to Gwen and said, “I think I’ll see how Haley’s doing with today’s batch of tools, and then maybe head out to the League City fairgrounds and see if I can catch a ride on the Jet Stream. I had Lisa check the schedules, and Captain Montaigne made it in this morning.”

“Isn’t he expensive?”

“They’re all expensive. And he’s going to charge me even more since I have some special requests to make. But, this is a good way to kill multiple birds with one stone.”

“Are we sure we want to place more sensors out for Lisa right now? She’s having a hard enough time as it is.”

“This will take a while to set up. Montaigne is not even scheduled to leave League City until tonight.”

“Do you think she’ll be ready by then?”

“I think Wink and Jinxie will be back any minute. In fact, I’m a little surprised they’re not here yet.”

“Wink? Wink! Wink, we’re heading into Republican space!”

“What? No, no, no! That’s . . . what’s going on?”

Wink rushed to the bridge from the hold. The door stood open and he could see Jinxie inside, staring at their new android pilot.

The droid did not return her gaze, sitting instead at the ship’s controls.

“What’s going on?” he asked again, sliding to a stop beside Jinxie.

“I don’t know. He’s not responding to any of my commands. At all. I wasn’t paying attention when we entered into hypertime. But then I came out here and . . . I noticed we’re headed in the wrong direction.”

“Droid! Uh . . . Pilot! Stop! We cannot go into Republican space, do you understand?”

No response.

The front holo showed stars flickering by. Wink took a quick look at the nav holo. They teleported one astronomical unit per second . . . but in the wrong direction.

Jinxie looked up at him with a distraught expression.

“Do something, Wink!”

“Uh . . . like what? Those things are way stronger than we are.”

“Then shoot it or something!”

“I’m not even sure that would help, Jinx. I’d probably end up destroying something critical on the bridge.”

The ship popped out of hypertime with a final teleportation. A space station filled the forward holo, a giant cylinder surrounded by a ring that slowly rotated clockwise. Tethered to the ring by tractor beams were dozens of other ships.

They held their position for a moment before the droid activated the standard drives, nudging them closer to the ring.

“We can’t go to a Republican holding!” Jinxie said. “There’s a bounty on us.”

At last, the droid spoke.

“Actually . . . Oh, I hate starting a sentence with ‘actually,’ but here we go.”

He turned and faced them.

The bot had a standard male face, one of the dozen or so that Verberger had been using the last few years to signal people that they were interacting with a droid. Otherwise, he looked and sounded completely human.

“Actually, there is not a bounty out on the Pulsar. After your . . . *indiscretions* on Sporades, the Republic settled the issue when rather high-level diplomats from Petra Roe approached certain channels in our government.”

Jinxie said, “‘Our?’ You’re Lutian. At least, you’re owned by the Ultima Mule Company, and they’re Lutian.”

Wink said, “Jinx is right. What do you mean by ‘our’ government?”

He turned to Jinxie and said, “I think Mr. Raleigh’s organization has been infiltrated again.”

The droid smiled at this.

“Yes, and no. I suppose you could call this an infiltration, of sorts. I’m merely borrowing Chris’s robot to catch a ride. I asked it to do something for me before you went into hyperspace, and he complied. You are docking at Space Station Gamma Four. You are right, it is a Republican outpost. But I assure you, no one here will try to cash in on a bounty for your ship. We’re only going to stop here long enough for me to transfer over to the Pulsar. Then you can resume your journey to Phaethon. I imagine you’ll only lose any time you spend on the station from your original arrival time.”

“You’re going to get on another ship?” Wink said. “But . . . Mr. Raleigh gave you to us, to do all the flying from here on out.”

“He said he was transferring to this ship, Wink. But he’s already here.”

“Actually . . . there I go again. Actually, the bot will stay with you. I’m . . . just borrowing him right now. Sorry if I wasn’t clear. *I* will be joining you. And the bot. In the flesh.”

Jinxie said, “Wait . . . are you somebody else? Somebody controlling the bot right now?”

“Very good! You catch on quick. Yes, allow me to introduce myself. My name is Gina Del Rio. And I’m not going straight home to Diego because you two have a Machro-drive installed on your ship, so . . . I’m going to be getting home a little later than I otherwise would. But, not much later.”

“I know that name,” Jinxie said, staring at the bot wide-eyed. “You’re the Director of the AOJ!”

The bot smiled at them.

Wink said, “Whoa. You’re a woman . . . inside an anatomically correct android?”

Jinxie elbowed him hard in the ribs.

“That’s not the important thing here, Wink! The critical piece of information is, this is the top law enforcement officer in the entire Republic!”

“That’s right,” the bot said. “I am the director of the Agency of Justice. But, more important than that right now . . . I am Gwendolyn’s . . . is she calling herself ‘Wilder?’ I am Gwen Wilder’s mother. And I would like to visit with my daughter. In the flesh. And your Machro-drive equipped ship is going to help me squeeze in this little unauthorized visit to an embargoed planet without missing too much work.”

The bot continued smiling at them as a tractor beam from the space station pulled them into an open slot on the ring.

5.15

Tom popped into existence inside Warehouse 14.

In the far corner of the vast space, the first few bales of hay were already stacked against the wall. As he watched, another one popped into place neatly beside the others.

Haley's car was here, since she had taken the truck to market loaded down with garden tools.

Tom made a mental connection, hoping Haley was still awake and not dozing at her table in the bazaar. She picked up right away.

"Hey, there. How's business?"

"Business is good. I'm not selling as many tools today. I think all the wholesalers got their fill. Only some farmers and others who need rakes and such have bought anything."

"That's okay. We're going to branch out soon. Also, tomorrow you can start selling hay."

"Hay?"

"Yeah. We've got thousands of bales. More than enough to feed . . . I dunno. Hundreds of cows? Horses too. Anyway, can I borrow your car? I need to go visit somebody."

“Oh, gosh. It’s tied to my palm print. I don’t know how to give you access without being there, and I’m in too open a place to disappear right now.”

“Oh, well. No worries. I’ll just have Lisa port me there.”

“Okay. Good luck!”

Tom signed off and turned his attention to the AI.

“Lisa, I need to get out to the fairgrounds on the other side of town. Can you port me someplace I won’t be seen when I appear?”

“Certainly, Thomas.”

He popped away and found himself in the dark, falling.

He yelled and reached out, grabbing the metal rungs of a sewer ladder.

Cursing, he started climbing up to the manhole cover above.

“That was just a bad idea, leaving a mini sensor here,” he muttered. “Never doing it again.”

When he reached the top of the ladder, he gently pushed the metal lid up and peered out. As usual, traffic in this part of town remained light. He pushed harder, moved the cover out of the way, and climbed out onto the street.

“Next time, maybe put me on a roof or something. Okay?”

“Okay, Thomas.”

He grunted and lifted the manhole cover back into place, then turned and headed to the edge of town.

A few people in doorways and some others watching from windows noticed him as he strode down the middle of the street. But again, as last time, they also noted the sidearm strapped to his side and opted to leave him alone.

Minutes later, he stepped out to the fairgrounds. Here, an open green field had booths propped up near the last city buildings, and a variety of sky train cars parked out on the grass.

Tom scanned over the crowd of people, many involved in making deals, until at last he spotted the man he hoped to find.

He walked to where Isidore Montaigne stood, an earnest young woman talking to him.

“But it’s for my family!” the woman said in an imploring tone. “Won’t you consider a discount?”

“Look, lady. I appreciate your concern. I really do. But I don’t run a charity here. The Courthouse barely gives me enough subsidies to carry around their cargo on this planet. The fare to go out that far is twelve hundred credits. Each. There is no bulk discount, I’m sorry.”

Tom felt for the attractive young woman, but he kept his mouth shut, not knowing anything about the situation.

“If I can raise the money . . . when will you be back?”

“That depends on where my passengers want to go, among other things. I’m usually back here every week, though, unless there’s an extraordinary request from a *paying* passenger. Do you think your family would have that kind of money in a week?”

He gave her a skeptical look.

“I . . . I don’t know. Maybe.”

“Alright. Well, I’ll keep an eye out for you next time I return to League City. What did you say your name was again?”

“Morgan. Morgan Fisher.”

“Well, Morgan. You come up with the money, and I will be more than happy to bring you and your family wherever you want to go.”

The young woman nodded, turned and walked back toward the Projects with a downcast head.

Tom’s heart went out to her. He could certainly afford her fare. He made a mental note to try and be here next week, if he could. Perhaps he could fund things . . .

“Southsiders,” Montaigne said with a snort, interrupting Tom’s thoughts. “She’ll never get the money for ten people. Twelve thousand credits? It may as well be twelve million. They should send the breadwinner out there and let him work to pay enough for the others to get to him. But they don’t think that way. It’s an all or nothing deal. Everybody including grandma has to go at the same time.”

He turned and locked eyes with Tom, and his face lit up.

“Hello, Sonny! Fancy meeting you here. Last I saw, I was dropping you off at Little York. How did you get back to League City?”

“Hi, Captain. I, uh, found other ways to get here.”

“That’s okay. My feelings aren’t hurt. You have to use whoever’s train is closest and willing to stop. What can I do for you?”

“I’ve made some business deals lately, and I’m filled with the entrepreneurial spirit at the moment.”

Montaigne grinned, his perfect white teeth flashing through a gray beard.

“Go on.”

“Well, I’ve got a big load of tools. Shovels, rakes, hoes, sledgehammers, axes, that sort of thing. And I’ve kinda saturated the market around here. So, I’d like to pitch them to general stores in the outlying towns.”

Montaigne scratched his beard, his eyes losing focus as he thought it over.

“How much cargo are you asking me to carry?”

“Not that much, really. I’d like to bring one of each thing I have as a sample. That way I can show the merchants what I have to offer, and they can place an order, which I’ll then ship later. Where the, uh, inconvenience to you would come from is, I need you to stick around long enough at each stop for me to make a sale.”

The old man’s eyes lit up, with just a hint of avarice.

“Ah, now we’re talking! Yes, Sonny. That will cost you quite a bit extra. Especially if there’s no set limit on the time you spend at a place. I can’t

wait indefinitely. The world and the Jet Stream wait for no one that long. But . . . I can pause a maximum of three hours at any given stop. If you don't show up at the car by the end of that time, we leave without you and you can find another ride home. If you do show up, we leave as soon as you get back. How does that sound?"

"I think I can do everything I need to within three hours at every stop. What would you charge me for that kind of trip?"

"Four thousand credits."

Tom visibly winced.

Montaigne said, "We would be visiting every settlement of size, every one large enough for a decent general store. Let's see, there's about 30 of them, adding a maximum of 90 hours to the circuit. You probably won't stay the full 3 hours at every stop, I would hope . . . We'd be back here in . . . probably ten days. The extra money would make up for lost business elsewhere."

"That . . . seems fair. If Little York was end of the line for you, and that ran twelve hundred, then you're not charging me *too* much for the delays on a roundtrip transit."

Montaigne beamed at him.

"You really are getting into this entrepreneurial thing. I see you have a good head on your shoulders for money."

"I'll need a private cabin, though. I've got lots of studying to do, and things I want total privacy for. I want to go in there and not be bothered until the next stop."

"Another five hundred credits and it's yours."

"You drive a hard bargain. When do we leave?"

"Six o'clock this afternoon. I might make an exception for such a high paying customer as yourself, if need be. Looks like we're going to be on your schedule the entire circuit anyway."

“Six is fine. That’ll give me time to gather my wares. Here, let me pay in advance.”

“Ah, I knew I liked you, Sonny. You know, when I saved you from those ruffians, I knew in my heart that before me stood a fine, upstanding young man. A future customer, a *paying* passenger, not one of these freeloading, welfare-seeking scrum inhabiting the tenement dwellings around here.”

“Well, ‘the poor will always be with you.’ Can’t be too hard on them,” Tom said, handing over several large tokens.

Montaigne took them and deftly made the money disappear in a side pocket.

“True. But, they don’t need to ride on my train for free. If Hizzoner wants to rid his city of the poor, he can buy them tickets on sky trains to the outer settlements. Since he does not, I remain under the presumption he either does not care, or he wants them to stay here. And I’m fine either way.”

The two men shook hands, and Tom promised to return before 6:00.

5.16

“I guess you could say this is an unscheduled stop.”

Jinxie and Wink wandered down the main concourse for Space Station Gamma Four, following the gently curving walkway and examining all the shops.

Plexiglass and holo displays littered both sides. They had left the entertainment sector, filled with casinos and live shows, then the restaurant sector, filled with all sort of culinary options ranging from cheap street fare to five star establishments with tuxedoed droids ready to serve.

Now they walked through the retail sector, where all sorts of goods from across the galaxy were for sale. No taxes or duties were levied on items sold in the space station, making it a popular place for crews and passengers to load up on things at a discount.

The stores outdid one another in trying to catch the attention of those passing by, with flashing lights, glittering holo signs and multifaceted displays. Colors and scents assaulted the senses, all designed to encourage people to part with their money.

Jinxie seemed immune to it all.

Wink agreed with her assessment of the situation.

“Well, seeing as how we have little say in the matter . . .”

“We had no choice, Wink! I don’t know how she got into the pilot drone’s head, or what she did while she was in there, but as soon as we jumped, he sent us in the wrong direction. I *told* you it was a bad idea to trust Pulsar with a droid pilot. *This* is why you don’t do it. Somebody takes him over remotely and sends us on wild goose chase!”

They walked on in silence, passing clothing retailers, then stores offering the latest personal gadgets.

These shops caught Wink’s interest. A holo on a loop out in front of one store displayed a man using a personal tractor beam to pull in items from a tall shelf out of his reach.

The scene shifted to a closeup of the device, on a wristband that could be activated with the other hand. It showed the man pressing a button and turning it on. The scene panned out and the man aimed his wrist up at the top of the shelf. A little statuette gently slid off the shelf and down into his hands.

The artificial actor turned and smiled at them, the unit still on his wrist.

“It’s good up to three meters!”

The holo looped back to the beginning.

“I could actually use one of those,” Wink said, stopping to watch.

“For 250 credits? Forget it! Keep walking.”

Reluctantly he continued, but he cast an eye over his shoulder as they progressed down the concourse, leaving the gadget stores behind.

At last they came to a series of meeting rooms. In this sector, crews from different ships could meet with station personnel or others. They found Conference Room Five, where Gina asked them to meet her, and the door slid open automatically.

Wink took a seat in one of the brown leather chairs.

Jinxie paced the floor, arms crossed, looking down.

“Will you relax? If she was going to have us arrested, they would have grabbed us when we ported onboard, right after we left the embarkation room. She wouldn’t have us walk all the way here on some pretext of meeting us. There’d be no need.”

Jinxie looked up and sighed.

“You’re right. I’m just nervous, that’s all. We’re not from this system, and . . .”

And we’ve skirted the law numerous times. That was the unspoken part they both knew. But she didn’t say it out loud because both PLAIR and StarCen were notorious for recording public conversations.

The door slid open and a tall woman in her late 40s with short blonde hair walked in. Gina Del Rio, the former Republican Space Marine Sergeant, former secret RNI agent, and current director of AOJ, looked over the two young people before her.

“Thanks for meeting me. Sorry I had to waylay your pilot. But that’s one of the risks you take when you use a drone pilot.”

Jinxie shot an “I told you so” glare at Wink.

He ignored her and said, “Does Captain Raleigh know that you’ve messed with his droid? That one belongs to him, not us.”

Gina shook her head.

“I did not have time to ask him before you left. Our ship had already stopped here, it was our first port of call out from Lute. This is a relatively new outpost. Personally, I think PLAIR picked this solar system for mineral mining because it’s so close to Alliance space. That, and Petra Roe, your home planet, which has always aligned with the League. So, it’s strategic to have a presence here in more ways than one.”

Wink and Jinxie nodded. They could understand political maneuvering, and Gina’s assessment made sense.

“Anyway, it occurred to me that I could hitch a ride on your ship, visit with my daughter for a while and get home again, and do all that faster than

riding the ship I was on straight home. That's the joy of hypertime, right?. I'll spend about four extra months in space and still beat the old ship home."

"You'll be out of contact with work while in hypertime," Wink pointed out. "Not for long, in real time. But you'll be unable to communicate with anybody for four months in time as you experience."

"I know," Gina said with a smile. "I'll consider that a vacation."

"Well . . . the detour here, and an extra trip to Diego and back is certainly an inconvenience for us."

Jinxie shot him a glare, silently imploring him not to upset the powerful policewoman.

But Gina nodded.

"I've done some calculations," she said. "I figure the extra travel for you and the convenience of hypertime for me is probably worth something like 30,000 credits. I'm willing to offer that as fare, if you'll take me."

Wink's eyebrows shot up in surprise.

"We'll take it," Jinxie said quickly.

Then she shot a glance at Wink to see if he approved. Pulsar belonged to him, after all, and he served as Captain. It really wasn't her place to greenlight something like this.

But the offer was very generous.

He nodded and smiled.

"When do you want to come aboard?"

"I need to transfer some luggage and let work know what I'm doing. And my husband. Then I'll port over to Pulsar from the embarkation zone."

"We can help with your luggage," Jinxie said. "We'll take it over now."

They left the conference room and walked out to the ring's main concourse.

“Uh, you two go on ahead,” Wink said. “There’s something I wanted to check out back here in the shops.”

“Don’t buy anything!” Jinxie called out as he walked away.

Wink raised his hand to wave goodbye and disappeared in the crowd.

5.17

Days passed aboard the Pulsar in hypertime.

True to her word, Gina seemed to thoroughly enjoy being out of touch with the rest of the galaxy. She took the copious spare time to catch up on shows she had missed. She also felt determined to tackle some classic literature she had always been meaning to read through.

On the sixth day, eating with Wink and Jinxie in the mess, she confided to them both with a weary look on her face.

“I can’t finish *War and Peace*. I tried. I just can’t.”

Jinxie nodded sympathetically.

Wink frowned and said, “What is that? A show? Quit elbowing me in the ribs! I’m serious. What is that?”

She remained very polite to her young hosts, recalling perhaps the time when she was their age. At first they all remained very stiff, and conversations were awkward. But after a few days everybody loosened up around one another.

Wink was most interested in the war, and when he found out Gina was a veteran, he tried to glean as much firsthand knowledge from her as he could.

“So, you were a Space Marine? That is so awesome! I’ve always admired them, even though they were Republican, you know? Petra Roe has always been aligned with the League, and we were taught to put down the Republican forces. But the Space Marines were awesome!”

Gina nodded, smiling.

“Yes, we were. The battles between ships were like a giant game of chess, with pieces disappearing off the board, all taking place in a matter of seconds. That was between the two AIs, StarCen and PLAIR. Then when it was all over, if we won, the Marines would go down to the planet and the real fighting began.”

Jinxie shuddered, unable to share the enthusiasm Wink felt.

Gina continued, either not noticing or ignoring her.

“The League was involved in all sorts of nefarious things in those days. They ran questionable experiments dealing with things like trying to augment humans to teleport without outside assistance. Anyway, there was a freak accident, and I ended up gaining some abilities to manipulate electronics at a distance. So, I can do things like this . . .”

Her eyes blanked out. The droid pilot walked into the mess and waved at them. Then he danced in place for a moment before stopping and spreading his arms out wide.

“Ta-dah!”

“Whoa.”

Gina’s eyes cleared and she looked up at them, smiling.

The droid blinked, his arms coming down slowly to his sides again. He turned and left the mess.

“I bet that comes in handy,” Jinxie said.

“Yes, it has helped tremendously over the years. Mostly it’s a secret. But you two saw it when I waylaid your ship by hijacking that bot.”

Wink said, “Space Marines are so awesome!”

“Thanks. It didn’t feel awesome at the time, during the war. Once a planet was secured, we often had to keep a force in place as boots on the ground before an election. Then the people could decide if they wanted to remain under a socialist dictatorship, or join a representative democracy. As far as I know, all former League territories we conquered voted to join the Republic.”

“Did they really have a choice, though?” Jinxie said. “I mean, they were kind of voting with a gun to their head, you know?”

“I don’t think your planet is truly autocratic like some of the major League planets were. A socialist dictatorship looks completely different than what you’re used to. There is no freedom. You cannot say anything out of line without fear of torture and death. And the government decides what’s acceptable, sometimes going back after the fact and changing the rules on people. It’s horrible, and no one should live under an oppressive system like that. But you have to truly be in it to appreciate how bad it is. Or, clean up the aftermath like we did.”

Wink, who felt he had more of an open mind than Jinxie, nodded sympathetically this time.

Gina continued.

“The people who voted during and shortly after the war on those planets are all too aware of how bad totalitarianism is. Their descendants born after will slowly forget, especially as their parents and grandparents die off. So, the cycle will probably begin again. Because socialism, the part where government takes money from those who have it and gives it over to those who do not, can be very attractive to the poor. Who doesn’t like free money?”

“I don’t know about that,” Jinxie said. “If that’s true, if it’s so attractive, why haven’t any of the original Republican planets ever voted to adopt a more restrictive government? I know you guys have socialists running for office. They even win seats in your parliament every now and then. But they’ve never been able to form a ruling coalition.”

“You know our history well,” Gina said in an approving tone. “I don’t know. I guess our conservative and libertarian politicians, the two parties

who normally form the leading coalitions in our government, are very good at politicking. That, and the people have grown used to minimal interference from Octavia. Politicians seeking to gain more power are frowned upon.”

“I’m just saying. A hundred and fifty years of elections, all going the same way . . . You’d think people would at least want to try tighter government control at some point.”

Gina shrugged.

“We’re just blessed, I guess. We never had to suffer through something like Tetrarch Thrall or his pet robot taking over and killing everybody. I will say that before and during the Welfare Wars, our Parliament trended more to the left. After that disaster, the idea of handing out free money pretty much died in the crib. Everybody saw the results, and it killed the notion for at least a generation.”

“But you’ve got to have *some* rules.”

“Oh, we have rules and regulations, alright. They’re just not very oppressive. They’re light. The guiding ethos for the Republic is to generally let people do what they want to do without excessive government oversight. So you can start a business without a lot of paperwork, or licenses or clearances. Or bribes.”

Wink winced. Bribes were an issue on Petra Roe.

Jinxie pressed the issue.

“What if people want even fewer restrictions? What if they want to get out of almost all controls?”

“If they really want to get away from it all, they can go out and help settle a frontier planet. Like my daughter did.”

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At long last, Pulsar made its final jump into the orbit of Phaethon and reappeared in normal time.

“Only a few hours has passed for everybody else,” Wink said over his shoulder to Gina as she walked onto the bridge.

“That’s really weird. I see now why Chris gave you two the bot. If you do this too many times, you’ll catch up to me in age.”

The droid in question did not respond to the conversation. He sat in the pilot’s chair with Jinxie hovering over his shoulder, watching nervously.

The coordinates to Tom’s farm appeared hovering in the front holo. Jinxie did not say a word, but she watched the droid carefully as he aimed the ship’s nose down into the atmosphere at an angle.

“Are we going to show up as a blip in their planetary control office? How do you avoid detection?”

“Most planets ignore their poles,” Wink said. “So, we start out there. Phaethon Orbital Control has never seen us come in.”

The ship hit the outer atmosphere and trembled as it met resistance. The vibrations continued as a red haze lit up the front holo. Below, featureless brown dust hid the planet’s surface from view.

Then they broke through the haze. The vibrations eased up and the red nimbus around the edges disappeared. Below them, green fields whizzed past.

“Here we go, landing soon.”

The pilot slowed the ship as their coordinate numbers approached the farm’s. They dropped lower to the surface, coming in at a gentle angle.

At last, he brought the ship to a complete stop, 100 meters up. Adjusting the controls, he brought them down vertically.

Pulsar landed gently, a slight thunk sounding through her hull as her feet pressed down on the ground.

“Well, we made it,” Wink said. “Welcome to Phaethon. It’s about four in the afternoon, local time. We’re kinda late. We were supposed to show up this morning after breakfast. All that time we spent on the space station counted against us. But no big deal, we’re here.”

“We’re home,” Jinxie said with a smile.

“That’s right. We’ve actually got a house now, on some land of our own. Come on, we can go down the cargo ramp. That’s the easiest way to get out.”

Gina followed the couple to the ship’s stern, where the massive cargo ramp opened to a field of green grass and a dusty brown sky. She walked down the ramp and set foot on Phaethon soil for the first time.

A screen door banged several meters away, and the trio turned to look. Tom and Gwen walked out of their house, walking down the short set of steps to their back porch.

Gwen stopped and shaded her eyes with one hand, staring toward the people who just exited the spaceship.

Across the distance, they could hear her spit out a long stream of profanity.

5.18

“**W**hat, I can’t come visit my daughter? My one and only child? What kind of mother do you think I am? Why did you come out here to the middle of nowhere anyway? I had to pull a lot of strings to get here, I’ll have you know.”

Several meters away Wink and Jinxie stood with Tom, watching the confrontation between mother and daughter.

“You know,” Jinxie said, her eyes never leaving the pair as they argued, “she may have been one heck of a Space Marine sergeant. And she’s obviously good at her current job since she’s held it ever since the war ended. But I don’t think she knows how to mother very well.”

“Well, maybe there’s tradeoffs you get. A good warrior may not be the best mom.”

Jinxie turned and glared at Wink.

“Are you saying a woman can’t do both? Are you saying we can’t be a good soldier *and* a good mom?”

Wink raised his hands in surrender, unsure how he had walked unwittingly into what now appeared to be a verbal trap.

“I’m just saying maybe *she* can’t do both. I’m not painting with a broad brush, here.”

“I think there’s a long history here that we don’t know much about,” Tom said beside the couple. “And I suspect both are unloading a couple years’ worth of suppressed emotions right now. They haven’t seen each other in a while.”

Gwen started yelling.

“Because I wanted to! Okay? I wanted to get away from *you*, Mom! You and your surveillance state!”

“My surveillance state? Sweetie, you were only watched over the same as anybody in Octavia.”

“That’s bogus, okay? I know for a fact you asked PLAIR to keep an eye on me. You knew every single thing I did, every minute of the day. You knew where I was, and what I was doing.”

“Sweetie, if I kept an eye on you, it’s because I care about you. You have no idea some of the people I have helped put behind bars. They would love to hurt me by coming after you and your father and anyone else I love.”

“You know,” Tom said, “this is getting kinda personal.”

Jinxie nodded and said, “For sure. I’m getting uncomfortable.”

“Let’s go unload your ship.”

-+-

By the time all the cargo was out of Pulsar, the mother-daughter spat died down.

Tom stood scratching his head, staring at two new AI cores the size of small houses. They rested on the grass at the bottom of the ship’s ramp.

“Supposedly, they’re the latest thing. Mr. Raleigh . . . uh, your Dad? . . . he told me that things have progressed on the way these cores look from the

old days. He says they're smaller and more powerful now than they used to be."

"They still look pretty big to me. I'm trying to figure out where we're going to put them."

"I'll place one in the mine cavern, near the location of my existing primary core, Thomas."

"Oh. Okay, Lisa. Do you need any help hooking it up?"

"No."

One of the cores popped away with loud inrush of air.

"Well, that was quick," Jinxie said.

"Lisa says she can hook it up herself. I'll have to find a place for the second one. Dad suggested League City would be good. Next time I'm over there, I'll drop off some of the new MicaBots and ask their CPU to find a good spot for her."

"Do you think it'll be okay out here in the open?"

"That's a good point. Lisa? Could you please stash the second brain somewhere until we find a spot for it?"

The other core popped away.

Wink said, "Where do you think she put it?"

"Probably in the mining complex. It's got our best storage spaces. In fact, I think part of it is being used for our excess hay right now. Good thing it's dry, though. In my experience, most underground caves and such are wet. But out in the desert, I guess that's not necessarily the case."

"This whole planet's too dry, if you ask me," Jinxie said.

"You're getting a little bit of a skewed picture this close to the desert," Tom said. "The lack of direct sunlight most of the time takes more getting used to, in my opinion."

Wink said, "I don't mind it. I'm not a big fan of too much sunlight."

“Me, too. I burn easy.”

“That’s because you’re blond and fair skinned,” Jinxie said.

“Let’s see if we can talk those two into an early supper. Lisa, please port the new MicaBots and your new sensors into the barn. I’ll be needing them soon.”

The rest of the cargo sitting on the grass disappeared with a pop.

-+-

Inside Tom and Gwen’s house, over the dinner table, the argument with Gina had died down considerably. Both women looked like they had made peace with the other. Everyone sat in silence, eating heated trays of poshbirds.

Gina broke the silence.

“Do you eat like this all the time? From trays? Do you make any meals from scratch? You’re growing a garden, right? That is a garden I saw out there, isn’t it?”

“No, Mom, we don’t eat like this all the time. Sometimes we have Lisa port us into League City and we go out to a restaurant.”

“But . . . don’t you make anything from, I don’t know . . . raw ingredients?”

Gwen stared down at her tray.

“I don’t know how to do that. Nobody ever taught me because they were busy at work.”

“Well, it’s easy to learn. Maybe I can show you now.”

Jinxie decided she felt comfortable enough to engage in the conversation.

“Do you make a lot of meals back home, Gina?”

The older woman glanced at her.

“No. Gwendolyn’s right, I work a lot and . . . we mostly have stuff delivered. But I can at least whip up some basics. I’ve done that before.”

Gwen took a bite of her poshbird, but contributed nothing more to the discussion.

“Has anything grown out of your garden yet?”

Tom said, “No. Some beans have sprouted. A few other green shoots have come up. When the chickens get older and the garden starts producing, then we’ll have some real home-grown ingredients. Right now, it’s just easier to eat the ready meals. They’re pretty good, so long as you don’t get tired of the same thing over time.”

“That’s what restaurants in League City are for,” Gwen mumbled.

Gina pushed back her tray and wiped her lips.

“Well, I’ll be staying for a few days. Do you have a spare bedroom? Somewhere to put me up?”

“Absolutely,” Tom said while Gwen continued staring at her plate.

“And I would love to have a tour of your place. All this surrounding land is yours? I’d like to see it.”

“I think we can arrange that. I’ve got something to do in town here in a little bit, but I’m sure Gwen wouldn’t mind giving you a tour.”

Gwen looked up with a smile, suddenly.

She said, “Not at all. Have you ever been on a horse, Mother?”

5.19

T rue to his word, Tom showed back up at the fairgrounds at 6:00 pm sharp.

He found in the marketplace a flat floating dolly, and a vertical tool rack. He loaded the rack on the platform, and placed one of each longer tool there. It looked for all the world like a floating hardware store display.

For the shorter hammers and hand axes, he simply piled them on the bottom of the platform. He could not find a neater way to organize things, and figured the shopkeepers he would be pitching these to could sort through the goods easily enough.

The primary mission for this trip, of course, was to set up new sensors for Lisa and release the new MicaBots near all the major settlements. But, to ensure he actually made some money in case he was unsuccessful in unloading his garden and construction tools somewhere, he also brought along a batch of the most common power pack sizes, all freshly charged from the SCUs on his star farm.

Once he got the sensors in place, Lisa would be able to tell him which towns were most in danger of their building units running out of power. Once he knew that, he could target those settlements at or near the time they would most need power.

And that should prove even more lucrative, he thought.

Although of course, he would maintain fair pricing even in the event of extreme need. The price for a building-level power pack would remain consistent before, during and after any shortage.

“Nothing generates ill will faster than price gouging in a disaster,” his father once said, in one of their many discussions about running a store when Tom was younger.

“Shopkeepers will say, ‘I didn’t want to run out,’ or they’ll mention something about supply and demand. Then their place gets sacked by looters and they don’t know why. No, son. If there’s a disaster, you continue selling your supplies, especially if it’s food or something else desperately needed, at the same price. If you sell out, you sell out. Then put a sign up on the door that says you’re out. People might be mad, but they won’t be angry that you charged five times what it’s normally worth. You might ration it, letting only one person buy one item, and no one will begrudge that. But if you can afford it, just give your inventory away, especially foodstuff. That will generate a lot of goodwill in the community. If you do that, do it early in the disaster. You don’t want to start a riot when people are desperate.”

No, he thought to himself, his price for building-level power packs would remain consistent. Tom figured there were thousands of buildings low on power, and the money would be flowing in regardless.

“This is gonna be fun,” he said to Gwen before he left. “It’s going to be a lot of work, but I’ll enjoy seeing all the big cities around this world.”

“Well, prepare yourself for disappointment,” she said. “There are no cities, other than League City. Everything else is smaller. More like villages. Towns at most.”

Nonetheless, he remained positive as Haley parked the flatbed truck near the fairgrounds. He got out and activated the floating platform in back, and pulled off his tool rack. He had thrown a suitcase on it as well, to add to the illusion that he would be traveling with the Jet Stream the whole way.

“Is your ride still here? There are cars from like, three different sky trains out here.”

“Yeah. That old guy charges exorbitant fares, but he’s very good to paying passengers. He’ll be one of the ones out there. I paid him in advance.”

“So, you’re not actually going to stay onboard the whole time? You’re coming back?”

“Shh. Let’s not say that part out loud, Haley.”

“Oh! Sorry.”

They said their goodbyes, and Tom pushed the floating cart between some vendor booths and out into the open field where the sky train cars sat waiting.

“There he is!” Montaigne yelled. “And right on time! Load up your stuff in the cargo car, Sonny, and let’s depart.”

Moments later, they secured his floating platform and luggage in a car loaded with boxes, shipping cartons, and one heavily sedated horse. Tom left his suitcase in there too, planning to retrieve it after the train got underway.

“Let’s go! All aboard! Climb into the passenger car, Sonny!”

Tom joined Montaigne in the car. Only one other passenger was there, and one of Montaigne’s crew members who doubled as a bodyguard.

When they strapped in, Montaigne adjusted the controls. The door slid closed and three connected cars lifted off simultaneously. A holo showed the outside view. The fairgrounds rapidly dwindled away as they kept going up.

Soon they gained the proper altitude, rising to join the sky train floating in the sky above League City. The docking sequence commenced, and cars broke apart to let in the returning ones. Everything sealed back together and lights on both sides of the passenger car turned green before the doors slid open.

“Welcome back, Sonny!” Montaigne said, approaching as Tom unstrapped himself from the seat. “Let me show you to your cabin.”

As they walked through the train, Tom noticed far fewer people out and about. He mentioned it to Montaigne.

“I’m glad you came along with your sales run, Sonny. Paying passengers have become scarce with the embargo. Before, fresh immigrants would step off their ships and eventually make their way out to the settlements, because that’s where all the homesteads are still available. But we haven’t seen an immigrant ship in a while, now. Or any ship, except for the Cole. I think yours was the last one. Or one of the last ones. And with this embargo, things are tightening up. Folks who’ve been in League City for a while and were thinking about claiming a homestead are sitting tight. That leaves me stuck with mostly cargo, most of it subsidized by the Courthouse to get supplies delivered. But paying passengers are the best, and I need more of them. So, long story short, that’s why I was glad to entertain your offer. Here’s your cabin.”

They entered a car for what Tom figured was reserved for the equivalent of first class passengers. Three doors on either side of the hallway stood closed. Montaigne pressed the panel on the first one and some holo buttons appeared. He swished a finger through three of them and took his hand away.

“There you go, Sonny. Press your palm there and the door will register you.”

Tom dutifully pressed his hand against the panel. It lit up in green and the door swished open.

The room was quite spacious, and bigger than the last one he used in Jet Stream. A queen-size bed fit in one corner, with a desk and chair in another. A small but comfortable-looking sofa sat along the wall next to the door. Another door on the other side of the desk led to a private bathroom.

In all, it looked like a moderately priced hotel room. Tom thought it might be the biggest room on the train.

“See you for supper in the dining car?”

“Thanks, but I’ve already eaten. When’s our first stop?”

“In a couple hours, actually. New Galveston. Second biggest city on the planet. You reckon the stores selling your goods will be open?”

“I don’t know. I’ll probably use the whole three hours just looking around, though, either way.”

“Suit yourself, Sonny. I’ll see you when we stop.”

Tom walked into the room and sat down on the bed as the door closed. Then he got up and locked it.

“Okay, Lisa. Please notify me when the train nears New Galveston.”

“Will do, Thomas.”

“Good.”

He stood up.

“Take me home.”

Tom popped away.

5.20

Haley parked the truck back in Warehouse 14, edging it just past her car.

Considerably less space remained in the warehouse, now that square hay bales were stacked up to the ceiling. Only a narrow corridor from the big sliding door in front to the restroom module and her cot in the back remained open.

Haley parked near the front and climbed out, slamming the truck's door. She wrinkled her nose at the smell of dried grass assaulting her senses.

"Okay, Lisa. Load me up."

Lisa ported 380 bales in the warehouse to the back of the truck, stacked neatly. Haley tossed a smart strap over the top, and it tightened up, firmly securing the load.

She repeated that procedure three more times, making sure the hay would not fall off in transit. Then she headed for the restroom unit's shower to get ready for another evening with Ash.

She found herself wanting to look her best for him, and struggled too long with her hair. When she realized she was going to be late, she abandoned the idea of driving to the restaurant. Instead, she asked Lisa to port her there.

Seconds later, she appeared in an alley with a pop. Looking both ways, she saw nobody. Haley walked out to the street, now bathed in artificial light as nighttime fell.

Ash wanted to try yet another new place. New to him, at least. This restaurant was a small mom and pop outfit set up a few blocks off Commerce Boulevard. It catered mostly to locals who knew of its existence, missing out on the many out-of-towners who frequented the marketplace.

The elderly couple who owned it eschewed advertising, relying solely on word-of-mouth from previous customers. Intentionally or not, this resulted in an air of exclusivity about the place, although they were not snooty like the staff at Arthurus.

Ash found out about it by persistently questioning everyone he met regarding their favorite food and where they procured it. He asked about favorite restaurants and any other culinary tidbits they wanted to share with him.

He had a list of places to try, and Haley suspected it may take a while for him to visit every new place before he circled around and tried one he liked a second time.

This one was called ‘Shrouded Sun Inn.’

Haley had never heard of it.

She found the place easily enough, though, with help from Lisa. The restaurant was in an unmarked ground floor apartment. The front living room had been converted to a seating area for dining.

Ash, of course, was already there. He sat in the middle of the room at one of only four small tables.

He stood up and smiled when she walked in.

“There you are! I’m glad you found it. It took me a while, primarily because there’s no sign out front. I had to ask three people. How did you get here?”

“I, uh, asked somebody too.”

“They don’t have menus. You eat whatever they’re cooking for the night.”

“Oh. Okay. I hope it’s good.”

They sat down and the elderly husband of the marital team running the place came out to greet them.

He cleared his throat and said, “Tonight my wife is making rack of lamb. We will have sides of lumpy mashed potatoes, brussels sprouts with butter sauce, and roasted yams in olive oil. Dessert consists of her homemade peach cobbler. I hope you enjoy. We have water to drink, or hot tea. Our wine for tonight is from Alief.”

Ash rubbed his hands together and smiled.

“I’d love to try the wine. From what I understand, very few places serve Alief vintages. And I take it the lamb was grown on Phaethon?”

“Of course, sir. The only thing imported will be the peaches. They are from Pearl. Without further shipments, her famous peach cobbler will soon be in far more limited production, I fear.”

“We’re looking forward to the meal. Especially that wine. Thank you.”

The old man retreated into the kitchen.

Haley smiled at Ash. He reminded her of a kid in the proverbial candy store, eager to try everything he could eat on this planet.

“So . . . did you file any reports for the Zeitung today?”

He shook his head.

“Nope. Nothing much has happened around here, honestly. Although there was that one poor guy who got murdered around lunch.”

“What?”

“I think it was before lunch. A prominent merchant again, just like the one we found last night. Evidently he was lured into an alley and bonked on the head again, just like that one. Almost certainly it was the same guy. Somebody is targeting merchants.”

Haley glared down at the table as the old man returned with their waters on a tray and a bottle of wine under one arm.

He set everything down and opened the bottle with a fancy corkscrew that sucked it out of the bottle's neck using a mini-tractor beam. Then he poured a small sample in Ash's glass.

Ash swirled the liquid around, examining it critically in the light. He sniffed it, then took a small sip.

"You know, I think that's the best Phaethonian wine I've ever tasted."

The old man smiled and said, "Alief has fine soils and climate, sir."

He topped off Ash's glass and filled Haley's too, then exited to the kitchen again.

They finished eating around 8:30. Ash thanked the old fellow profusely and asked him to pass his compliments on to his wife. He offered to mention them in his next story.

"We do okay, Mr. Thallus. If you told everyone about us, we might be overwhelmed with too many customers."

Ash noted he did not ask specifically to keep him out of the story, though.

They shook hands, and Ash held the door open for Haley. They walked toward Commerce Boulevard, weaving in and out of pools of lamplight.

When they reached the busier intersection, Ash turned to Haley and smiled.

"It's kinda early, still. Want to visit a bar or do something else?"

She smiled politely.

"No, I've got to get up early in the morning. We received a load of hay at the warehouse, and I've got to figure out where to set up in order to sell it. I won't be at my usual tables. I'll have to go out into the open agricultural sales area to set up. So, thanks but no. I should be going."

"Okay. I've got a new series to catch up on, anyway. Well, new to me. It's called Moon Love. Really interesting show."

They parted ways.

Haley watched his back as he disappeared in the evening pedestrian traffic, headed to his hotel.

She wandered down a dark alley and looked in both directions with her enhanced sight.

Seeing no one, she said, “Okay, Lisa. Suit me up and port me to the roof.”

5.21

Merchants guarding the rooftops were few and far between tonight. Haley spotted two. One of them had fallen asleep, propped up against the stairwell door with his head slumped over.

She might have thought he was dead, but her enhanced hearing picked up a gentle snoring so she did not worry too much about him.

Unlike the time Haley was spotted on a rooftop not long ago, and unlike the immediate aftermath of the Southsider riots, few merchants were now willing to sacrifice their evening hours for guard duty. Trouble had died down, and other than some random muggings no one seemed intent on ransacking their businesses.

So, rooftop guard duty remained light.

Still, Haley exercised caution. She squatted near the corner of her current perch and peeked over the edge, watching the sidewalk below and the alley emptying out to the street.

Pedestrians strolled below, oblivious to any threats or the clandestine overwatch.

“Lisa? Could you monitor *all* the alleys between here and the bazaar, please? Let me know if anyone is lurking there. I want to try and prevent any muggings before they happen this time.”

“Will do, Haley.”

She waited, sighing behind her mask.

This is typical law enforcement work, she thought. You spend hours waiting on something to happen. Stakeouts, investigations, questionings, waiting, watching. Those are the true time sinks for cops. It isn't all action and adventure like you see in the holos.

“And they never tell you that when they're recruiting,” she said to herself. “I know that from experience.”

Lisa interrupted her thoughts.

“Haley, I see three men who have entered an alley two blocks over. They are being sneaky as they approach Commerce Boulevard in the dark, and acting very suspicious.”

Haley stood up and said, “Thanks, Lisa. Can you port me to a rooftop near them, please?”

She popped away and reappeared on another rooftop. A quick scan of the nearby area showed that she had the upper floors to herself. No one stood guard over here.

Carefully, she approached the ledge at the corner and bent over, looking down into the darkness below. Her enhanced senses picked out the three men. They stood against the wall of the alley, watching the sidewalk.

A couple walked by, arguing.

Then a group of six businessmen passed, deep in conversation. They all wore suits and ties, though none carried briefcases. The hidden trio let them walk on unperturbed, probably concerned they were outnumbered, Haley thought.

Finally, a lone merchant walked down the sidewalk, approaching the alleyway.

Haley could pick out the merchants now, after spending time with them at the bazaar. The local ones all dressed the same. They often wore nice

clothes, although usually not business attire. Their pants were brown or gray, and their shirts were high quality solids.

Farmers or those selling to farmers often wore jeans and plaid shirts, so the merchants who owned shops or rented booths from the city stood out. Not farmers. Not businessmen. Haley thought their attire comprised an informal uniform, or at least a dress code of sorts.

The men in the alley tensed. The merchant did not notice them. He walked too close to the building walls, Haley thought. He would pass right by the alley, within a meter or so of the men waiting for him in the dark . . .

“Lisa I need you to do a short range port before I go splat on the sidewalk. Can you handle that?”

“I can indeed, Haley.”

She stepped out, swinging a leg over the ledge and pulling down, letting her wall climbers stick to the building’s façade. Then she hoisted the rest of herself over and treaded softly down the wall, coming in right on top of the three men.

The merchant passed the alley.

The thug closest to the street pulled out a gun. He took a step forward and shoved it into the man’s belly.

“Hands up. Get back here.”

The other two stepped out and grabbed the merchant’s shoulders. They pulled him into the shadows.

Haley was three stories up when everyone moved. She jumped and sailed down, arms stretched out like a diver.

Her body slammed into the gunman, knocking the other two back into the alley. The merchant lost his balance and stumbled backward, landing on his rear and sitting down hard on the sidewalk.

Haley’s momentum carried her down and over to the cement. Just before she hit, Lisa ported her away, arresting her fall and placing her back on the roof. She landed softly from mere centimeters up.

“Oof! Thanks Lisa.”

She stood up and peered over the edge again.

“Get me back down there. Put me behind the other two.”

Haley popped away again, appearing behind the two thugs still standing. She tapped on one of their shoulders and both turned around at the same time.

The power in her braces fired up as she slugged the one on the left. Her right hand connected with his jaw and cracked it, shoving it back deep into his brain.

He went down in a heap.

The other one stumbled back, tripping over the body of the gunman she dropped. He fell backward but managed to cushion his fall. Then he looked to his right and saw the gun on the sidewalk.

He lunged for it.

Haley retreated to the darkness of the alley. She turned and ran, making a hasty retreat.

The thug sat up, squeezing the trigger. He shot blind, bolts flying. Red flashes lit up the alley like a strobe light, punctuating her dark shape as she ran away.

Haley found herself wishing she had Tom’s sand dragon armor as one of the bolts zipped by her side dangerously close.

“Lisa?”

A pop, and she found herself running on the roof.

Haley stopped and caught her breath.

The shooting continued down below, lighting up the dark alley between this building and the next.

She frowned.

“Lisa, port me in two meters above him.”

She braced herself and held her arms out.

A pop, and she fell in the darkness on top of the gunman.

He screamed as she landed on him, his knees buckling with the sudden unexpected weight.

They slammed into the concrete with Haley on top.

She lifted the man’s head up by the back of his hair and slammed it into the pavement with the full force of her enhanced bracers.

His skull cracked, and he stopped moving.

Sighing, she stood up and looked for the merchant out on the sidewalk. But he had long since fled the scene.

Glancing around some more, she picked up the gun and slid it into the back of her belt.

She debated looting the corpses, but in the distance she could hear a siren.

One of the few deputies on call must have been alerted. Maybe the merchant had been able to call for help.

Haley turned and retreated further into the alley, where the darkness would cover her escape.

Halfway in, she stopped.

“Lisa, take me back to the warehouse, please.”

With a final pop, she disappeared just as the flashing blue lights from a squad car lit up the alley.

5.22

Gwen snickered at her mother's discomfort.

The sun dipped behind the mountains.

Even though it was late afternoon, plenty of light remained for them to ride around and look at things. So Gwen whistled for Bessie, and the other horses came racing into the corral with her.

She saddled up Bessie and Tom's horse, then watched in some amusement as Gina awkwardly mounted up.

They rode out the corral and across the bridge, hooves tapping out a rhythm on wooden planks. Then they continued up the path that would eventually lead to Little York many clicks away.

But first it would bring them to Silas and Lola's house, the sawmill and Gwen's homestead, along with a thousand or so trees tapped for sap. Gwen decided to show her mother this, first.

Gina had obviously never before been on a horse.

Her daughter, on the other hand, had two years of practice under her belt. It was a rare moment where the daughter outshone her mother.

Gwen wanted to savor it for as long as possible . . .

Gina was a big woman, taller than most. If horses could display expressions, Gwen thought, Tom's would probably be morose. But Lucas, like most equines, endured disgraces silently. He carried the former Marine sergeant without complaint.

Gwen stopped on the other side of the bridge and waited for her mother to catch up.

"The great Gina Wilcox Del Rio, director of the Agency of Justice, has never sat in a saddle before today."

Gina straightened her back and held herself with whatever dignity she could muster. But her hands gripped the reins so tight her fingers looked white, betraying strong trepidation.

The stirrups were let out, since she was taller than Tom, but not far enough. So her knees knocked awkwardly against Lucas's sides with every step he took. When she came even with Bessie, Gwen urged her horse on again, smiling, and they proceeded together.

"The Apostle Paul said we all have different roles to play. Some serve as hands or eyes or feet, but all serve the same church regardless of their functions in life. I put bad guys in jail. Other people ride horses around on wild planets. So, no. I am not competent in all things, Gwendolyn. And that's okay."

Gwen smiled again at her mother, genuinely pleased with this turn of events. In her mind, watching her mother's discomfort made up for everything surrounding this surprise visit.

"I know that different people have different roles in life. It's just . . . I've never seen you incompetent at anything before this, Mom. I mean, literally everything I've ever seen you do, you've been great at. Except *this*. It's wonderful to see."

Gina did not dignify this statement with a reply. Instead, she concentrated on maintaining her balance atop the horse, swaying to either side as Lucas walked.

Gwen said. "You might need some painkillers before it's all over with. I think you're gonna be really saddle-sore tonight."

Minutes later they rode past Silas's place.

"Who lives here?"

"Our farm hand and his wife."

"Are we going to stop and say hi? I'd like to meet them."

"No. They're probably boinking."

"What?"

"Never mind. They're newlyweds and very amorous. They need privacy, although they have a thing for doing it outdoors, for some reason. One with nature or something. Best to just . . . leave them alone. If you arrive unannounced, you'll probably be interrupting something."

"Okay."

Gina looked over her shoulder as they passed the house while headed toward the woods, thinking.

"Are you and Tom going to . . . you know?"

"We're not boinking, Mom, if that's what you're asking. You saw that we have separate rooms."

"Not that! I mean . . . are you two going to get married anytime soon?"

Gwen pulled her horse to a halt and let Lucas catch up to Bessie.

"Is that why you came all the way out here? To check on me and see if I was planning on getting married?"

"No! Well . . . yes."

"Great. Wonderful."

"I do care about you, Gwendolyn. I know you don't believe that, but it's true. And I saw a rare opportunity to fly out here on a hypertime ship that is bypassing the embargo. I don't know if and when I can get away long enough to take a regular ship and come see you. And I don't know when the

politics are going to ease up and allow us to travel again to Phaethon. All three major AIs seem to be working in concert on this, for some reason.”

She looked Gwen in the eyes and smiled from her awkward perch on the saddle.

“So, yes. I did bend some rules when I saw a golden opportunity to come visit my daughter and get away with it.”

“And the marriage thing? What’s that about?”

“I care about that, too, Gwendolyn. I want to see you get married. I want you to be happy. I know you don’t *have* to get married to be happy. But most people do, eventually, find their partner. And have kids. I did, although it was later in life and after the war, and your father and I were older when we met. But I eventually got married, and we had you, and I’m happy. Everybody wants that for their daughter, too. Or at least, they should. If they don’t, something’s wrong with them.”

Gwen frowned with a speculative look on her face.

“Would *you* be happy? Even if I get married to Christopher Raleigh and Jillian Thrall’s son, Mom? Heir to the biggest pirate fortune in the galaxy? How will that sit with folks back home, the AOJ director’s daughter marrying the son of a famous pirate?”

“I worked with Chris and Jillian in the war, when I was in RNI. They’re good people. Yes, they have the ‘pirate’ label. But those so-called pirates helped us win the war. Directly. We literally could not have done it without their help. I know, because I was there, even if most of it is still classified. So when people ask . . . I will be proud to say who my daughter married, if you marry him.”

Gwen smiled at her mother then, and felt a bit of the frost between them thaw.

She realized this was something she had been worrying about.

Gina smiled back.

Then her mother's smile dropped and she said, "*Are* you going to marry him? Has he asked you yet?"

"No, Mom. He has not. Come on, let me show you the sap trees we're making syrup with."

"But would you say yes if he asked?"

"Come on, Mom. They're this way."

Gwen squeezed Bessie's sides and they started moving again. Lucas followed.

"At least you'd know he's not marrying you for your money. He's richer than we are, by far."

"The trees, Mom! Focus on the trees!"

5.23

When Tom popped back to the house, no one was home. He walked outside to the front porch. The sun was low in the sky, and the chime went off inside the CC 1000.

Robert herded the chicks in, and they attacked the corn scattered by the coop's automatic feeder with zeal. The door slid shut behind them and the slats closed, securing the poultry inside. Then the coop's force dome came on, providing another layer of protection.

He noticed the corral gate was closed, and he saw some horses inside. In the distance, he could see two more coming down the trail and headed for the bridge.

"Lisa, are all the horses in?"

"All your animals are secure and accounted for, Thomas, except the two Gwendolyn and Gina are riding."

"Ah, good. She must have taken Mrs. Del Rio for a ride around the place. Alright . . . Lisa? What am I going to need for this upcoming visit to New Galveston? More of your sensors. The new kind, not the mini sensors. And, I guess, a bunch of MicaBot army ants."

"That is correct."

“So tell me. Do you think anyplace will be open by the time we get there tonight?”

“No, I do not. Jet Stream will arrive long after shops normally close.”

“Yeah, that’s what I thought. I don’t think I’ll bring the sample tools with me. I’ll just go and plant your sensors and the MicaBots.”

“I would appreciate that, Thomas.”

“How’re your new brains coming along?”

“My primary core will be online later tonight, in an undisclosed location underground. My secondary is not in place yet. I have teleported a thousand MicaBots to League City, to scope out sewers, basements and geological strata for an appropriate location. When they find one, they will commence preparing it for me. When that is done, I will teleport the secondary core into place and connect it to my network.”

“Good, good. Alright then. Let me go get ready for tonight.”

-+-

The Jet Stream slowed and came to a halt, engines holding her in place a kilometer high in the sky.

Below, on the passenger car holo, lights from a city twinkled and a dark ocean stretched to the horizon.

Isadore Montaigne rapped on Tom’s door.

“Mr. Savage? We’ve arrived at New Galveston, our first stop.”

He heard a muffled *pop!*, making him furrow his brows. But then the door swished open and he forgot about it.

Tom hoisted a backpack over one shoulder and stepped out into the hall.

“I’m ready.”

“Will you be taking your samples down with you?”

“No, I don’t think any stores are open at this hour. If it’s okay with you, I’d like to go scope things out anyway. Maybe pick out some stores I can approach later, next time I’m in town.”

“Suit yourself. You’ve already paid your fare. We won’t leave until you get back to the car. However if you’re gone over three hours, we’re departing without you. That was the deal.”

“That was the deal,” Tom said, nodding. “I’ll be back on time.”

He followed Montaigne to the passenger car. Here one other person waited patiently, already strapped in, an older lady making the short jump between League City and New Galveston. She clutched a travel bag in her lap.

Montaigne nodded at her in greeting and moved to man the controls. The passenger car and two others disconnected from the rest of the train with a *clunk!*

The three cars connected a few meters lower, then started heading down, descending like an elevator.

The cars landed in the field set aside for this purpose, much like the one in League City. Rather than sitting on the edge of town, however, this one was situated near the middle.

When the door opened, the older lady hopped out spry as any, and quickly headed to the luggage car. Here, she retrieved the sedated horse, gently coaxing him out of the car and onto the grass. She walked off toward the nearest city street, her bags strapped to the saddle.

Tom took a step out, exiting the car and looking around in the dim evening light.

Montaigne tipped an imaginary hat to him and said, “Three hours.”

Tom nodded, and walked off in the general direction the lady headed.

He decided this park might be a good place to drop off some MicaBots. Turning to see if Montaigne still watched him, he saw a few people approaching the car to discuss rides or package delivery.

With Montaigne focused on his potential customers, Tom reached into a pocket and dropped a handful of tiny black bots.

They scattered, heading out in all directions. A few started digging into the ground immediately. One turned and waved at him before running off into the park.

When Tom could no longer see any of them, he continued on his way.

The buildings here, he realized, were no taller than three stories.

He sidled up next to one facing the park, keeping to the shadows. An apartment building, a handful of lighted windows illuminated the side.

Tom pulled out a mini sensor and looked up at the roof. He tossed the disk up hard, making it spin. It sailed in an arc and bounced on the roof.

“Port me up there, Lisa.”

He disappeared and popped into place on the roof.

“Alright. What’s that old saying? ‘Now we’re cooking with gas.’ I wonder what that means.”

“It was an advertising slogan, Thomas. An effort by the industry to encourage the use of natural gas appliances.”

“Oh. Okay.”

He looked around for a good place to leave a larger sensor, pausing to pick up the smaller one he threw. He saw no housing assembly for a door and stairs up here. Only a trap door that probably had a ladder leading to a storeroom or closet.

He found an air conditioning vent, though. Placing the larger sensor next to it, he stepped back for a look in the evening light.

“It almost looks like it belongs there.”

“I am sure that will suffice, Thomas.”

He walked to the edge of the roof and tossed the mini sensor over the side.

“On to the next one.”

He disappeared with a pop.

Much later, Tom walked back to the park and made his way to the passenger car. No people surrounded it now. All the merchants and others who wanted to talk with Montaigne for whatever reasons were long gone.

The Captain remained, standing by the door. He looked about ready to leave.

“You’re right on time, Sonny! I was just about to take off.”

“I’ve still got five minutes,” Tom said, double checking the clock on his implant.

“Ha! Right you are. Well, if you are ready, strap in and we’ll go back upstairs.”

Tom nodded. He entered the car and sat down, tossing his backpack beside him.

If Montaigne noticed the backpack looked considerably lighter than when Tom left, he did not mention it.

Minutes later, they reconnected with the Jet Stream one kilometer up.

Tom made his way to his cabin, locked the door, and had Lisa port him back home.

5.24

“Uncle Silas’s Phaethonian Syrup. ‘Made with love.’ Does that have anything to do with your farm hand’s amorous marital pursuits?”

“You told her about Silas and Lola?”

Tom and Gwen sat at their kitchen table the next morning eating pancakes Gina had made for them. It was the first homecooked meal either young person had eaten in a while.

Tom’s contribution was a bottle of syrup.

Gwen said, “Yes. We went to see the maple trees and the taps, and I wanted to show her my place. We passed by their house. I suggested it might be better to give the couple some privacy.”

“You’re lucky they weren’t out on the front porch or something.”

“Gwendolyn informed me they have an affinity for outdoor lovemaking.”

“Yeah, they’re something alright.”

Gwen said, “Today, we’ll go in the opposite direction. I’ll take you out in the desert and we can look at the solar containment units, see where Tom blew some of them up, take a look at the gold mine and a few other things.”

“I only blew one of them up. And you two can go see those things,” Tom said, checking his internal clock. “But right now, the Jet Stream is coming into Sugarland, and I need to go down and pay that place a visit.”

“Gwendolyn tells me you’re planting sensors in all the towns?”

“The big ones, yeah. The sky train is serving as sort of a floating platform to get me around. They don’t know I’m not in my cabin all the time. I asked for privacy.”

“Interesting. You are doing so much undercover, but not really illegal.”

“No, not illegal. Especially out here. There are no laws yet, to speak of. But it would probably piss some people off if they knew about it.”

“Hm. I can appreciate that reasoning. We do a lot of that in law enforcement, things people don’t know about that would anger the general public.”

“Now maybe you can understand why I feel the way I do, sometimes,” Gwen said, crossing her arms.

“Yes. Maybe. But that was for your own good, monitoring you in secret.”

“Okay, well, I’ve gotta go. I’ll be back in a few hours. Thanks for the pancakes, Mrs. Del Rio.”

“Please,” Gina said in a dismissive tone. “We’re all family here. No need for formalities.”

He nodded, and stood up, then stepped away from the table. With a pop, Lisa teleported him back to the Jet Stream.

“And if you play your cards right, he really will be family someday.”

“Okay, Mom. That’s enough. If it happens, it happens. I’m not going to push him.”

Mr. Biddles took this opportunity to jump up into Gina’s lap.

She laughed, cuddling him and bringing the kitten up close to her face.

“Well, hello! And who are you? So affectionate.”

“That’s Mr. Biddles. Don’t let him outside, no matter how much he begs.”

“What’s this little round thing on his collar?”

“That’s one of Lisa’s mini sensors. She’s supposed to teleport him back inside the house if he gets in trouble. But she’s overloaded right now, so we need to just keep Biddles inside, okay?”

“I am no longer overloaded, Gwendolyn. Overnight, my new core has come fully online. I am perfectly capable of fully processing everything on the farm and all surrounding areas.”

“I know that glazed look in your eye. Somebody’s talking to you. Is it the AI?”

“Yes, Mom. She’s fussing at me, saying she can take care of Biddles.”

“Oh. Shall we let him go outside, then?”

Gwen frowned and shook her head

“No, Let’s get back on the horses.”

Gina groaned slightly as she stood up, placing Mr. Biddles down gently on the floor.

“You were right about being saddle sore. I had to take something for the pain. It was nice of Tom to let me sleep in his bed. I don’t think I could have suffered the downstairs couch.”

“Of course. You’re always supposed to give guests the nicest things. Well, come on. Let’s get Bessie and Lucas saddled up before Timmy lets them out for the morning.”

They walked outside and Gwen led her mother in a wide berth around the CC 1000 and Robert the Rooster, who eyed them warily but did not charge at the women.

Gina stopped at the corral gate and stared at Timmy as he tromped toward them.

“Gwendolyn? What are you doing with a Marine battle bot?”

“Oh, that’s Timmy. Timmy, meet Gina Wilcox Del Rio, my mother.”

The bot snapped to attention, standing ramrod straight.

“Sergeant.”

Gina’s jaw dropped.

“Has this unit’s operating system not been purged? How did that happen?”

“Um . . . I don’t know. How does it even know your name, and that you were a sergeant?”

“I have no idea. You know more about this than I do.”

“Well, Timmy was bought secondhand by Tom’s dad. He’s been in their family since Tom was little. He’s been a bodyguard, and I think Tom’s playmate for years.”

Gina shook her head in disbelief.

She said, “Leave it to the Raleighs to buy a used battle bot for a bodyguard. But it makes sense, I guess, if you can afford it. Still, I know for a fact they are supposed to have their battle protocols scrubbed when they’re sold as surplus. Someone bent a pretty big rule here.”

“Mom, leave it alone. You know these are my potential future in-laws you’re talking about.”

Gina gave her daughter a sharp look.

“Okay, now you’re just playing me. I know when I’m being played, Gwendolyn.”

“No, seriously. Don’t make anything hard on them. Timmy’s been a big help, especially when outlaws attacked the farm. Speaking of surplus, we faced a League battle tank that time.”

Gina’s face dropped.

“What happened?”

“Tom took care of it. He had Lisa port a solar chunk on top of it. But Timmy helped. I think having those battle protocols definitely helped. So just . . . leave it alone.”

“Oh, don’t worry about it. If I know Chris, he didn’t buy this thing in Republican territory. It was either procured somewhere neutral, or in Alliance space. Wherever he bought it, he’ll say the laws there about wiping the battle protocols did not apply.”

They continued into the stables. While Timmy let the other horses out, Gwen saddled hers. She pulled the smart strap under Bessie’s belly and the material pulled itself tight.

“Is it just me, or are you getting fat, Bessie? That riverside grass must be good for you. Or is it the oats Timmy feeds you at night?”

“The battle bot feeds the horses?”

“Yes. He cleans the manure out, too.”

Gina watched in wonder as Timmy passed by them carrying a huge sack of horse droppings.

“Does he do all the manual labor on the farm?”

“Pretty much. I mean, our farm hand does some things. But yeah, if it’s difficult we usually ask Timmy to do it. Yesterday he was running out and grabbing bales of hay that were out of Lisa’s range. He’d run them back to the nearest sensor and she’d port them away, rinse repeat.”

“That’s . . . different. I’m not saying other people haven’t used battle bots for manual labor before. Heck, the Marines did it all the time. It’s just, they’re so darn expensive, even on the secondhand market, that no one buys them for that.”

“Well, Timmy wasn’t bought for that, really. I think his primary purpose is protecting Tom.”

At the door, the bot turned. His tall flat rectangular sensor that served as a head turned toward them.

“Affirmative.”

He walked out of the stables carrying the manure in a bag over his back.

“Alright,” Gwen said. “Let’s get Lucas saddled up for you, and we will be ready to go.”

Moments later the two of them set off north for the desert. The grass grew steadily sparser until it vanished completely, leaving nothing but sand and rocky outcroppings as far as the eye could see.

They passed the mine shaft and Gwen pointed it out, as well as the smelter with its thick column of smoke. Sledgehammer heads lay in a neat pile beside it.

Riding further, they eventually came to the edge of Tom’s property. Here the solar containment units were set up, each with different charging platforms.

“Technically one of these could serve as a power plant, but of course that’s not how modern systems work, especially out here on the frontier. Each building and car and gun and so forth all have their own power packs. And most of them are about to expire.”

Lisa brought the force dome for SCU 4 down as they approached, then put it back up after they crossed the threshold.

Gwen dismounted, assured that the horses could not go outside the dome’s perimeter. Her mother followed suit.

“As you can see by the charging platforms, we can recharge anything. For a fee, of course. It’ll get fun when the building units start expiring.”

“Gwendolyn . . . Thomas is setting the stage for a monopoly here. A benign monopoly, but . . . no one else on the planet will be able to swap out power packs like this.”

“Yep. That’s the idea.”

“And as long as this embargo goes on . . . Did Chris and Jillian have anything to do with that?”

“I dunno. Don’t investigate them or anything.”

“I’m not . . . they’re not Republicans, dear. And they’re not in Republican space. It’s out of my jurisdiction. But . . . do they need investors?”

“Mom!”

“Well, I’m just saying. Your grandmother was the one with all the business acumen. But maybe if you really do marry into the Raleigh family, they can take care of our things, too. Or your things after you inherit them when your father and I are gone. Certainly they can handle business matters better than we can.”

“You’re not that bad, Mom.”

“I’m a passive investor. So is your dad. Our account indicates how much we made every year, and that’s about it. We’re better at our jobs than . . .”

She waved at the different force domes around them with all the SCUs holding solar chunks in stasis.

“ . . . this. Or even thinking up ideas like this. I mean, who does this? Tom is going to drain every red cent out of this planet when people’s power packs start dying. Who dreamed up that idea?”

“Gwendolyn?”

Her daughter looked away.

“Just a minute, Mom. Yeah, Lisa?”

“Big Ugly is on the move.”

“Is he coming toward us?”

Gina turned at the alarmed tone in Gwen’s voice.

“No, he is running away from your location. He is heading toward the interior of the desert as fast as he can go.”

“Why?”

“I do not know. But all the other sand dragons in his vicinity that I can sense are all headed in the same direction.”

5.25

When Gina finally understood what was going on, after several minutes of explanation by Gwen as to who “Big Ugly” was, and why the AI was tracking him, she suggested something profound.

“Why don’t you plant more sensors along his trail?”

“What? Why?”

Gina shrugged and waved out toward the vast desert, disappearing in a hazy horizon.

“You’ve got this vast, unexplored part of the planet. Nobody has gone out there, from what you say. Maybe a survey team flew over it a couple times, but has anybody really explored it, taken a good look at what it has to offer? I doubt it, or you would know more about it. Have your AI drop sensors whenever the lizard moves outside the range of the last one. You won’t cover the whole desert. It’s what? The size of South America, something like that? But you’ll at least get a path leading into the interior that someone can teleport to easily.”

“Mom, that’s . . . brilliant.”

“Well, thanks. Maybe a scientist someday will name a new species in the desert after me or something. If nothing else, it’ll expand the breadth of Lisa’s sensor field on this continent.”

“That’s presuming she can handle it.”

“I told you before, Gwendolyn. My new processing powers are exponentially greater. Tracking inputs from multiple sensors is no longer an issue.”

“Is she talking to you?”

“Yeah. She’s fussing at me. Swears up and down she can handle it now.”

“Good. Ask her if she needs assistance placing the sensors, or if she can teleport there based on Big Ugly’s mini sensor.”

“Inform Gina Del Rio that I am quite capable in this endeavor.”

“Yeah, she’s got it.”

-+-

Big Ugly moved fast, his one good eye roving the way ahead. Powerful legs helped propel him forward, kicking up little dust storms as he scurried north.

He stopped only to eat. A rat jumped from under a rock as he approached. Lightning fast, his jaws shot down to the sand and his teeth bit into the savory morsel. He came up chewing, tossing his head back to make the fresh meat fall back into his mouth.

He kept going.

To his right and left he could see other sand dragons moving at speed, all of them heading north.

One on his right stopped to tackle a snake, then raced to catch up, the reptile’s tip hanging from its mouth.

Big Ugly did not pause to think. He only stopped when he saw food, which was anything smaller than himself. And food was sparse in the desert.

He kept moving north, almost in a beeline, only deviating from his course when an outcropping of rock blocked his way.

A loud *pop!* sounded behind him . . .

Big Ugly stopped, sliding in the sand.

That particular noise he associated with the large mammals who had recently proved so irritating.

His body tensed. Claws curled, ready to slash.

Leather skin drew back around his formidable teeth, prepared to tear into flesh.

Slowly, he swung around to face the direction he came from, so his one good eye could sweep the area behind him.

He expected to see Tom or one of the other hated humans.

Or something.

But he saw nothing out of the ordinary.

The only thing different was a small pyramid with a flat top sitting on the boulder he just passed. But it was not alive. It was not a human, which he associated with the pops of displaced air that often accompanied them.

Big Ugly took a deep sniff of the air, sampling it for humans, horses or any other mammals.

But he could sense nothing on the wind. He snorted out a cloud of dust from his nostrils, looking for all the world like a dragon of myth.

He swung an arm around, bringing one of the thick flightless wings over his face, like a reptilian Count Dracula.

Humans had shot at him from a distance. If one was out there with a gun, he might not smell them.

Big Ugly waited a couple seconds, but no energy bolts slammed home.

The cry of a buzzard-roc overhead distracted him. The giant carrion eater floated on a thermal, slowly spiraling higher while surveying the desert floor below.

Big Ugly gave up. He sensed nothing out of the ordinary, other than the lifeless sensor.

He turned back north and kept going.

Several moments passed.

The buzzard-roc ascended higher, looking for food. Unfortunately for the bird, all the sand dragons in the area consumed their prey entirely, leaving little in the way of a carcass behind. It would have to wait for the desert animals to die in other ways.

Another loud pop bounced across the sand, and Gina appeared with Gwen.

“Look at this!” Gina said. “I bet we are the first persons to ever stand on this exact spot.”

“Whooahoo. Yippee.”

“You don’t seem impressed.”

“It’s a frontier planet, Mom. People step on spots no one has ever walked on before every day.”

“Are you sure about that?”

“Pretty sure, yeah.”

“Well, how many people have been this far into the Skoni Desert before, on foot?”

“Probably not that many,” Gwen conceded. “For one thing, they would have been attacked by multiple sand dragons by now.”

“See? My point exactly. This is something to commemorate.”

Gina pulled out a knife and turned to the huge boulder where the sensor perched. She started chiseling something in the stone.

“What are you doing, Mom?”

“Something your dad would do, if he were here. I’ll take a picture and send it to him.”

Gwen sidled up to where her mother diligently worked the knife.

Gina finished carving and stepped back to let her daughter see. She had scratched “J + G” in the stone and chiseled out a crude heart around the letters.

“Mom, that’s . . .”

“Awesome?”

“I was going to say juvenile. What are you, in middle school? Who does that?”

“This is an eternal mark of the love your father and I have.”

“You defaced a stone!”

“In the middle of nowhere. It’s not a national monument or something, dear. Besides, your father will like it. Hold on, let me get a picture.”

Gina stepped back and blinked, committing the image in her eyes to her implant’s memory.

She turned and smiled at her daughter.

“Would you like to add yours and Tom’s initials to the rock?”

“What? No!”

“Suit yourself. It might not hurt if you showed him some affection, you know.”

“I show Tom plenty of affection.”

“You show very little affection to anyone. Except maybe that kitten.”

“I’m very affectionate!”

Gina said nothing to this. She just smiled at Gwen.

“Okay, maybe I’m not the best at showing affection. But that’s partly your fault. You were never home, you were always out fighting bad guys.”

Gina chuckled.

“Ow. Hey no fair turning it back on me.”

“It’s totally fair, Mom.”

“Okay, maybe I wasn’t the best mother. But you can be a good partner for Tom. Try showing him some love and affection sometime.”

“We do things. The other day we held hands.”

“Did you? Good. A little bit of motherly advice. If you want to keep your man, keep him happy. And men are very easy to keep happy. All you have to do is show them some affection every day.”

“That sounds too easy.”

“They’re very simple creatures, dear. They’re not complex like women. Not at all.”

“I’m not sure I believe that.”

“Well, you’re still young. Now, let’s go back. It’s hot out here. I thought you said winter was coming.”

“Yeah. It’ll get colder soon. I think it’s already getting cold at night out here in the desert. Lisa? Take us home, please.”

The two popped away.

5.26

The sky train flew steadily west, stopping at towns along the way. Tom spent most of the day on Jet Stream. He even spent some time outside of his cabin, talking with Montaigne.

Food was included in his fare, so he had lunch in the dining car. Tom was the only passenger, so he had the place to himself.

At the Woodlands, he made his first sale. The general store looked busy when Tom stepped inside at 10:00 in the morning local time. True to its name, the surrounding area had lots of timber.

It also had lots of stumps. The vast forest surrounding the town had been harvested for lumber to build out League City and other towns. It served as the primary timber production center for the entire planet.

From the passenger car's holo coming down, Tom could see fields in the distance with very small trees. Evidently, the locals were already planting for the future. As those trees grew, they could replace the ones chopped down for production purposes.

Tom found the owner of the general store and invited him to examine the tools on the cart he left out in the street.

The Woodland, like most other settlements, had few paved streets. The buildings were all pier and beam, and made from local timber. Sidewalks

consisted of wooden planks, and horses were more common out here than cars, although a few pickup trucks could be seen floating around this close to the capital.

They were close enough to League City that roads allowed ground vehicles to travel overland between settlements, and deliver items from the capital cheaper, although slower, than the sky trains.

Tom bet that items purchased from the bazaar, in particular cargo from visiting merchant ships, would be marked up heavily out here.

Indeed, he stopped at a display of shovels near the back of the store and noted they were priced at 25 credits each.

When the proprietor saw his samples, he asked Tom what he wanted for everything on the spot. When Tom said ten credits each for the big ones, and five for the hand tools, the man handed over some tokens without even bothering to negotiate. He yelled for his assistant to come out and help haul the merchandise back inside.

Tom said, "I've got more if you want it. Let me know what you need."

"Shovels and hoes are my biggest sellers. Although regular hammers do well, too. Everybody's always building something, and we've got plenty of wood. Come to it, I could use more axes. Them laser cutters are starting to lose their charge."

"How many do you want of each? Same price."

The shop's proprietor asked for ten more shovels, rakes and axes, and 20 hammers. Tom promised to return in half an hour.

He pushed the empty floating platform away, and headed for someplace private. The Woodlands reminded him of Little York, with its rustic Old West charm, but it was far bigger. Lots of buildings stretched out on either side of Main Street, some devoted to business and some to housing.

He wandered through town for a while until he found an open backyard that looked deserted.

“If no one’s looking, Lisa, please add the items that guy wanted on the cart.”

The tools popped into place.

Whistling a tune, Tom slowly pushed the cart back toward Main Street.

He stopped at one of the outlying buildings and had Lisa port him up to inspect its roof.

“Completely flat. The buildings around here all pretty simple, aren’t they, Lisa? I don’t see any air conditioning units.”

“That is correct, Thomas. The further away we get from League City, the fewer resources colonists have.”

“I worry about somebody disturbing your sensors up on a flat, featureless roof. It’s gonna stick out like a sore thumb up there.”

He stood on the roof in question, fists on his hips, and looked around at the tops of other buildings nearby. They were all flat and featureless, save for the houses which had sloping roofs.

Then his eye landed on the water tower outside of town.

“Can you get me up there? I bet we can put your sensor on the water tower and nobody will mess with it.”

He popped away, reappearing on top of the water tower. Here, an antenna farm clustered near the center, with a few yagis aimed back east toward Little York.

“Excellent.”

Tom retrieved one of Lisa’s large sensors and put some adhesive on its base. Then he set it down in the center of the antenna farm.

“Take me back to the cart, please, if nobody is looking.”

He popped away and reappeared in the backyard with his tools. Smiling, he tossed the backpack on the floating cart and made his way to the store again.

The proprietor was happy to see him. He handed over more credits and transferred the merchandise inside.

“Will you be back this way? How often do you think you’ll make it out to The Woodlands?”

Tom shrugged, but he said, “I bet I’ll be back about the time you need to restock these.”

“Good. You’re a lot more reasonable than the other guy I usually buy tools from.”

“Oh, do you deal with Pops? I didn’t know he sold stuff out here.”

“Yes, Pops Filmore. That guy is ruthless. And he’s pretty much the only tool manufacturer we’ve got on this planet. At least until you came along. He drives a hard bargain. And he’s not a very nice man, to boot.”

“Yeah, I’ve met Pops. He’s shared his wisdom with me. Says I’m selling too cheap.”

“Well, you’re definitely undercutting him by a pretty penny. Keep an eye on him. Pops is not a nice man, no matter how polite he seems.”

“Thanks. I’ll remember that.”

On the way back to the waiting passenger car, Tom pulled into a deserted space between two buildings. Looking both ways, he saw no pedestrians or vehicles. No one looked out the few windows facing this area, either.

“Please refill the sample racks, Lisa.”

A loud pop occurred, and the rack looked the same as it had when he stepped off the Jet Stream.

Satisfied, Tom dropped a handful of MicaBots on the ground. After they scattered, he pushed the floating platform back out in the street, and headed for the passenger car.

He sighed and said, “Two dozen more to go, Lisa.”

She responded through his implant.

“You only have to do this once, Thomas. I can maintain the sensor network on my own once it is up and going.”

“Thanks, I’m counting on it,” he said, smiling. “But I might have to come back and maintain ties with some of these merchants.”

5.27

Glyph sat with Morgan behind the desk in his basement office.

He appreciated her submissiveness. But unlike previous women he'd kept, she showed a lot more interest in the goings-on of the X's and O's.

The money interested her, in particular.

Glyph could understand that, as one of the key reasons he started this quasi-religious, heavily political organization was for the accumulation of wealth. So, he did not begrudge his chosen girlfriend paying close attention to how much they were bringing in.

"Morgan, you've queried all the sky train conductors by now?"

"Yes, sir."

"And all their fares are about the same, correct?"

"Yes, sir."

"Yet the Courthouse subsidizes freight. Why do they not subsidize passenger service?"

"Maybe the government here thinks people should fend for themselves."

Glyph dismissed the idea with a flick of his hand.

“They care enough about their precious colonists to subsidize food deliveries on the sky train network. Why not pay for us to go out and about across the planet? It makes no sense.”

“Maybe they want those who are bold enough to go not to die out there. It takes some grit and determination to settle the land. If they made it too easy, more people would fail at it.”

Gliph stared at her a moment.

“Shut your mouth, Morgan. Don’t make stupid comments like that.”

“Yes, sir.”

“Now, let’s see. Twelve hundred credits . . . times twelve, since we’re bringing ten more besides you and me . . . that’s going to cost us . . .”

“Fourteen thousand, four hundred credits.”

“Shut up, Morgan. I’m trying to think. Now, how much do we actually have from all the muggings Refa and his cohorts have been doing?”

“Eleven thousand and twenty.”

“I see. I see. Hmmm. Just a few more robberies, then. These hidebound, rule-following capitalists owe us more money, it would seem. Where is Refa?”

“I can go get him for you, ReyRey.”

“Don’t call me that. Fine, go out and get him. I need to discuss our plans with him, which requires more of his particular skillset.”

-+-

Morgan found Refa where she knew he spent most of his time and money, in the tenement bar called Tay-hoe’s.

A dark and dirty dive in the basement of the building across the street from Gliph’s, Tay-hoe’s owner and operator was an ex-LEAF soldier by the name

of Casper Slodovich. He plied the tenement dwellers in League City with prostitutes and cheap liquor, and ran a small gambling operation as well.

She found Refa at the bar, a cheap hooker mooching drinks and hanging onto his arm. The prostitute wore a holo top that flickered off and back on every few seconds, offering brief glimpses of her bare breasts.

Morgan sidled up to the other side of him. She stood there, refusing to sit down on the barstool. It looked filthy.

Refa turned away from the hooker, after her top flickered back on, and focused on the newcomer.

“Ah, I see Glyph’s floozie is here to fetch me.”

“My name is Morgan, Mr. Ramirez.”

He barked a laugh and threw back his shot glass, swallowing the contents.

“Right. You do realize that Morgan is one of the most common names for older women in both major systems? But especially the League. Baby names are funny things. Different ones gain popularity over the years. Sometimes you can tell what year someone was born by their first name.”

“What are you trying to say, Mr. Ramirez?”

“I’m saying I don’t believe that’s your real name. You’re too young to be a Morgan. That name fell out of popularity after the war. If you were in your 30s, maybe I’d believe that was your real name. But you’re still in your teens. You were born after the fighting stopped.”

He waved at Casper and pointed at his shot glass, sliding another small token forward. The old LEAF soldier nodded and brought the bottle over for a refill.

He nodded at the newcomer, his leathery brown face dipping down for a bit.

“Morgan.”

“Mr. Slodovich. Mr. Ramirez here was just telling me how my name has fallen out of popularity.”

“Ah, that.”

Casper rubbed the whiskers on his chin. He only shaved every third or fourth day. But he kept his military crewcut. The hairs on his head looked like slightly longer whiskers than the ones on his face.

“Yes, well . . . there was a particularly bad SSI head on one of our planets. Her name was Morgan. So, that’s why not many people name their baby girls Morgan anymore. A documentary came out after the war . . .”

“Several documentaries came out,” Refa interjected. “On both sides.”

“Right. Well, in all the ones she was in, she came across looking really, really bad. The personification of evil. So, yah. Nobody names their baby girls Morgan anymore. Except your parents, evidently.”

“Well, I like it.”

“People are going to think you’re a Leaguer,” Refa said.

“I don’t care.”

“What’s wrong with Leaguers?” Casper said, leaning forward on the bar.

He was older than Refa, but bigger. Casper never stopped working out, and took nano supplements to help maintain a bodybuilder’s physique. It helped in his secondary role at the bar/casino/brothel as a bouncer.

Refa shot back the liquor and slapped the empty glass back on the bar.

“Nothing. Another round, please.”

He slid a token forward.

Casper took the token and tossed it in his register, then poured Refa another round.

“Mr. Gliph requires your services again,” Morgan said. “He needs to obtain more funds.”

“Right. You can tell him all my guys are refusing to go out there.”

“Why?”

“Because of that Night Shadow bitch. If she catches you in the act of mugging someone, she kills or maims you. It’s got everybody quaking in their boots.”

“But not you.”

Refa’s head jerked toward Morgan. He held her eye for a moment.

“Oh, you’re good. You almost had me there. It’s only because I’ve had a few, it makes me vulnerable.”

Refa downed the next shot.

“You can go back and tell the head honcho, the one everybody knows you’re sleeping with, by the way . . . you can tell him he’s going to have to wait for things to die down. Nobody is willing to do anything so long as Night Shadow is out there, whacking people.”

“Maybe you should set a trap for this Night Shadow. Maybe with her out of the picture, you could accumulate a lot more money, hm?”

Refa stared straight ahead as Casper poured him yet another round.

He nodded slowly, the buzz hitting him hard.

“Oh, you are good, young lady. You are very, very good. You’re even manipulating me, now.”

Morgan said nothing.

When the prostitute on Refa’s other side caught her eye, she smiled.

Then she turned and walked out the door.

5.28

Nighttime fell across League City as the shrouded sun set, sinking below the horizon.

Nightlife continued in the Merchants' District. People were wary, especially around alleyways and areas with low light.

But they felt more confident. They knew a guardian of the night watched over them.

She was seldom seen. But enough *had* seen her in action to know. And practically everyone had watched the Zeitung's video footage.

Vendors in the bazaar followed the lead of t-shirt manufacturers on Diego and even Clarion, making outerwear with a woman clad in black flying down on a mugger.

In lettering underneath, in bold letters, the t-shirts read, "*Vigilante Justice! Night Shadow.*"

They sold well. Everyone liked the idea of a local hero.

All agreed she must have some way to fly. In the video it looked like she swooped down on the bad guy from above. No one had yet drawn the conclusion that Night Shadow spent a lot of time on rooftops . . .

Haley stared down at the streets below. This night, she had seen no guards at all. Everyone had grown relaxed. Even the muggers seemed to give up hunting prey.

“And that’s just when someone will strike, I bet,” she said quietly.

She straightened up and looked toward the bazaar, seven blocks away. The rooftops were all about the same height, at five stories.

“Okay, Lisa. I’d like to practice. Port me from place to place to place.”

“It is easier to port you once, Haley.”

“I know. But we’re trying to hide your existence, remember? If people figure out I’m teleporting, they’ll know you’re here. I want it to look like super speed.”

“Okay, Haley. I’m ready when you are.”

She crouched down into a starter’s stance, then took off running across the rooftop.

Lisa ported her three meters at a time. At the edge of the building, she ported Haley across the gap and onto the next roof.

Haley kept running, zipping across the rooftops at an incredibly fast speed thanks to the short hops.

She stopped on the last roof before the bazaar, catching her breath.

“That was great! Can you do that for me without my asking? When I’m running, and especially when I’m trying to catch someone?”

“Yes, Haley. So long as you are dressed as Night Shadow, I will do that for you.”

“Okay. Now, let’s practice falling gracefully. I’m going to have to trust you on this one, Lisa.”

“I will not let you get hurt.”

She nodded and jumped off the roof feet first, plummeting down to the street.

At the last second, Lisa ported her, arresting her fall, and placing her within a centimeter above the sidewalk.

She landed on her wall crawlers and waved her arms for balance.

“Whoa! That’s going to take some getting used to.”

Before she could ask Lisa to put her back up on the roof so she could try it again, an incoming com request pinged on her implant.

“Hey girl!”

“Hey, you! Whatcha doin’?”

“Oh, just practicing being a superhero. Heroine, whatever. What’re you doing?”

“Well, we’re just about to eat supper with a bunch of people. I wanted to invite you. My mom’s in town, by the way.”

“Oh, really? How did that happen?”

“She hijacked a ride from Wink and Jinxie. They’re gonna be here, too. Wanna come? Or have you already eaten out with Loverboy?”

Haley blushed under her mask.

“No, we ate lunch today, together. But he has a story deadline to meet, even though not a lot has been happening around here lately, so right now he’s holed up in his hotel room. I haven’t eaten, and I’d be glad to join you guys. Just let me port home and change.”

-+-

Minutes later, Haley appeared outside Tom’s house, near the front porch.

It was just now starting to get dark on the farm, and the chickens were still out. Robert jerked his head toward her when she popped into existence, and watched her carefully. But he decided she was too far away to pose a threat.

Haley walked up the steps and knocked on the front door. Gwen opened it, reached out and gave her a hug.

“Come in! You’re sitting by me.”

“What are we having?”

“Mom’s making hamburgers. I know. She insists on homemade meals for some reason. Heated trays aren’t good enough, I guess.”

“I’d love a hamburger.”

“Well, come on in!”

Inside the living room, Tom listened raptly to Wink telling him about their adventures on Nefos One with Anthony Kim.

Silas listened too, but on the side with his arms crossed. He looked the most out of place among everyone here, continuing to cast worried glances toward the back of the house.

In the kitchen, Lola insisted on helping Gina. She came out to the living room with plates and silverware, setting them up on a large table that Gwen had obtained somewhere.

When Gina showed up with a steaming platter of hamburger patties, Gwen grabbed Haley by the hand and led her to the table.

“Everybody sit down! Haley, you sit here. Mom, this is Haley, my best friend. She used to lead the local rangers around here. Now she serves as our sales rep in League City.”

“Hi, Mrs. Wilder.”

“Del Rio.”

“Oh. Sorry.”

Halfway through the meal, Gina grew irritated at Silas constantly sneaking glances at her.

“I am out of my jurisdiction, you know. I don’t particularly care what you did. So long as my daughter remains safe, you have nothing to fear from me.”

Silas rocked back, as if she had slapped him.

They locked eyes for a moment.

He nodded and looked away first, then took another bite out of his hamburger.

-+-

After dinner, Gwen told everyone about their adventure with Big Ugly.

“Is he still going?” Tom said.

Haley said, “*Where* is he going?”

Gwen said, “Lisa? Is Big Ugly still on the move?”

She responded in everyone’s implant, except for Gina’s which was attuned to PLAIR.

“Yes, Gwendolyn. Big Ugly and the other lizards with him continue to move overland at a pace of approximately 30 to 35 kilometers a day. They appear to be heading for somewhere near the center of the Skoni Desert.”

“Are they going to hibernate?” Lola said. “You know, winter will be here soon.”

Haley said, “If they’re hibernating, why are they headed north, toward the middle of the desert? I would think it’d be even colder there. Although, admittedly, it doesn’t get very cold anywhere on this planet.”

“Why is that?” Gina said, suddenly taking an interest in the seasons. “Is it closer to the sun?”

“Yes, ma’am. That, and its axis is not tilted as much as Old Earth and other planets. It’s an elliptical orbit, though, so there is a change in seasons. It’ll freeze in the mountains. And the desert. Like I say, if they’re hibernating, it seems an odd choice of direction.”

“I’ll guess we’ll find out, whenever he gets to wherever he’s going,” Tom said.

He stood up from the table and said, “If you’ll excuse me, I’ve got another city to visit.”

“Which one are you going to this time?” Gwen said, smiling at him.

“Alief.”

“Oh! Bring back some wine. I hear they make really good wine there.”

“Yes,” Haley said. “I can attest to that. Ash took me out to a small place that served it. It’s expensive, but very good. Maybe you can grab a case cheaper from the source.”

Gina’s eyebrows shot up.

“Ash? You’re dating Ashley Thallus?”

Haley blushed.

“Yes, ma’am.”

“Does he know about Lisa and how all of you can jump around the planet?”

“No, ma’am. He knows nothing about Tom and Gwen. He just knows I sell stuff for a farm in Anatolia.”

“Hm. Probably best to keep it that way, for now.”

“Yes, ma’am.”

“And he goes out to eat a lot, you say? Do you know if he uses the Zeitung’s expense account for that? My husband’s. Or mine, the AOJ account?”

“I don’t know for sure, but I know he writes about everything he eats for the subscribers back home. So . . . the Zeitung’s?”

“Good. That’s okay, then. Still, it might be fun to pay him a visit.”

“Mother, you’re just being cruel! Leave that man alone.”

Gina smiled and would not commit to avoiding her agent on Phaethon.

After dinner, Silas and Lola excused themselves and left, taking the pickup back to their house.

Before Tom popped back to his cabin on the Jet Stream, he handed Haley a bag of clothing.

“What’s this?”

“Your sand dragon armor. It’s blasterproof, remember? Maybe that’ll come in handy. And if it gets cold at night, maybe it’ll help keep you warm under your superhero outfit.”

“Thanks. That’s not a bad idea, actually.”

Wink said, “Oh, hey. Speaking of superheroes, I’ve got something you might need.”

He pulled back his sleeve and showed Haley a band wrapped around his wrist, about three fingers thick.

Jinxie looked over his shoulder and frowned.

“I *told* you not to buy that!”

“What is it?” Haley said.

“It’s a personal tractor beam,” Wink said, smiling. “Watch this.”

He aimed it back at the table and activated it with his other hand. A spoon flew off the surface, and he caught it.

“That is awesome! How much can it lift?”

“I’m not sure. I haven’t played with it much. Want to try it?”

He took the band off and passed it over to her. She placed it on her wrist and stretched her hand out to a chair at the table. It slid across the floor and she stopped it by grabbing the top.

“This is great. I definitely think it would be useful. Would you sell it to me? How much do you want for it?”

“Oh, it’s expensive. They’re the latest thing. Five hundred credits?”

She nodded, eyes glued to her new toy. She pulled out a big token and handed it over without even looking.

Jinxie still looked peeved, but mollified somewhat since Wink had sold the personal tractor beam for a profit.

He decided now was not a good time to tell her that he had four more just like it back on the ship.

5.29

Haley popped into place on top of another rooftop, closer to midnight local time in League City.

She walked to the ledge and mounted it, then squatted to look down. From below, she remained invisible, her black outfit blending in perfectly with the night.

Fewer pedestrians strolled the sidewalks this time of the evening, though a few staggered out of bars or restaurants, and made their way home.

At least one merchant she saw had a hired gun, a man dressed in slacks and a loose-fitting tactical shirt with lots of pockets. This guy glanced all around as they walked, staying slightly behind the merchant.

Haley suspected he had plenty of weapons hidden in his loose clothing. By the way he walked, she also suspected he knew how to handle things, as well.

One couple exited a restaurant across the street. They went straight toward the Courthouse and the more moderately priced apartment buildings, showing no signs of inebriation.

A lone female, judged young by Haley by the way she walked, headed in the direction of the bazaar. She wore a short turquoise skirt and a tight white

top with matching pumps. She carried a small turquoise clutch with sequins on it, a thin leather strap holding it over her shoulder.

This seemed slightly off, since only expensive apartments were in that direction, and not many of them at that. But the young woman headed that way fast.

Was she a prostitute, going to visit a client?

But Haley had not seen any prostitutes in the shopping area before. No doubt there were some, the oldest profession existed everywhere. But it was not out in the open here.

She gave up wondering after the young woman walked out of sight.

Time passed.

Nothing happened.

She shifted her legs underneath her and sat down on the ledge.

Haley had literally nothing to worry about from her perch, between her wall climbing boots and Lisa's teleportation, so the height did not bother her.

She dangled her feet off the ledge, one hand on either side, and passed some more time.

"They got the message, Lisa, obviously. Nobody's out here trying to mug anybody."

"It would appear so."

"Crack a few heads, and the bad guys give up. I think this is called 'broken windows policing,' or something like that. Focus on the small things and the bigger problems dry up."

A second pause ensued as Lisa processed this statement.

"Broken windows police theory involved maintaining a neighborhood and cracking down on minor incidents such as graffiti. It springs from a famous paper delivered in the United States in the early 1980s. This in turn involves a . . . I am sensing three armed individuals in an alley two blocks from here."

Haley stood up on the ledge.

“Take me there.”

She disappeared, reappearing on a different rooftop. Haley raced to the ledge and looked down into the alley below, using her enhanced sight.

“Quiet down. Not a move till she gets close.”

She picked up the whisper with her enhanced hearing. One of the other two men sniggered softly.

Haley’s eyes narrowed.

She activated the wall crawlers and started easing her way down, pulling closer to the three.

Whatever was about to happen, she wanted to be in proximity of the action.

Haley walked sideways silently, hidden in the darkness of the alley.

At three stories up, she paused, waiting to see what the thugs were up to. She heard somebody walking toward them out on the street, taking quick short steps.

Haley’s eyes squinted as she tilted her head to see the person approaching. She saw the same young girl walking in the other direction earlier, coming back this way. The turquoise skirt and white top stood out, and she remembered it.

Was the girl coming back from wherever she went earlier?

The men tensed as the woman drew near.

Two squatted and wiggled their fingers. Haley’s attention turned to them.

Several things happened at once.

The girl passed the alley.

The two squatting men lunged for her.

She screamed.

Haley jumped from three stories up.

The third man pulled back, away from the street, looking up.

He saw Haley and pulled out a gun, shooting her as she dropped.

The force of the blast hit Haley in the side, throwing her off her trajectory slightly.

She slammed into the top of the two men at a bad angle, knocking over the girl in the skirt, who went sprawling out on the sidewalk.

Lisa ported Haley before she slammed into the pavement. Already, she hurt from colliding with the two men, and from the gunshot.

When Lisa plopped her gently on the ground, she rolled over on her side.

The third man in the alley shot twice.

His first bolt hit the pavement, where Haley was before she rolled.

The second shot clipped another man's leg.

He screamed.

Haley rolled again and stood up. The other man she knocked over pulled out two guns and squeezed them off at her middle, point blank. The bolts burned away the black cloth, revealing brown sand dragon skin underneath.

His mouth gaped as he stared at her middle, clearly expecting to see blood.

Haley kicked the gun away. It flew out of his hands out into the street.

Then she bent down with her force bracers and slammed a fist into his eye, breaking the ocular bone.

He went down screaming, holding his face. She gave him another blow to the neck and he collapsed, gurgling.

Haley turned and looked down the alley, easily picking out the third fellow in the dark. She stood and walked slowly toward him.

Things did not go as Refa planned.

They started out well. Morgan was the bait designed to lure Night Shadow into attacking. He debated trying to get somebody to play a hapless merchant, but nobody in the Southside Projects looked or dressed the part.

He thought about attacking someone at random in the Merchants' District. But this too had some unknowns. Many merchants out this late were taking precautions against muggings, like the one they saw with a bodyguard.

No, better to set the trap with some willing bait. And Morgan agreed to play an attractive young woman out for a stroll.

Most likely people would assume she was a strumpet, dressed like that and out this late. The clubs young people liked . . . well, there was only one in town, with a measly ten square meter dance floor, and it was closer to the spaceport than here. No, she'd be suspected as a hooker out here.

All these thoughts went through his mind as he stared at the woman dressed in black.

How had she not gone down? He knew he hit her.

The fall was perfect. He watched the video that reporter made of her during the protest. He read the accounts from eyewitnesses other times she attacked his men. The woman could not fly, obviously. She jumped. Somehow, she was jumping out of windows or something, and tackling people.

So this time, when his men moved on Morgan, he pulled back, ready to shoot. And sure enough, like magic, Night Shadow appeared out of the dark, falling . . .

But now she had taken three direct hits, and she stood there, glaring at him from behind that mask.

She took a step down the alley and toward him.

He raised the gun higher.

"Stop. Don't move. I know you have some kind of blasterproof undergarment on. Maybe Kelvingarb or something. But . . . I'm going to

guess that it does not extend behind your mask. Come no closer, or it's a head shot for you."

Slowly, she raised her hands, palms outstretched.

He nodded, approving the motion.

At chest level, her hands slowly moved together.

"What . . . what are you doing?"

Then one hand moved to the other wrist. She touched a button on a band, and he realized her other hand was pointed at his gun.

It wrenched out of his grip and sailed over to her. She caught it midair.

"How . . . how did you do that?"

He saw Morgan walking up behind Night Shadow, but he dared not avert his eyes. Even though he stood in the dark, it seemed like she could see him clear as day.

Morgan quietly opened her clutch and pulled out a knife with a wicked blade. The one Refa gave her earlier tonight.

Morgan screamed and jumped, legs springing. She slashed with the knife, going down at the neck with her full weight behind it.

They went down together in a pile of black, white and turquoise.

Refa heard a loud *pop!*

And then . . . silence.

5.30

Haley and Morgan appeared in a pile in Tom's living room.

Morgan screamed, slashing wildly with the bloody knife.

Haley looked dazed. Already, blood flowed freely from her neck, spilling on the floor.

Her black leotard looked shot up and burned, reduced to tattered ribbons covering her body. The sand dragon skin underneath looked scorched and blackened, some of the cloth burned into it.

Morgan screamed and pulled back her arm with the knife.

Gina ran from the kitchen and jumped, her full weight slamming down on the arm.

Morgan dropped the knife and it clattered across the floor.

She struggled, screaming, and bit Gina's leg.

Gina pressed down with her forearm on Morgan's neck, cutting the blood flow to her head.

Morgan's eyes turned white almost immediately, and she slumped over, tapped out.

Gina moved and turned to Haley, touching the wound at the base of her neck.

Gwen ran down the metal spiral staircase.

“What’s going on? Haley? Haley!”

“She needs medical. Quick!”

“Okay! Okay! Uh . . . Lisa, port in the first aid kit!”

A pop sounded in the living room and a white polyresin box appeared with a big red cross on top.

Gwen ran and opened it, pulling out a pneumatic syringe.

“Here! Tom says it’s milspec!”

Gina nodded and pressed the syringe on the other side of Haley’s neck.

They watched as her breathing eased, and the skin underneath the cloth knitted itself back together.

Haley’s eyes fluttered open. She glanced at Gwen, then Gina, and pulled off her mask.

“Well, that wasn’t good. Somebody saw me port away with the bait.”

Gwen said, “Bait?”

“Yeah. That girl was in on it. They used her to lure me to a pretend attack. I should have known better. Thanks for the nanobots, Mrs. Del Rio.”

“You may as well call me Gina, Haley. Everybody else does.”

“Yeah, but you’re old enough to be my . . . Sorry, I’m just putting my foot in my mouth. Nothing’s going right, tonight.”

“What are we gonna do about her?”

Gwen pointed at the unconscious Morgan.

“We don’t have a jail around here,” she said, biting her lower lip.

“No, you don’t,” Gina said. “And if you port her into a cell in a city somewhere, that will just lead to more questions.”

“Let’s let her go,” Haley said, rubbing at the tender spot on her neck where the knife cut her.

“Let her go?” Gwen said. “She just tried to kill you!”

“Yeah, but she doesn’t know what happened. Let’s put a bug on her and send her back to that alley. Maybe we can learn a thing or two.”

“You know, you really do have a good head for law enforcement,” Gina said, smiling and offering her a hand up. “If you ever want to move back to the Republic, look me up. I might have a job for you.”

“Thanks Mrs. . . . Gina. Right now, I just wanna figure out what’s going on. Somebody set a trap for me, and I want to smoke ’em out.”

-+-

Morgan woke up, lying face down in the middle of the alley.

She sat up, startled, breathing hard.

Then she stood.

Her clothes were a mess. Blood stained her white blouse. The turquoise miniskirt looked filthy, with grime smeared all over it. Her sequined clutch lay nearby, all but forgotten.

She picked it up and walked, disoriented, toward distant streetlights. She saw two bodies on the ground ahead, and she knew that way would be Commerce Boulevard.

Someone walking down the street saw them too. They stopped.

She could hear talking as a couple looked down at the men who had pretended to attack her.

“It’s happened again. Someone got mugged. Help! Police! Help!”

Morgan stopped walking.

She did not want to talk to the police. Even if there were only a handful of sheriff deputies covering the whole city, she wanted to have nothing to do with any of them.

Quickly, she turned around and headed toward the other end of the alley. She picked up speed as more people converged on the scene back on Commerce.

Turning out into one of the side streets, she kept walking. Few people were out this late, and no one noticed her. She headed for Courthouse Square and the Projects, sticking to the shadows as much as possible.

“What happened?” she whispered.

The fresh night air helped clear her head.

She realized that *something* must have happened. One minute she was attacking Night Shadow. The next minute, a big blonde woman was sitting on top of her, like some Viking warrior from one of those old operas.

“Did I imagine all that?”

She felt sore and bruised all over. She could still feel where that woman pressed her arm against her neck.

That was not imagination. Morgan attacked Night Shadow. Then . . . something happened.

She passed by a bar. Since it was off Commerce and catered to locals, it was a lower rent place with cheaper clientele.

Out front, rickshaws were parked on the street in a row, their drivers talking quietly together.

These men operated at night, unlike the youngsters who plied their services in the bazaar each morning.

They saw her walking by with arms crossed, holding her clutch tight, looking bloody and tousled.

“Hey. Hey! Are you alright?”

“Do you need a ride?”

“Ma’am? Ma’am, what happened?”

She stopped and saw the men, the concerned looks on their faces . . . and she turned on the tears.

Bawling, she said, “I just wanna go *home* . . .”

Minutes later, a man jogged down the street, holding the bars up on his rickshaw.

Morgan sat in back. Her arms were crossed, one hand holding onto the turquoise clutch, its sequins twinkling in the lamplight.

She was getting a free ride home, all the way back to the Southside Projects.

She’d promised the rickshaw driver he would see her again, but she had no intention of following up on that arrangement.

Men would do a lot of things for her, with just a promise. She knew that from experience.

She had lied and double-crossed many people, and broken even more promises in her short life.

5.31

Morgan walked up the steps to her apartment, stripped her bloody clothes off and took a shower.

An hour later she felt recovered enough to go and find Refa. She left her building and walked across the street. She passed the young man nominally standing guard, ignoring his lustful leers, and walked down the stairs into the basement and into Tay-hoe's.

At this time of night the place was packed, with patrons at the bar buying drinks and other drugs. Prostitutes mingled in the crowd, flashing flesh and making deals. In the back, a rowdy crowd lingered near the gambling tables.

She found Refa sitting alone at a table for two, ignoring the noise and everybody in the bar. Already, four hookers had hit him up for business, but he brushed them all off. They moved on to easier fare, so he sat alone.

Morgan, now in sweatpants, t-shirt and tennis shoes, did not seem dressed for a night out. This did not stop every man in place who saw her from staring.

Some recognized her as Gliph's new girl and quickly averted their eyes.

She too ignored everybody, taking the chair opposite Refa.

He did not look up at her, staring down instead at his glass.

Casper left him an entire bottle, which he must have paid dearly for, she thought, since Casper only sold liquor by the shot.

She said nothing, waiting for Refa to talk first. With the noise and hubbub in the bar, they could speak freely.

Finally he glanced up at her and squinted.

“What happened to you?”

“I was going to ask you the same thing. One second I’m stabbing Night Shadow in the neck. The next, I’m being jumped on by some old blonde chick who chokes me out. Next thing I know, I woke up back in the alley. Night Shadow is gone. You’re gone. Two of our guys are dead or knocked out. You tell me what happened.”

Refa did not answer for a long while.

She thought he would take a sip from the shot glass on the table, already filled with two fingers of amber liquid.

Instead, he took a gulp from the bottle directly, and set it back down.

“You were teleported.”

“What? No way. There’s no teleportation on Phaethon.”

“It makes the most sense. Think about it. You disappeared. I know you disappeared because I was there. Now you’re back. You said somebody knocked you out while you were gone. You were teleported somewhere, disabled and disarmed, then ported right back where you started from.”

She stared at him silently for a moment while he took another slug from the bottle.

“But . . . that would mean . . . That makes no sense. We have no AI to coordinate terrestrial teleportation. There would have to be sensors everywhere, an AI core . . .”

Refa shrugged and glanced up at her. His eyes started dilating from the liquor.

“There was a Republican Navy ship in orbit not long ago. Maybe they left some sensors behind. I know they left a satellite with a quantum matrix antenna so their reporter can file his stories with Diego. You have no idea what resources their navy has. Vicious people. Don’t get me started about Republican Naval Intelligence. You have no clue about some of the shenanigans those guys pulled during the war.”

“But . . . this isn’t war. And we’re not the League. Why would the Republicans even care what we do?”

“Who knows. Maybe there’s some resources here we don’t know about, like Gotha Mu’s gold.”

“There’s not a lot of gold on this planet,” Morgan said with a strong degree of confidence. “At least no more than your average habitable planet. I’ve read the survey reports.”

“How do you know those weren’t faked?”

The young woman blinked as she processed this statement.

“I don’t believe that. They wouldn’t do that.”

“You don’t know what the Republicans would do. You have no idea. They put themselves out there as champions of democracy, always wanting a population to decide things by voting. But . . . They. Never. Lose. Not ever. Why is that, do you think? What are they doing, what did they do to win the war with the League? Why did every planet they ‘liberated’ vote to join their ‘wonderful democracy?’ Don’t you think someone would have voted to stay with the form of government everybody there grew up with?”

“Look . . . okay, maybe the Republicans set up an AI on the down-low or something. Or maybe there’s enough sensors in this city and one of their battleships is still in orbit that we don’t know about. That’s probably the most likely scenario. But why would they tie it all into Night Shadow? It makes no sense. She’s out there fighting crime, with a helping hand from the Republican Navy? I don’t buy it.”

Refa shrugged again and took another drink.

“Night Shadow is probably a huge RNI psyop designed to get the planet to vote to join the Republic when the time comes. This is how they do it. They never lose an election for system alignment, I’m telling you.”

“Alright. Whatever. I’m sure they’ve lost one in the past. Look, what am I going to tell Mr. Gliph? You’ve still got to get the rest of the money for the train tickets he wants to buy.”

Refa stared down at the glass. This time, he emptied it instead of taking another drink from the bottle. Then he topped it off again.

“I’ll think of something,” he muttered.

“Good. He’s expecting the money in the morning.”

She looked up as one of the prostitutes approached their table, glaring at Morgan for disrupting business.

“Hi Refa, baby. Are you ready for some lovin’?”

“No. Go away.”

She pouted and gave Morgan another dirty look before wandering off in search of another customer.

"And don't spend it all if you do get it," Morgan said. "He needs at least 2,000 more credits."

“You shut up, too.”

Morgan sighed and sat back in the chair. She did not have anything else to say.

After staring at him for another moment, she stood up and left Casper’s bar, heading back to her room across the street.

Refa took another drink from the bottle. Then he drained his glass and refilled it. Then he took another sip from the bottle.

A burst of cheering rolled out of the gambling den in back, and a drunken crowd spilled over into the bar area.

“Phil! Phil! Phil!”

Refa looked up at the chanting. One drunken Southsider swayed happily, pockets bulging with tokens. He handed one to Casper behind the bar, who took it without smiling. He handed another to the hooker who had approached Refa. Two more hookers quickly attached themselves to his arms, somehow weaving through the crowd to get to him.

“Not tonight ladies,” he slurred happily. “I’m going to bed. Alone. Long day tomorrow. Some of us . . . *hic* . . . actually work for a livin’.”

“Awww!”

“Don’t be so disappointed. I’ll . . . *hic* . . . be back this weekend and I’ll . . . *hic* . . . still be rich!”

A small cheer went up from the crowd at his gambling success. He staggered toward the door, and they let him go.

Refa’s eyebrows went up. He chugged down another couple of gulps and let a few seconds pass.

Then he stood up and took the bottle with him as he went out the door.

5.32

Refa walked to the door of the tenement apartments, past the guard for the building. This young man looked thoroughly bored, sitting on a stool just inside the stoop.

He glanced up at Refa as he appeared.

Refa's eyes followed the gambler, walking in a slightly crooked line down the sidewalk, heading north up the street.

He handed the "doorman" the bottle, still three-quarters full.

"Knock yourself out."

The young man's eyes lit up. He pulled the bottle in close to his chest, as if afraid Refa would take it back.

But Refa headed down the steps to the sidewalk and turned to follow the gambler.

The doorman twisted the top off and took a slug of the whisky, not even noticing which direction Refa went.

An hour later, he wouldn't remember much at all from this night.

The fresh night air helped clear Refa's mind as he followed the staggering gambler from a safe distance.

Is there an entire network of sensors in the city? He thought if so, little he did out in the streets would be private.

On civilized worlds, AI sensors were everywhere. Municipal sensors used to sit on poles. Gangs and other groups outside the law often destroyed them. Over time, the companies producing them enhanced their durability, making newer models practically indestructible.

Also, the League in particular liked to hide their municipal sensors so no one knew where to go to find them, much less destroy them. StarCen seemed remarkably cautious about this, especially after the Great AI Reset.

So, Refa decided, if there were Republican sensors here, they would be hidden. They would also be few and far between? Maybe. There were almost certainly sensors in the Merchants' District. At least one.

Were there any in the Projects?

It seemed unlikely, he thought.

The Projects were where the least desirable elements lived. Few wanted to do any business here. Most people didn't have much money to afford many transactions, anyway.

No, the Projects served as the last thing passengers and cargo passed through when going from the Courthouse to the fairgrounds before being ferried away to other settlements.

If a Republican ship dropped off some sensors and stayed behind in a clandestine role, they would want sensors for terrestrial teleportation between the ship in orbit and down here in the capital. They'd want sensors in the important places, like the Courthouse, the bazaar . . . and the Merchants' District.

Refa raised his eyebrows at this thought. Morgan was likely teleported up to orbit and disarmed by security personnel. They likely patched up the woman calling herself Night Shadow and sent her back home. If so, that would buttress his theory she served as an RNI psyop.

In Refa's mind, there was no greater force for good or evil (mostly evil, in his opinion) than the Republican Navy. All of the data so far fit nicely into

his mental schema as he walked along, following his mark.

So, if the Merchants' District is one of the only viable place for multiple sensors, he thought, the chances the Pugs placed one here in the Southside Projects is . . . slim to nil.

Convinced he had arrived the closest to the truth that he was going to get for right now, Refa took a quick glance behind him.

He saw no one else out on the street.

The two men were now about halfway between doorways. They were, in fact, outside of the X's and O's territory. The buildings here were slightly nicer. This was more of a working-class area. Many living closer to the Courthouse Square over here held down legitimate jobs. They were taxi and rickshaw drivers, retail salespeople, janitorial staff, day laborers. They filled dozens of roles this less technologically advanced planet had to offer.

More important than that, as far as Refa was concerned . . . no guards stood inside the doorways here, watching over things. Nobody was likely to be looking out of their windows at this time of night, either.

Refa picked up his pace, closing in on the drunk from behind.

He reached into his pocket and pulled out a neural disruptor, a thick tube the length of his fist.

Originally, neural disruptors were designed for lab experiments on animals. A quick zap from the device, and mice or pigs or monkeys would stop doing whatever they were doing, blanking out for a second. This proved remarkably useful in a variety of settings.

For a while they were even available on the open market. Underworld figures then realized that if someone increased the power, they could be used to stop the neural processes in a human altogether.

The company making the products quietly took them off the open market after a couple of high-profile assassinations. They still sold them, though, but directly to universities and corporations doing lab work.

Some units still made their way to the dark corners of the underworld, at significantly higher prices now. Especially if they were modified to deliver a stronger zap.

Refa reached out and put a hand on the man's shoulder.

"Excuse me."

"Wha?"

The gambler stopped, confused, and turned around.

Refa put his fist to the side of the man's head, placing the neural disruptor just above his ear before squeezing it.

ZZZZT!

He slumped to the ground, the disruptor halting all brain activity.

Refa knew he was not dead. Not yet. But the unit shut everything down, including the man's heart and breathing. He only had seconds before expiring.

Reaching down, Refa opened the man's coat and began transferring the winnings from Tay-Hoe's over to his own pockets.

A minute later, Refa turned and walked back toward the Projects.

If only Morgan had this little device, he thought to himself, she might have been able to take out Night Shadow before getting ported away.

Perhaps I should have given that to her instead of the knife.

Next time, he decided.

"If there even is a next time," he mumbled under his breath.

He had no desire to take on someone who could call upon an AI and teleport at will.

5.33

The next morning, Refa knocked on the basement door of Gliph's office.

It took a while for anyone inside to respond. A minute passed, then another.

At last, Gliph yelled out, "Enter!"

Refa opened the door and walked in. Morgan was there, sitting in another chair behind the desk and to one side.

She locked eyes with Refa and pulled a strand of hair back in place.

A lot passed unspoken between their looks. Morgan had established domain over Gliph. Morgan had not told Gliph all that happened last night.

"Morgan tells me you did not obtain any funds last night."

Refa shifted his eyes back to Gliph. He stood in front of the desk now, facing his boss.

"We did not when she was with us. I appreciate her help. We lost two more men, Dockens and Chung."

Gliph frowned at this news.

"We can hardly afford to lose any more men. I'm gonna have to raise up more women fighters at this rate. Or start recruiting from the locals."

Speaking of locals, how am I going to get our seed team out in the field? I need more money. We can't just hijack a sky train, and I don't know of any other way to get out there."

Refa reached into his pockets and pulled out dozens of tokens. He placed them on Gliph's desk.

"I found another mark. There's more than enough here to pay your train fare, with some extra to boot."

Gliph's face lit up in a smile.

Morgan's eyes bulged. She looked at Refa with questions and concern on her face, but he ignored her.

"This is great, Refa. You've outdone yourself! We have enough here to bring you along, if you want to get out of town for a while."

"I'm good, thanks. I have no desire to leave League City."

"Fine."

Gliph stood, sliding all the tokens to the edge of the desk and into a little pile.

"Morgan, my dear, get ready to leave. And tell the others. Cloud Nine is departing this afternoon, and Captain Mathers charges the same fare as Montaigne."

Refa gave Morgan a little look of triumph as she stood up and left the room.

-+-

"Basically, she left her purse in her room. Then she walked down the stairs and into the basement across the street."

"That is correct, Gwendolyn. Presently, she is in the basement of her own building, without the purse. I cannot sense things underground very well. Concrete, lead and dirt serve as effective barriers. All the basements in League City are lined with concrete. Whoever designed and built the

structures did a commendable job. The buildings on top are mostly wood, but their foundations are solid concrete, as is the city's sewer system."

"You keep sending *me* underground, Lisa," Tom said, feigning outrage. "Into that very same sewer system."

"The mini sensor you left under a manhole cover is not very deep underground, Thomas. I can still sense what happens in that shaft, and a few meters around the top on the street."

Gwen chewed down another bite of pancakes. She looked across the breakfast table at Gina who stared back at her with questioning eyebrows.

"Lisa says our new friend left her purse, the one we hid a sensor in, at her apartment. Then she wandered down to some basements where Lisa can't follow."

Gina sighed and took a bite of her own pancakes, smothered in syrup.

"I knew that was too easy to work. This syrup is really good, by the way. 'Made with love.' That's cute, I like that. I'm going to take a bottle or two home with me."

Tom opened his mouth to make a comment on the syrup, but Gwen butted in before he could say anything.

"Well, at least we have somebody for Lisa to follow. It wasn't a complete waste of effort. Maybe we can help Haley put a stop to all the muggings and murders that are going on over there."

"Someone was mugged last night, I'm afraid," Lisa said over Gwen's implant. "It occurred in the Projects and happened far too quickly for me to do anything about it."

"Great."

Gina said, "What?"

"Lisa says there was another killing last night, in the Projects. I'm surprised anybody had enough money worth jacking over there."

“Everybody has money worth jacking at one point or another, Gwendolyn. Even the poor. That guy must have been extremely unlucky.”

-+-

Gliph spoke to his top lieutenants as the morning waned.

These older men were trusted. Gliph had known them long before the mass migration to Phaethon, and their loyalty to the organization had been tested multiple times.

Each one presided over at least one apartment building. Two presided over four. Together, they represented Gliph’s authority over the Projects, which, he explained to them, he was now leaving behind.

“I want you to hold down the fort, so to speak. Continue the good work we have done here. Stay out of trouble with the sheriff. Stay away from that black-clad crime fighter, if she shows up. Hopefully she’ll stick to the other side of the city and leave our area alone.”

“But . . . where are you going?”

“And why?”

“These are good questions. As you know, it is my desire that we take over this planet before it swears allegiance to one of the major systems. Their avarice and desire for more planets knows no bounds. But this galaxy needs at least one world completely devoted to anarchy. One place where men and women can truly be free from all laws and regulations. I aim to make Phaethon that planet. In those days, we shall rename this planet. We will call it Allegory. And everyone from across the Milky Way will beat a path to our door.”

Their chests swelled with pride. All four had been susceptible to this vision when hearing of it years ago. They still were. Now that they were on a frontier planet, the vision seemed closer to reality.

It had waned slightly, living for months on end in the Projects with little in the way of creature comforts. But now they were being handed control of their own fiefdoms, and their leader confided in them.

“I’m going to share something with you that does not need to leave this basement.”

The men leaned in. Two shuffled closer.

“In order to take this world, we need to spread out across the planet. I know our efforts to secure that smuggling boat failed, the one with the Machro-drive in it. But we still need to establish people in every corner of the globe. Then, when the great uprising occurs and we wrestle control from the Courthouse, we’ll have our people in place. We will own this rock and everything on it.”

The men nodded, satisfied the great plan seemed to be coming together before their very eyes.

“Now, I will go and establish our first foothold outside the capital. When that is done, we’ll take over more towns until we have a firm grip on the entire globe. And then . . . Allegory will be born!”

5.34

Tom stepped off the passenger car in Alief later that morning. For the locals, it was lunchtime. He had high hopes that since he was hitting this town in daylight he could sell some tools here.

The air was crisp, with the slight scent of ocean in the air. The rolling hills outside of town looked beautiful, all verdant unlike his own half-desert homestead.

Here, horizontal trestles up and down the slopes showed signs of growing grapes. Alief wine was highly desired. He suspected most of what was served in League City was highly inflated, both in price and reputation.

But the landscape around Alief looked gorgeous. He thought it reminded him of Sicily, or Portugal, from holos and old movies he'd seen.

He saw a sign on the way in greeting visitors. It said, "A leaf for Alief."

"Well, that's one way to get people to pronounce it right," he said with a smile.

Tom found a general store soon enough, near the middle of town. Like Little York, almost everything here was made from wood.

Alief was bigger than Little York, considerably bigger. But smaller than New Galveston and some of the outlying towns around League City.

The sky train traveled in a broad spiraling circle from Little York, in a circuitous trek around the continent of Glagia. Eventually they would stop at Westheimer, the furthest settlement of any significant size from League City.

Afterward, they would cross over to the continent of Iliou. There, only a handful of settlements were established, and it took a while to get over there.

After that, the sky train would head to Anatolia and Little York, then fly back to its home.

But Tom did not particularly care which way Montaigne took his sky train, nor how long the journey lasted. He spent very little time onboard, porting back to the farm for the lion's share of the journey.

In Alief, he received a few curious stares and some friendly waves as he pushed his floating platform down the street.

Outside the general store he stopped, meaning to go inside and have a word with the shopkeeper. But a woman came out before he could go in.

She wore slacks and a cotton shirt, and looked to be in her late 30s. Two young boys followed her out, matching her in build and facial features. Tom presumed they were her sons.

"What're you selling? Someone told me somebody got off the sky train loaded down with tools. That must be you. How much do you want for them and what do you have?"

"Uh, I've got quite a bit, actually. This is a sample. Five to eight credits each, depending on how many you buy."

"That's actually a really good price. Do you have any snippers?"

"Any what?"

"Snippers. Loppers. Things that cut small branches. And shears. The vintners are always wanting garden shears. Could also use more stainless-steel tubs, too. I never get enough of those, and now they say we're under some kind of embargo so there's no more coming in."

“Um, yeah. I can get all those for you, if you’ll give me a minute.”

He pointed his thumb over his shoulder. She took it to mean he had more items back on the sky train.

“Well, okay. I want ten garden shears, five snippers, and as many stainless-steel tubs as you got.”

“Uh . . . I’ve got ten tubs. Is 40 liters big enough?”

“That’s perfect, thanks. I’ll take all ten. How much?”

“Um, five for the shears and snippers. That’s 75. And, uh, ten for the tubs? Does that sound reasonable?”

“It does. I charge well for those since they’re hard to get. So, 175?”

“Yes, ma’am. I’ll go get them. I’ll be back. Um, can I leave my stuff here?”

“Absolutely. Cerry, you watch the man’s things. Don’t let anybody walk away with them.”

The youngest boy nodded sullenly. He stood staring at the tool-laden platform with his hands in his pockets, totally bored.

Tom walked back in the direction of the sky train. When he was far enough away that nobody could hear him, he touched the implant under his ear.

“Lisa? Can you ask Mica to make a bunch of snippers and garden shears, please? Go ahead and make 20 of each. I need ten of the shears and five snippers ported here, along with some way to carry them. Oh, and have her make a bunch of 40-liter stainless steel round tubs, too. And send me ten.”

“Will do, Thomas. It will take a few minutes.”

“No hurry. I’ve got to plant your sensor here anyway.”

One thing he noticed during this walk was that, unlike elsewhere, everybody watched him. He felt a little self-conscious about it.

Another similarity to Little York, he realized, was almost all the buildings in town were connected.

This, he knew, was a rapid construction technique. The frames were put up first along a street for meters and meters, then the walls went up, separating the shops and other businesses.

While efficient, it left little in the way of alleys that he could duck into for teleportation purposes. And with everyone eyeing the stranger in town, he doubted he could duck behind a house somewhere and get away with it.

“Well, may as well do some shopping while I’m here. Since everyone’s watching me.”

He stopped inside a store with a painted sign out front that read “Dryer’s Groceries & Dried Goods.”

He could only walk inside a couple meters. The counter came almost all the way to the door. Obviously, he thought, this is not the kind of grocery store you can pull items off the shelves yourself.

A plump fellow he presumed must be Mr. Dryer approached from the other side of the counter.

“What can I do for ya, stranger?”

Tom chuckled.

“Don’t get a lot of visitors around here, do you?”

“Nope. No roads have been built to Alief, yet. Sky train is the only way in or out. Or boat maybe, if you want to be real adventurous.”

“Ah. Well, that explains why there’s not much of your wine back home.”

“That’s right,” Dryer said with a smile. “Would you like to buy some? We have sample packs from our biggest vintners I can sell you. Eight bottles.”

He turned and retrieved a polyresin carton from a shelf with eight 750 milliliter wine bottles, each with their own colorful labels.

“That’d be great!”

“One hundred credits, please.”

“What? Come on. That’s outrageous.”

Dryer smiled politely and said, “I know for a fact you can get 50 credits a bottle at the bazaar in League City for each of these.”

“Yeah, this ain’t League City, bub.”

Tom turned to walk out the door when Dryer stopped him.

“Alright, fine. I’ll give you the local price. Nobody around here wants the sample pack anyway. They’re all partial to their favorites. Eight-five credits.”

Tom opened his mouth to counter with 75, but he closed it.

What’s ten credits? Maybe I can generate some goodwill around here.

He took out a hundred-credit token and the man handed him 15 back along with the wine.

“Thanks.”

“Any time, stranger. Come back soon.”

Tom walked out the door with the carton of bottles under his arm.

“I’m still a stranger, even after we did business? I shoulda offered him fifty.”

He still felt watched, all the way to the sky train car. He decided there was really only one private place to do a teleportation around here.

“Coming back so soon, Sonny?”

“Uh, not really. I need you to do me a favor, please. I need to go back up to my cabin. I’ve got something a shopkeeper wants up there.”

“I’m not normally in the habit of coming down to a stop twice, Sonny. But . . . I like you and you’re my only passenger right now. So, I’ll humor you. Step aboard.”

The sky car returned half an hour later, Tom pushing a smaller floating cart loaded down with washtubs and clippers.

He returned to the general store and made the transaction with the owner. He even tipped her son Cerry five credits for standing there watching his stuff all that time, bored out of his mind. This gesture made the young boy very happy, and his mother appreciated it, too.

“When will you be back? I’ll be needing more of these at some point, I’m sure.”

“I’ll be in touch.”

Saying goodbye, he pushed both his platforms down the street, heading in the opposite direction this time. But too many people watched him. A couple of old men sat in wooden chairs outside a barber shop, their eyes never leaving him as he strolled past.

“This place gives me the creeps. Am I close enough to the water tower for you, Lisa? Can you get something up there without me?”

“I can indeed, Thomas. I have a sensor in place.”

“Good. I’m going home.”

5.35

“**B** ig Ugly is no longer moving at speed, Gwendolyn.”

“What? He stopped running?”

Gwen reached down and picked up Biddles, preventing him from running down the steps of the back porch.

She tucked the kitten under one arm and cupped her other hand over her mouth as a megaphone.

“Mom! The sand dragon’s stopped!”

Gina waved from the garden where she culled weeds with Silas and Lola.

All three put their hoes down, leaning them up against a tree at the garden’s periphery, and headed for the house.

The air felt cool, in the teens, a marked contrast from the upper 20s and low 30s they usually experienced this time of day.

Winter, with little fanfare and few announcements beforehand, had suddenly made its presence known.

Or at least its approach.

Silas assured Gina it would not get *too* much colder around here, maybe dropping down into the single digits at the worst. The mountains and some

other areas like out in the desert would likely freeze, though, especially at night.

All three made their way to the back porch and into the kitchen.

Gwen said, "I made hot chocolate!"

She made sure everyone had a mug, and they all sat down at the table.

Lisa said, "I am porting in a holo camera on the nearest rock outcropping. On my mark. Three . . . two . . . one."

The AI brought a 180-degree view of the desert into the kitchen.

"Wow!" Lola said. "Look at all that steam."

The view stretching out before them showed steaming pools of water, with white plumes of vapor trailing off into the air. The ample steam and hot water evidently made the surrounding air much warmer.

Sand dragons of all sizes scurried about everywhere, untouched by the cooler weather.

"It's lizard-topia," Gwen said in awe.

"It's their winter resting grounds, obviously," Gina said. "Look at all those thermal vents. This spot in the desert must be warm year-round."

"Yes, ma'am. I do believe you're right," Silas said. "We think of animals migratin' south for the winter. Big Ugly and his compadres went north. But . . . our little finger of green sticking into the desert is already near the center. And anyhow, the center is where this hot oasis is. Looky there, some young un's is hatchin'."

Off to the right they could see some eggs, a little smaller than basketballs. A mama lizard stepped away and watched them carefully, bringing her snout in close.

Gwen stretched out her fingers on the scene and it enlarged, filling up the view.

One egg cracked open and a tiny sand dragon crawled out. It looked up at its mama and made a pitiful little roar.

Lola said, “Aww! They’re so cute!”

“They don’t stay cute for long, darlin’,” Silas said. “And believe me, you don’t want one for a pet.”

Lola looked crestfallen.

Gina glanced at her and nodded.

“He’s absolutely right. That’s an apex predator. It’s a baby right now, but it’s still an apex predator.”

Gwen said, “It’s hard to even shoot those things down, Lola. Their hide is basically blasterproof.”

Biddles jumped up on the table and batted at the freshly hatched baby lizard, paws swishing through the image.

“Well, cats are predators, too.”

“Not like that, sweetheart,” Silas said. “Trust me on this one. And trust the director.”

Gwen reverted the scene to a wide-angle view.

She said, “It’s probably a mating ground as well as a migration spot. And hatching grounds, too, I guess.”

“You need to get some scientists on this,” Gwen said. “An exo-biologist from one of the universities would kill for this opportunity. It’s a PhD thesis just waiting to be written.”

“I’m thinkin’ nature documentary,” Silas said.

“The camera and sensors aren’t going anywhere, Mom. They’ll still be there whenever somebody does get out here to research. Or do a documentary. In the meantime . . .”

She took a sip of hot chocolate and leaned back in the chair. Biddles jumped up in her lap, and she scratched behind his ears. The kitten purred and snuggled down, happy for the attention.

Big Ugly approached one of the nesting females clustered in rocks the size of beachballs. She looked up at him and the slits of her eyes dilated.

Another lizard approached, growling a warning.

Big Ugly launched himself horizontally before the younger sand dragon had a chance to react. He tackled the other one and they landed in a sandy heap, biting and clawing.

Just as suddenly, it was over. Big Ugly stood on top of the younger lizard, jaws clenched around its neck.

He growled.

The other sand dragon let out a low, keening wail.

The victor let go of his neck, and the challenger scampered away.

Big Ugly approached the nest.

The female made cooing noises and scooted over to give him room. He crawled into the tight space beside her, and carefully sat down on the eggs.

“In the meantime, I think this might even be better than an episode of Moon Love.”

“Ask Lisa if she’s recording this.”

“Tell her I am indeed, Gwendolyn.”

“She says she is, Mom.”

“Good. Tell her to keep the videos. Somebody is going to want to study this, someday.”

“If nothing else,” Silas said, leaning back to take a sip of his own hot chocolate, “it’ll make for one fine animal documentary.”

“‘The Secret Lives of Phaethonian Sand Dragons,’” Lola said. “Narrated by Silas Vick.”

He cast a troubled look toward Gina, but she made no response. She continued watching the sand dragons playing, eating and cavorting between

the steam vents and rivulets of water.

Somewhere in the distance a geyser erupted, sending a long spray of hot water skyward.

All the baby lizards screamed in fright and ran in circles. The older ones ignored the disturbance.

“Aw, shucks, sweetheart. Ain’t nobody wants to hear from me.”

5.36

“Night Shadow. I mean, it seems kinda redundant. She’s a shadow . . . at night? Where did you come up with that name, anyway?”

Haley sat with Ash in the rear of Arthurus again, at the same table they had last time.

Everything had been repaired remarkably fast, she thought. All the broken glass was cleaned up. Somehow the restaurant had replaced the parts of the giant fishbowl window that were broken.

What had not been restored yet were the customers. The staff recognized Ash, and were being exceptionally attentive to him and his date tonight. They had the place practically to themselves. Only two other couples and one party of four graced the interior.

“She’s a shadow in the night. Night Shadow. I don’t know. So many superhero names are taken, you know? That one just seemed to fit. And our legal department assured me it did not violate any existing trademarks in either system. That’s the important thing.”

Haley laughed.

“I had no idea lawyers were involved in the naming rights of superheroes.”

“Oh, yeah. She’s big right now in all the universities. Unfortunately, Zeitung can’t enforce a trademark on all the merch being sold with her name on it. But they can sell the story, and it’s huge.”

“Too bad *you* can’t profit on it, since you discovered her.”

Ash shrugged with a self-deprecating air.

“When I’m working for the company, everything I produce belongs to them. That’s part of the deal when you sign up. Whatever you write, any pictures and video you take, it’s all theirs. But in return, if you come up with something big, like this Night Shadow thing, it makes your name. I can profit personally with a book deal after this is all over and I get back to Diego.”

A little bit of wind died out of Haley’s sails at this statement.

“You . . . you’re going back?”

He glanced up at her while swallowing a bite of mutton.

“Uh . . . yes? Someday. I mean, not right now obviously. Probably not anytime soon. I don’t know how long this embargo is going to last. I’m kind of stuck here right now, to be honest.”

She said nothing, but glanced down at her plate.

“Oh, gosh. I put my foot in it, didn’t I? I would like to go home someday, Haley. I don’t see myself living in League City forever. This place is nice, and all. And I’m sure the rest of the planet is nice too. It’s just not home, you know? I mean, it may take a hundred years or more before this can even begin to approach something great like Octavia or Stockton. Or even Port Ryan. You know?”

“Sure. I know.”

He set his fork down.

She would not meet his eyes.

“Look, I didn’t mean to hurt your feelings. It’s a fine planet. There’s not much sun, but it’s a fine planet and there are lots of good people here.”

“No, I understand. You’re not a colonist. You don’t have the colonist’s mindset. It’s okay, it’s not for everyone.”

He frowned at her and tilted his head, reminding her of a dog.

“The colonist’s mindset? What is that, exactly?”

“It’s a commitment to make a planet great, like Diego, or Clarion, or Lute. The colonist knows their effort won’t pay off right away, and they may not see skyscrapers being built here from locally acquired resources in their lifetime. But their grandkids will. And that’s what they work for.”

He frowned again.

“From my understanding, colonists are people who want to get away from the two . . . the three major systems. They migrate out here from Diego, Clarion, and I guess Lute, because they want the freedom of going it alone.”

“That’s part of it, sure. Have you ever studied anything about beneficial selfishness in economic theory?”

“Oh, you’re going back to Adam Smith, now. Yes, I’m familiar. People do things to benefit themselves, like earn money from a job, find ways to get rich and so forth. That ‘selfishness’ has a beneficial effect on society as a whole. The more people who thrive in an economic system, the more wealth they spread to others voluntarily, and even more people will thrive. The Republic is built on that underlying concept.”

“Right. Well, it works the same with frontier planets. People do come out here to escape things in established space, sometimes. We get lots of criminals, people running away from debts and other problems. But once they’re here, they go to work. They have to, to survive. There’s some exceptions in the Projects. I think Hizzoner just keeps those people fed so they’ll continue voting for him. But for the most part, nobody is going to make it out here without working and contributing to the system.”

“Okay. I hadn’t thought of it that way, but okay.”

“And in the back of their minds, they *want* to make things better. Those who stay in the big city want to see the city flourish. Those who go out to the hinterlands want to see things improve out there, too. So they work and

they contribute, and they cherish the improvements. I'm going to be buried in Phaethon's soil, Ash. And I hope that my children's children will walk the streets of a great and prosperous League City someday, with glass towers and flyways and a big spaceport. A real one, not just some giant concrete circle on the edge of town."

She smiled at him and said, "That's what I'm here for. That's what most of us are here for. And I'm pretty sure that's what Night Shadow is here for, too. You should tell your subscribers that."

They left the restaurant with the *maitre d'* dropping hints that he hoped Ash would mention Arthurus in a positive light. Sales of Zeitung's printed material had increased dramatically, especially since many other media outlets were no longer accessible.

Some locals had been following Ash's culinary adventures, and restaurants he mentioned in his stories often saw a spike in customers afterwards. The *maitre d'* obviously hoped Ash could help restore business here as well.

Ash left a big tip and politely extracted himself from the conversation, neither promising to write about the place or saying he would not.

Out on the sidewalk, they both headed toward the bazaar.

Haley said nothing, watching her feet as they walked.

Ash frowned again, glancing over at her.

"Look, I feel like I put a wedge between us, and I didn't mean to. But yes, I don't plan on staying here forever. I want to go back home, and I'll probably take the next ship that comes in. I got a story, I've reported on things, everything has gone well. I don't want to start a relationship with any false hopes or expectations."

"No, I understand. You're just visiting. I've enjoyed spending time with you."

"Good! Good. I'm glad you understand."

They bid one another goodnight, and parted ways.

Haley watched Ash's back as he continued heading toward his hotel.

She sighed softly and said, “No, I don’t have any hopes or expectations for you, Ashley Thallus. Not anymore.”

5.37

Tom and Gwen popped into place out in the desert.

“Wow. Kinda cool out here for a change,” Tom said, adjusting to the difference in locale.

Gwen nodded and said, “Well, you know. Winter. I think it’s freezing after dark out here, now. There’s nothing to hold the heat in. You don’t think of a freezing desert, you think of a baking one.”

“Yeah. I guess if the sun wasn’t always hidden by the haze, it would be hotter. Then when winter comes . . . yeah. It’s just a change from what we’re used to, I guess.”

“Does Lute have harsh winters?”

“I guess? In certain parts. I like the equator. Weather stays stable year round, for the most part. I imagine that’s true on most planets. Mom and Dad prefer the mountains. Cold and snow don’t bother them. Me, I like the sun. I kinda miss it here, not seeing it every day.”

“What’s this?”

Tom turned to the huge boulder nearby and pointed at the heart symbol with J + G in it.

“That’s my mom, reverting to childhood playground stuff.”

“Oh, that’s cool. Your dad’s first name is . . .”

“Javon. Yeah. Javon plus Gina, forever. She calls this the ‘love rock.’”

“Aw, that’s kinda neat. We should do us.”

He pulled a knife out and approached the boulder.

To the right and a little higher, he scratched into the stone T + G, and carved out a heart shape around the letters.

“There we go. In stone forever, on the love rock.”

He turned to look at Gwen and found her smiling at him.

“What?”

“You know what.”

He smiled back and pulled her into his arms, kissing her long and hard.

When they came up for air, Gwen said, “I accept, by the way.”

“Accept what?”

“Your proposal.”

“My proposal?”

“Yes. I accept your proposal to marry me.”

“Oh. When did I do that, by the way?”

“Just now.”

She pointed at the initials and heart he had carved and said, “We can’t last ‘forever’ without marriage vows. So, the answer is yes. I accept your proposal. When would you like to get married?”

He let go of her and rubbed his chin, deep in thought.

“We could do a ‘stars and moons’ arrangement like Silas and Lola. In that case, we could just do it right now and ask Lisa to register us as married in her records.”

“My mother would kill me if I did something like that. There has to be a ceremony of some sort, or it didn’t happen. That’s the way she’s gonna see it. And I can’t say she’s wrong, for a change. I wouldn’t feel comfortable with some informal arrangement with a portable AI and then boinking each other out here under the stars. I want the real thing. The real *formal* thing. Walking the aisle kinda stuff. Preacher man pronouncing us man and wife. That kind of deal.”

“Okay. Hm. I think we can handle that. I’m not sure there’s a real preacher this far out in the desert, though.”

She slapped his shoulder, smiling.

“But seriously,” he continued. “I do think we can handle that. We’ll either teleport a preacher in or we can all go to the Courthouse in League City or something. We’ll figure it out.”

They smiled at one another again, and their bodies drew close, like magnets. They kissed with passion for several long minutes. He put a hand under the hair behind her neck and pulled her in close.

Tom pulled apart and said, “If you want a formal wedding, I should make it formal.”

He let go of her and bent down on one knee, holding her hand and locking eyes.

“Gwendolyn Wilcox Del Rio, will you marry me?”

“Yes. Of course I will, Thomas Savage Raleigh.”

He stood up and they resumed kissing for several more minutes.

-+-

Haley walked into Warehouse 14 between the rows of hay stacked up to the ceiling.

She walked past the old flatbed truck and her car, all the way to the back where her cot sat with clothes piled all around it.

“This looks sad. This is so sad.”

She sat down on the cot with a huff, and held her chin with both hands, elbows on knees.

“I mean, all the signals were there. He’s been throwing off the signals. I think he likes me. He doesn’t like me enough to *stay*, obviously. I guess he doesn’t like me that much.”

Her implant pinged with an incoming call from Gwen.

“Hey girlfriend!”

“Hey.”

Haley’s voice lacked its usual enthusiasm, but Gwen did not notice at the moment.

“Guess what?”

“What?”

“I’m getting married.”

“*What?*”

“I know! Right? Yeah, so Tom proposed. Actually, I kinda told him he had to propose. But he did it. My mom, being my mom and all, has kinda accelerated things for us.”

“Wait a minute . . . what . . . what’s going on? Accelerated things? Was this not going to happen any time soon otherwise?”

“Yeah, I’m pretty sure it was *gonna* happen. Just a matter of time. We are sort of living together, you know. Not that we’re living together like *that*, but we’re close and always drawing closer, and . . . there isn’t anybody else. For either of us. So, yeah. This just accelerates things. Mom was a catalyst. I wanna tie the knot before she has to head back home. She’ll need to go in the Pulsar and beat the ship she was on before it gets back to Diego in a few days. So . . . yeah. Marriage. How ’bout that?”

Haley was silent for a moment.

“Are you there?”

“Yeah. Yeah, congratulations!”

She made her voice sound happy.

“I’m happy for you, this is great. Tom is a lucky guy. I knew you two would hit it off.”

“I want you to be my maid of honor.”

“Uh . . . oh, wow. Okay. Um, *when* is this happening?”

“Before Mom leaves. So . . . soon? I’ll get all the details fleshed out. It can’t be too fancy because there’s no time. But it’ll be a formal wedding, recorded by PLAIR. And Lisa, of course. But PLAIR will be the official holder of record, so it will go out to the other two systems.”

“Okay. Well, let me know when you want to do it, and I’ll be there. Will I have to buy a dress or something?”

“We’ll go shopping! I’ll come over later this afternoon, if that’s okay.”

“Sure. We’ll do it. Will Lola be part of this?”

“Yes. I think Tom’s going to ask Silas to be his best man.”

“Okay, then. I’ll see you later today. The good stores like Elizabeth’s Private Chambers close at six, our time.”

They disconnected, and Haley fell backward on the cot, staring up at the ceiling.

She lay there quietly for several minutes.

Then she whispered to herself, “Now I know what that old saying, ‘Always a bridesmaid, never a bride,’ feels like.”

5.38

Glyph threw another pair of pants into the cheap polyresin suitcase, the same one he used when immigrating to Phaethon.

His room was a mess, with clothes scattered on the floor and bed, most of them dirty.

On top of the scrunched up garments he had shoved into the suitcase he placed a blaster, one of six he was bringing to the outer settlements. All of his men would be armed too, some of them heavily. While he preferred to let others do the dirty work, if possible, he believed in protecting himself above all else. So he rarely ventured out in public without a weapon.

The outer settlements were likely dangerous. He did not really know what to expect. He thought maybe outlaws would be a problem, if they could not be won over to the cause of Allegory.

Law enforcement, on the other hand, was practically non-existent here in the big city, so he did not expect it to be a problem out there.

That left monsters. He had heard the stories of sand dragons attacking villages and marked owls snatching away babies, giant snakes and so forth. But he did not put a lot of stock in those tales.

Privately he suspected some of those stories were meant to scare people away from resource-rich settlements, so that only filthy capitalists would

settle there. If the locals wanted more people to join them, they would lie about the dangers. Kind of like calling Greenland green when it was so close to the polar icecap, he thought.

Gliph threw in a pair of underwear that looked relatively clean, and closed the suitcase. Then he opened the door to the basement hallway, it was filled with men waiting for him.

He pointed to one of the younger fellows going with him to the settlements.

“Take my bag to the fairgrounds. Don’t lose it, and make sure nothing happens to it. We’re leaving on the Cloud Nine sky train. Make sure it gets loaded on the right luggage car.”

“Yes sir, Mr. Gliph.”

The young man grabbed the suitcase and headed for the stairs.

Gliph closed the door on his private quarters, resolved never to go back in there again.

He scanned the hallway, and looked at the men staring back at him. He pointed at three of them in turn.

“You, you and you come with me. You too, Mr. Slodovich.”

The four he singled out followed him into his office across the hall. He took a seat behind his desk and gave one more look out the door before the last man shut it.

He had hoped to see Morgan out in the hall, but she had not shown up yet. He did not want to leave without her.

The men lined up, looking at him expectantly.

He cleared his throat.

“I am about to leave, to help establish our global presence here. Before I go, I wanted to give you a final assignment, to help secure funding while I’m gone. I want you to rob the First Galactic Bank.”

Feet shifted as a ripple of nervous excitement ran through the men. The only one who showed no emotion was Casper Slodovich.

“Mr. Slodovich, you were special forces during the war, is that not correct?”

“I was a LEAF grunt.”

“Regardless, you have more military training than anyone else in this room. I want you to lead these men into the bank and rob it.”

They locked eyes for a moment.

Anyone else might have been intimidated by the flat look the old soldier gave Gliph.

“And may I remind you that your little establishment continues to exist and generate substantial personal income for you thanks to my largesse. It would be a shame if you were no longer allowed to freely operate it.”

Casper did not outwardly respond to this threat.

He said, “The bank is fortified. We don’t have the weaponry to take it on.”

Gliph waved at some guns leaning against the wall to his left.

“There are two heavy rifles. They’re yours. Also, this backpack has what is left of our egg grenade supply. That should be plenty for a military man like you to get in and out.”

Casper took the backpack from Gliph’s desk and peeked inside. He took a look at the heavy rifles against the wall, but made no move to retrieve them.

He turned back to Gliph.

“And Night Shadow?”

Gliph made a dismissive gesture.

“She’s just a girl in tights, Mr. Slodovich.”

“Who has killed . . . how many of our men?”

“She’s been very lucky. Mr. Ramirez got some shots off at her. It’s not like she’s invulnerable or anything. Besides, everyone thinks merchants getting mugged is the problem. No one expects the bank to be robbed during daylight hours.”

Casper held the other man's gaze for a long moment.

Finally, the old soldier nodded. He picked up the backpack and slung it over one shoulder. He grabbed three empty cloth bags from a pile on the floor.

Then he walked over to the wall and grabbed the heavy rifles. He slung one on another shoulder and handed the other one to the nearest man.

The young Southsider smiled and said, "Thanks. I haven't had a new weapon since Vinny lost my brass knuckles."

"We'll be back with your money," Casper said. "Don't go anywhere."

He made a nod with his head to the men and walked out the door. They turned and followed.

Gliph sighed and leaned back in his chair.

"I hope you do, Mr. Slodovich. I hope you bring me lots and lots of money."

5.39

It was not altogether out of the ordinary to see men walking down the streets of League City carrying guns.

No police were called, not that there were enough officers to go around addressing the concerns of worried citizens. For one thing, Casper and the others did not carry their rifles in a threatening manner. And there were only two rifles between the four men. The other pair had only pistols.

And most people carried pistols.

So the sight of two men among four with rifles across their backs did not stir up an alarm, at least not in the Projects.

The men walked into the working class neighborhood south of Courthouse Square.

Again, their presence raised no alarm. Most residents here were not even present, they were out earning money.

When the group reached the Courthouse, though, many people gave them second looks.

First, they looked obviously dangerous. Many people recognized the extra large rifles for what they were, heavy weaponry. And that served as a credible threat to the peace.

Worse, the guns were strapped on the backs of men walking out of the Southside Projects, the source of rioters and other unrest.

A handful of people stopped and stared at them as they marched down the street toward the bank.

One of the taxi drivers at the corner ran to the Courthouse steps to alert law enforcement that a possible situation was brewing.

Casper ignored them all, heading straight for the bank doors.

A merchant saw him coming, and the big gun on his back. He saw the determined steps the other men took, making a beeline for the bank. He ran inside to sound the alarm.

An old fashioned bell rang outside the bank, one of their security features. Everyone around Courthouse Square heard it.

The doors to the bank locked.

The deputy on duty at the Courthouse yelled and drew his gun.

Casper stopped on the street, raising his fist so the men behind him would stop.

He turned to the one he gave the other heavy rifle to and said, "Shoot the pig."

The man nodded and unslung his rifle. He turned and aimed up at the Courthouse doors, where the sheriff's deputy took the top of the stairs to head their way, weapon drawn.

The Southsider squeezed off a burst.

One of the big bolts hit, and the deputy flew backward on the stairs.

The bell kept ringing, its mechanical clacker furiously slamming in a fast staccato rhythm.

Casper reached into the backpack and pulled out a black egg grenade. He pushed the red plunger down and tossed it up against the bank's door.

"Get down."

He turned and squatted, holding his ears. The other men followed his example.

WHUMPH!

Tinkling glass from nearby windows followed the explosion as the door and front wall blew in, throwing back a couple people inside unfortunate enough to be standing too close.

Casper said to the rifleman, “Stand guard out here. Blast anybody who comes close.”

The young man nodded, zeal for shooting people glowing in his eyes. He turned his back to the hole in the entrance and watched the square.

Casper marched in the gaping hole, the other two right behind him.

The lobby was relatively small, about three large apartments back in the Projects, all pressed together. Four customers cowered on the floor, holding their heads. Two human tellers squatted behind the counter along with a bank executive.

One bot attached permanently to her seat simply observed, neither hiding nor exhibiting fright.

Casper aimed his rifle high and shot a few bolts against the bank’s back wall.

Everyone screamed. Again. They had all screamed when the grenade went off, except for the bot.

“This is a hold up. Everybody is going to die.”

More screams from the women. The men looked at him in horror.

“Unless you give up all the money. In which case you might get out of this alive.”

He nodded at one of the men who moved to the teller windows, hopping over the counter.

“Open the drawer.”

A human teller stood up, shaking like a leaf. She pressed her palm on the counter and a locked drawer sprung open, filled with tokens. The Southsider tucked his pistol in the back of his belt and started filling a bag with tokens.

Casper nodded at the other man. He jumped over on the opposite side, where the robot sat.

“Sir. I cannot let you over the counter.”

He held his gun up to the robot’s face and pulled the trigger.

Its head exploded.

More screams.

“Open the drawer!”

The other teller stood and slowly approached the counter, her hands up.

“Please don’t shoot! Please don’t shoot!”

She reached down and palmed open her drawer, then scrambled backward as the gunman reached over to empty it.

The bank executive stayed on the floor, hands on his head.

Under his breath, he whispered, “Night Shadow! Help us!”

-+-

Haley popped into existence on top of the bank building’s roof, red-eyed and pissed off.

“It’s bad enough my best friend is getting married and Ash is commitment-phobic and my life is just crap right now. Now there’s a bank robbery, too?”

“That is correct, Haley. They have large weapons and grenades. Be careful.”

“Careful is not really on my mind right now, Lisa.”

She walked to the edge of the roof. The floors above the bank lobby were all devoted to apartments, mostly used by people working for the financial industry or the Courthouse. It stood five stories, just like most of the other buildings in this part of town.

Haley stepped onto the ledge and looked down. She had bought new leotards in different colors, not just black so the shop owner would not get suspicious. She wore a fresh black one over her sand dragon skins again.

Below, on the street, the gunman with a heavy rifle pointed it at the Courthouse, then swung it across the street, then back toward the square again, sweeping everything in sight.

But he did not look up.

She remembered Tom's brass knuckles this time, and slipped them over the gloves on her right hand.

Haley held her arms out straight, then jumped. She sailed down four stories before Lisa popped her away, arresting her fall.

She reappeared half a meter above the gunman, her arms dropping down over his shoulders and forcing him to aim the big gun down.

A giant bolt went off, slamming into the street. He tumbled over, with her on top.

She slammed into the trigger assembly with her brass knuckles, the force bracers pushing them down hard on his finger.

He screamed. His finger flattened and the trigger broke off, damaging the gun. She shifted to his face, pummeling hard.

All of her pent-up emotions came out as she hit his face again and again, punctuating each strike with another word.

"You. Sorry. Rotten. No. Good. Bastard!"

She stopped, panting, and pulled back at the sight of his bloody skull. The man no longer moved or screamed.

Thoop! Thoop!

The robbers inside made their way out now, the two men in front firing on her in the street.

She rolled out of the way as bolts slammed into her middle, the sand dragon skin absorbing them. She got up and ran toward the Courthouse, blurring as Lisa ported her every other step.

The men stopped shooting and moved further out on the street.

“Where’d she go?”

A black streak blurred straight toward them, running back from the square. Too late, one of them aimed to shoot.

Haley’s brass knuckles whipped out, pulverizing a jaw.

She wrapped an arm around the one’s neck and pulled, filled with anger and adrenaline powered by the bracer. His neck popped.

She dropped the limp body.

Haley wheeled around ready to take on Casper, the last man standing.

He shot her with the heavy rifle from three meters away.

She disappeared, the pop going off almost simultaneously with the blast.

Casper blinked, still holding the rifle.

The other two men were dead on the ground, but Night Shadow . . . was gone.

He glanced both ways up and down the street. People ducked behind cars or lay flat on the sidewalk. But he could see no one dressed in black, ready to fight.

Mentally, he shrugged. He strapped the rifle over his shoulder, reached down and grabbed the money bags from the dead men.

Quickly he headed across the street, walking back toward the Projects.

5.40

Haley opened her eyes and found herself staring up at the ceiling in Tom's house.

Gwen's face slowly floated into view, blocking out most of the ceiling.

She held up an empty pneumatic syringe and smiled.

"Milspec. Saved your life this time. You had a big hole in your side."

"Hm. I don't remember much."

Tom's head floated into view on the other side.

"Whatever hit you put a hole in your sand dragon hide. Must have been a heavy rifle."

He looked at the empty syringe and added, "We're gonna have to get more of that stuff if you insist on getting hurt all the time."

"I'm sorry."

"Hey, no problem. We saw what you did to the other guys. Your friend the reporter got to the scene not long after Lisa ported you here. The pictures are . . . gruesome. But I'm sure those guys deserved it."

At the mention of Ash, her face clouded.

“Hey, hey. It’s alright,” Gwen said. “What’s the matter? What is it? Tom, go make her some tea.”

Tom recognized the excuse to get him out of the room. He backed away and walked into the kitchen, leaving the women alone.

A tear rolled down Haley’s cheek.

“I’m sorry, Gwen. I should be happy for you. You’re getting married and all that. It’s just . . . I thought maybe Ash was starting to feel for me the same way I’ve been feeling for him. But all he can do is talk about how much he’s looking forward to going home. And I’m not going anywhere. This is home.”

“Hey, it’s okay. I’m here. Just talk it out.”

“I mean . . . it’s not fair, is it? You can find someone to love. Lola can find someone. Why can’t I find someone? Why is the guy I’m interested in ready to jump on the next ship out?”

Gwen said nothing. She reached down and gently hugged her friend, arms wrapping tight around her.

“Ow. Still tender. I don’t remember getting shot.”

Gwen let go and smiled down at her friend.

“It’s okay. You’re okay. Night Shadow lives on to fight another day.”

“Woo-woo. Yippee.”

But Haley smiled, the negative emotions spent.

“I’ll be happy to be your maid of honor, Gwen. Just tell me when. And someday, maybe . . . maybe, if I ever find Mr. Right, you can be mine.”

“You know I’d love that,” Gwen said, giving her another hug.

-+-

Gliph watched as his last man loaded up stuff into the Cloud Nine luggage car. The man entered the passenger car, strapping in next to Morgan and the

others.

“Are you about ready, Mr. Gliph?” Captain Mathers said.

He stood near the controls, and seemed anxious to get back to the main body of his sky train floating one kilometer up.

“In just a moment, Captain. Just a moment more. I am expecting a last minute delivery before we lift off.”

“Well . . . no offense, but we do need to leave soon if we’re going to stay on schedule.”

“I have paid you the fare for all twelve of us, Captain. I would appreciate the privilege of you waiting just a while longer.”

Mathers backed off at this statement. In a time of decreasing passenger traffic, he felt very fortunate indeed to have Gliph show up with eleven other people, going almost to end of the line.

Gliph kept an eye on the street to the Projects ending at the fairgrounds. At last he saw a man heading his way, carrying three black bags and a heavy rifle strapped to his back.

“There he is. Mr. Slodovich! Over here!”

Casper showed up, unsmiling as usual. He walked up to the car and a beaming Gliph with the bags, and handed them over.

“Oh, good show, Mr. Slodovich. Good show indeed.”

Casper made no comment. He betrayed no expression on his face.

He spared one glance at Morgan, strapped in the train car, and turned on his heel to walk back toward the Projects.

Carefully, when he was sure enough distance had been placed between himself and Gliph, he lightly touched his front pockets.

They were stuffed with big tokens.

For the first time all day, he smiled.

Gliph watched him go, smiling himself. He climbed back into the passenger car with the bags of tokens.

“Are you ready to go now, Mr. Gliph?”

“Yes I am, Captain Mathers. Yes I am.”

“Very good. Strap in. Then, we’ll be off to Little York.”

The door slid shut and the three connected cars for Cloud Nine rose vertically into a darkening sky.

-+-

The sun floated a little higher in the hazy sky above the Skoni Desert, many kilometers away.

Here, a light wind blew a small dust twister past a rocky outcrop.

One particular boulder showed signs of human activity, with initials and hearts carved into its side.

On top, to one side, a modern sensor rested, giving Lisa an unobstructed view of the surrounding countryside.

Quiet reigned, other than the sounds of a gentle breeze and the patters of dust striking rocks.

Then, a pop rang out as the air displaced around two figures, a man and a woman.

Silas Vick reached for his wife’s hand as they both stared at the desert landscape. He pushed a duffel bag out of the way with his foot that teleported with them.

“I ain’t never been out this far in the desert before, Silas.”

“I know. Neither have I. It’s kinda excitin’, ain’t it?”

“What about the sand dragons, Silas? They’d tear us up if they found us out here.”

“Well, here’s the thing, sweetheart. Lisa can port us home lickety-split if there’s any trouble. But I reckon them dragons is all cavortin’ in their secret breedin’ grounds right now. We gots the place to ourselves. For the moment, anyhow.”

“Oh, that’s neat. I bet not many people have ever been this far out.”

“Looky here. Mr. Savage and them done put their initials up.”

“Aww! That’s so sweet!”

“Yeah, he says they call it ‘Love Rock.’ Here, I’ll add ours.”

Silas retrieved a blade and set to work on the stone face. Moments later, he had “S + L” carved in the rock, surrounded by a heart.

“Oh, Silas. That’s wonderful. I love you.”

“And I love you. I was thinkin’, you know, we really should make this into a ‘love rock.’”

“Should we? I guess we could. There’s no sand dragons about, like you say.”

“We’ll be the first ones to ever make love in the whole Skoni Desert, I bet.”

“Oh, that’s exciting! But . . . it’s a little cold, and getting colder with the setting sun. Winter’s almost here.”

“I brought bedding.”

He unzipped the duffel bag, pulling out blankets and pillows. Laughing, she helped him throw them on the boulder. He jumped on top of the rock and reached over to give her a hand up.

They lay down together on the makeshift bed as the sun sank lower in the sky.

“Oh, Silas. You’re such a romantic! I love being one in nature with you.”

“Don’t you mean one *with* nature, sweetheart?”

She smiled and shook her head. He caught her drift.

Minutes later, Love Rock lived up to its new name.

End of Book 5

FARMER'S WIFE

6.1

Deep under League City, a black metallic ant poked its head out of a one-centimeter-wide hole in the concrete wall of the city's sewer.

Here at last, up from its lengthy subterranean exploration, it reconnected to the MicaBots' network when it pinged a distant ant further down the tunnel with a better connection to the outside world.

Silently, the little bot transmitted data over the network, which found its way up and out of the concrete labyrinth beneath the city to one of the small flattop pyramid shapes safely ensconced on a rooftop above.

From there the signal jumped to a stealthed satellite in geosynchronous orbit above the city, pinged off another one halfway around the world, and back down to a point farther north and on a different continent.

Here it found its way to Lisa's main core, safely stored in an underground desert cavern on Tom Savage's homestead. Rocks and dirt would have blocked the signal here, too, but for many receptors and relays connecting both wired and wireless connections deep underground. These spread kilometers down through a vast complex of chambers and tunnels, all carved out by MicaBots for mining and storage purposes.

The data transmittal, from the tiny ant bot to a giant underground brain, took place almost instantly. MicaBot 70100B sampled all the soil from its

section of the city grid, examining it from the surface to the bedrock. Then the little bot dug down an additional 100 meters.

The substrata underneath the city in this section of the grid, it determined, remained firm and strong. This was a shelf-stable part of the continent, not prone to quakes. The bedrock was not very deep. In this sector, it started at just 30 meters down. Parts of the sewer system cut through it, in fact.

Lots of other data was included in the little bot's report, including acidity levels of the soil, suitability for different crops on the surface, and the moisture levels at different depths. But the key info that interested Lisa and Mica, the two computing powers examining it, was that location-wise, this would be a perfect spot for Lisa's second core.

It would be underneath the city's fairgrounds, where sky trains landed and people wandered around for a small taste of the wilderness before returning to urban life.

Lisa projected that within 20 years these hectares on the surface would be designated a city park, and she estimated a low likelihood of future development for at least five more decades after that.

That estimation could rise if she were to gain additional soft control, such as influence over city leaders and committees, or the ability to introduce things like long range municipal plans. She had spent several processing cycles studying the designing, building and rebuilding of cities, from Nehemiah to Robert Moses, and she felt she had a good grasp on what to do.

It helped that League City was nowhere near the size and population of a truly large city. In more ways than one, she would be getting in on the ground floor before significant expansion.

Mica had 1,073 bots in, under and around League City. She called in all who were not otherwise engaged in other projects, for a total of 891 more.

Unnoticed by most residents, black metallic ants across the city converged on this spot in the sewers. They crawled down the sides of buildings, scurried over sidewalks and disappeared inside grates and drainage openings.

One zigged on the sidewalk, narrowly avoiding a man's foot coming down. It probably would not have been crushed, depending on a variety of factors. More likely, the man would have stumbled when the mighty little bot pushed his weight off.

If anyone saw them, and precious few were seen, they were dismissed as local bugs. No surveys had identified organisms that were any more harmful to humans than usual for this planet.

There were animals to avoid, for sure. But things like sand dragons were safely out in the desert somewhere, not anywhere near League City. A poisonous snake, indigenous to this area, was the only thing for which people kept a wary eye out. And most folks killed any snake on sight, poisonous or not, despite pleas from local herpetologists.

So the bots made their way into the sewer and headed south, for the fairgrounds, passing under the Southside Projects along the way.

Here, the mini sensor Tom left some time ago under a manhole cover in the Projects came into sudden use. It served as a link to a large sensor placed on a tenement roof by Haley Stonecipher.

However, Lisa needed a much stronger presence in this part of the sewers.

As night fell across the city, her large sensor on the roof and the small one under the manhole cover kept an eye on the street. Foot traffic here remained relatively light, especially compared to the more prosperous districts.

As the night wore on, even fewer people wandered the streets. Guards at the Project's doorways were the only ones keeping an eye on things, and at this late hour they grew bored.

No one paid attention to the middle of an empty street.

The heavy metal manhole cover lifted up a couple centimeters, one ant on each of the cardinal points. It moved off the hole it protected. In the dark and from a distance, it seemed to slide itself across the pavement.

A large sensor ported into place on the street with a small pop of displaced air, and everything paused for a second as Lisa monitored the area to see if

anybody noticed.

A few men stood in doorways within hearing range. One engaged in political conversation with an acquaintance. One discussed the services of a prostitute who lived in his building and was on her way out the door. Another dozed on his seat.

The last, and closest to the manhole, turned his head at the noise. But the street remained dark and from his place on the building's stoop, he could not see the sensor. It was about the size of an American football standing vertically.

Hearing nothing else, he went back to daydreaming.

The sensor then moved as if on its own accord but actually carried by a dozen ants. When it reached the open shaft, the tiny bots spread out and began shifting the load, carrying it down the metal ladder.

When the sensor disappeared under the surface of the street, the four MicaBots holding the lid moved it silently back into place. They zipped down the ladder to join the others.

A small ant parade followed the group carrying the sensor along the concrete sewer's floor, as if in escort. The larger sensor was much more powerful than the miniature one, and the bots carried it down the middle of the tunnel to the edge of the Projects.

Here, a small shelf had been carved out of the concrete by the ants, at the top of the round tunnel wall. The height would give the sensor greater range in the tunnel.

A string of helpful bots carried the sensor up the wall and placed it safely inside the nook. They then covered the front of the nook with a very thin wall of concrete dust, which took several minutes to complete.

The thin layer was not completely waterproof. In the event of a flood reaching the top of the tunnel, it would likely wash away the compacted dust and reach the sensor. But if water did knock the sensor from its perch, the bots could always put it back.

A bigger concern for the moment was a maintenance worker discovering the sensor and wondering what it was doing down here, how it got there, and who made a little nook for it. But that bridge would be crossed if and when they came to it.

When the bots finished, the thin layer of concrete looked almost identical to the surrounding walls.

Now Lisa had unfettered access to this part of the sewers, with a link to her greater network up on the surface.

A tiny pop echoed down the concrete tunnel walls as 10,000 more MicaBots suddenly appeared in a long column on the sewer floor.

They moved toward the tiny hole 70100B dug. The first bots expanded it the size of a token. More came in behind them, expanding the width even further.

More flowed in, shaping it to the size of a baseball. Then a basketball, then a dinner table.

Soon, a new tunnel sprouted off from the sewer, leading to an underground cavern. The bots dug into the bedrock, shifting the material, pulling it out and bringing it back to the sewer, leaving little piles of debris on the concrete.

Lisa teleported these away, making small mounds of dirt appear in various back alleys and streets around town.

When the sun rose over League City, Lisa's second core was fully installed underneath it. Microfilaments, each a single molecule long and virtually invisible to the naked eye, stretched out from the underground cavern in all directions, giving the core access to her communications network despite being buried under tons of dirt.

The entrance off the tunnel under the fairground had been replaced. No one walking by would be aware of the new hidden extension to the underground sewer.

Lisa connected all of the local sensors in League City, New Galveston, and the many other settlements on the continent Tom had visited to her new

brain.

Her capabilities increased, and she grew . . . stronger.

6.2

“So, uh, Mom?”

“Yes, Gwendolyn?”

Tom Savage and Gwen Wilder stood in the living room.

Gina Wilcox Del Rio, director of the Republican Agency of Justice, sat on a couch with a bowl of popcorn in her lap, one leg slung over the sofa’s arm.

Half the room displayed what was called by marketers a “half-sphere view” (actually more like a top quarter sphere, but that didn’t sound as good), showing a warm-water oasis several kilometers away in the Skoni Desert.

Here, massive numbers of sand dragons frolicked and fought. The camera sat on a rock facing one edge of the oasis, and a constantly rotating cast of lizards sped in and out of view.

Gwen traded a glance with Tom.

He squeezed her hand in a sign of support.

“Mom, Tom and I are getting married.”

Gina paused, a handful of popcorn halfway to her mouth.

“Be serious, Gwen. This reminds me of the time you told me your best friend Darcey Dublin had been kidnapped. I nearly had the entire force on

the case before you told me you were only joking.”

“Mom! I was five!”

Gwen stared at her mother open-mouthed, then turned to look at Tom.

He smiled back at her while her ears turned beet-red.

“Sounds like a story there.”

“Oh yes indeed, Tom. This is how Gwendolyn learned not to lie to her mother. A month of no playtime and various other punishments. It was a very stressful time for us both. I remember it like it was yesterday. We actually had an APB out on imaginary suspects for a few seconds before PLAIR informed me no such persons existed and that little Darcey was, in fact, safe at her home.”

Gwen now frowned, eyes squinting.

“Stupid AI betrayed me.”

Tom’s smile turned into a grin.

“Well, that does sound like an interesting story. But I have to agree with your daughter, Mrs. Del Rio. We are getting married. I proposed to Gwen, and she agreed.”

Gina turned away from watching an egg hatch open inside a nest in the foreground, cracks spreading across its off-white shell, and a fight between two male lizards in the background.

She stared at Tom.

“You proposed to her?”

“Actually, she accepted *before* I proposed. But yes, I did. I would like to take her hand in marriage. We’ve gotten to know each other very well, and I think we’re compatible with one another. We get along. We’re attracted to each other. We complement one another’s strengths and weaknesses. I think we’ll be a great match.”

Gina dismissed the holo with a wave of her hand just as a baby sand dragon poked its head out of a shell and made an angry squawk.

“What about love? Do you love my daughter, Tom?”

Tom looked down at Gwen, who no longer frowned. She looked back, locking eyes with the same intensity she always had when faced with something serious.

“I think I loved her the first time I laid eyes on her, as corny as that sounds. She came running into the pub back in Little York to escape that fugitive you sicced Marshal Metger on. And we’ve been together ever since. Over time, those feelings I have for her have only grown.”

Gwen said, “Aww!” and reached out to touch his cheek.

“Okay, you convinced me. This isn’t a repeat of the Dublin affair, after all.”

“Mom, I was five years old!”

“When are you planning on doing it, Gwendolyn, and what can I do to help?”

Gwen stared at her mother, ready to fight. Then she realized Gina was . . . smiling.

“Oh. Well, I thought it would be nice, you know, if we had it before you go back. You can help me plan. Dad can show up via holo, maybe. Or, I dunno. Maybe Tom’s parents can get him here via hypertime or something. But the key thing is I do need your help.”

“That’s very thoughtful, Gwendolyn. I think it would be wonderful if Tom’s parents could be here, as well as your father. If that doesn’t work, a holo presence is the next best thing, you’re right. What do you think, Tom? Could your parents arrange a trip here for my husband? Would they be willing to join him?”

Tom raised his eyebrows in thought.

“As far as I know, Pulsar is the only ship that can skirt the rules on the embargo.”

“Ah, I forgot about the embargo.”

“But I bet if he’s willing to fly a few weeks alone out to Lute, my parents would be happy to join him on the rest of the route. Might be a chance to get to know one another.”

“Yes. Yes, this is a good idea. I’ll ride home with him, of course. That should be fun, going from Lute to Diego all by ourselves. We haven’t had a chance to get away from our jobs in a while. And we can do it in hypertime without losing much real time at work.”

“Mom . . .”

Gwen snapped some fingers in her mother’s face.

“This is my wedding. My special day. Focus.”

“Of course, dear, of course. I’m just thinking out loud. Okay, who needs to talk to Chris and Jillian about this? You do that, Tom, and see if he’s willing to go along with picking up Javon on Diego. If he’s not, I’ll talk to him and convince him.”

“I don’t know what you could say that would convince the richest man in the galaxy to do what you want if he doesn’t want to, Mom.”

Gina laughed lightly.

“Oh, don’t worry, Gwendolyn. It won’t come to that.”

Tom and Gwen shared a glance. He raised a questioning eyebrow at her. She shook her head and shrugged.

“Now, the big question. Where are we going to have it? Here?”

Gina gave a glance around the little living room, scattering a few stray kernels of popcorn on the couch.

“No,” she answered her own question. “It needs to be in a church. With a pastor. Javon’s family is very traditional. You’re still a Del Rio, for now anyway, until he gives you away. What’s the biggest, nicest church on the planet, Tom?”

“Uh . . . I’m pretty sure it’s in League City.”

“I’m not getting married in League City. I want a country wedding. Out here is fine. And no guests other than immediate family and our friends here.”

“Okay, no big city ceremony. That’s fine, dear. But we still need a church. Your father is going to insist on it. I will too.”

“Why?”

“To back him up. Is there one in that town near here, Thomas?”

“Uh . . . I don’t think so? I don’t remember seeing one there.”

Gwen shook her head.

“Well, can your little army ant robots build us one? Maybe set it up a little ways outside of town so the locals don’t see it being constructed.”

“Yeah, that . . . that should be doable. They can put one up overnight.”

“Excellent! I’ll leave the church building to you, then. All we need is a pastor to lead the ceremony. Please have your AI connect us with the Raleighs. You can tell them the news, Tom, then I’d like to talk with Chris about travel arrangements.”

Gina turned and gave Gwen a warm smile.

“Then we’ll call your father.”

6.3

After the initial excitement about the upcoming wedding died down, Tom retreated to the back door. He left the house looking for Silas Vick, his farm hand.

Out back, the space capsules used as storage sheds were all shut tight, their irises closed and door panels glowing red.

The garden stood empty. The field behind the house stretched north, grass and shrubbery growing increasingly sparse as it rolled toward the desert half a kilometer away.

Divots were left in the ground out where Pulsar usually landed, but the ship was in transit at the moment, bringing in another round of supplies from Lute for Lisa's expanding sensor network and other supplies Tom and Gwen had requested.

Tom walked around the side of the house toward the barn sitting alongside it.

The CC 1000 had moved itself more to the right and now stood in front of the corral off to one side.

It had been a sight to see, Tom thought. Six spidery legs unfolded from the metal slats. The coop picked itself up and crept to a new location while

Robert and the chicks were out. Then it settled down and folded the legs back in, like a fairytale house that liked to move on its own.

This new location meant that Tom did not have to be as careful approaching the corral gate, or his front porch.

Robert the Rooster considered all the area surrounding the chicken coop as his own, to be zealously guarded from any non-poultry specimens. However, now that the coop had moved, his domain had shifted as well. The big mean bird no longer gave the death glare to anyone going near the front porch or the corral gate.

Tom found Silas standing alongside the corral's wooden fence with his wife, Lola. They both turned to him with concerned expressions on their faces.

"Hey there you two. Found ya. What's going on?"

"I'm thinkin' Bessie is about to give birth, Mr. Savage. In fact, I'm sure of it."

"Really? I didn't know she was pregnant."

"Well, we didn't either. I had noticed she was gettin' kinda fat lately. But I figured that was all this good grass growin' out by the river. I also saw her udders were gettin' more pronounced, but honestly didn't think much about it."

"Yeah, I noticed she was getting fat, too. So we think she's preggers, huh?"

Silas lifted a finger and pointed inside the corral. There, Tom saw the mare lying down on the ground, breathing hard.

"Yeah. Huh. She does look she's about to give birth. Do you think there's anything we can do to help her?"

"Nope. Horses have been givin' birth without us interferin' since forever. She'll be fine. I hope."

"How'd this happen? I mean, I know how this happened. But I also know Lucas didn't do it. He's been fixed. Did one of these new horses we got knock her up? I haven't noticed any equine lovemaking going on. Not that

I've been looking for it. And Timmy puts them all in separate stalls at night."

"It probably was one of the Fae Phalanx horses, Mr. Savage," Lola said. "We used to pen them all together back when we were camping out in the woods. Bessie must have been fertile around that time, and one of the stallions mounted her."

Silas nodded and said, "The timin' is about right. Horses have almost one standard year gestation, about eleven months or so, if I recollect correctly."

Tom scratched the back of his head, watching the horse on the ground. He saw movement, a light ripple, in her belly.

"Well . . . I guess I should go tell Gwen."

He turned and walked to the front door, climbing the short steps to the porch while Silas and Lola kept watch at the fence.

He opened the door and poked his head inside.

Mr. Biddles immediately tried to make a break for the outside, running toward him. Tom put a foot in the crack of the door, thereby preventing a feline escape.

"Hey, sweetie. Your horse is about to give birth."

"WHAT?"

Gwen and Gina came out quickly. Gwen ran past Tom to join Silas and Lola at the fence.

"What's going on? Omigosh. I had no idea! Is there anything we can do?"

"No, ma'am," Silas said. "I reckon it's gonna happen with or without us."

"Well, can we teleport in a horse doctor or something?"

"I don't reckon that will be necessary, ma'am. Besides . . . it's already happenin'."

They heard a loud huff of air from Bessie, along with some squelching noises.

Suddenly, the horse looked like she lost a lot of weight.

She took a few more deep breaths, then raised two legs up on one side and pulled herself into a sitting position.

Bessie stood up and turned around to face her baby.

On the ground, a tiny brown horse the color of mud lifted its head to look up, locking eyes with its mother for the first time.

“Awww!” Lola said. “It’s the miracle of birth!”

The foal put one front leg out, then the other, and pushed. It rose for a moment, legs trembling, before going back down.

“It’s already trying to stand up?” Gwen said. “Is that . . . normal?”

“Yes, ma’am,” Silas said. “The little one should be on his or her feet here in just a few minutes. It may take them a bit to figure it out, but they’ll be runnin’ around the corral here in no time. That long gestation period has them ready to go from the get-go, almost.”

They watched as the foal tried again, this time bringing its hind hooves underneath it before pushing up with all four legs. It stood about halfway before going down again in a heap.

It rested again as the group outside the corral kept talking.

Minutes later, the foal stood up on all four legs, and this time stayed on its feet for a full minute.

Its audience cheered.

Twenty minutes later, the foal could stand without trembling and took a few tentative steps over to the mother, who nuzzled its neck affectionately.

Then it began to nurse.

“So, is it a boy or girl?” Gina said.

“There’s only one way to find out,” Silas replied.

He opened the gate and closed it behind him, walking slowly into the corral.

The foal backed away as Silas approached. But he slowly and gently reached out a hand, stroking Bessie's neck and being careful to make no sudden movements.

The foal decided maybe Silas was okay. Besides, it was still hungry . . .

When it approached again, Silas calmly reached down and lifted up a hind leg, peering underneath.

"Congratulations. You got yourself a colt, Ms. Wilder!"

Silas returned to the others, still moving slow and deliberately so as not to spook the little one.

Gender now determined, the women debated what the new addition to the stables should be named.

"It should start with a B, like Bessie," Lola said. "How about Bernard?"

Gwen frowned and said, "For a horse? No way. I'm not naming any horse of mine Bernard."

"Aw! You could call him Bernie for short."

"That's an awful idea. No offense, Lola, but that name sucks."

"Silver is a good, classic name for a horse," Gina offered.

"Mom! He's brown! Muddy would be more appropriate than Silver. And I'm not naming him either one of those, either."

"How about Dunmire?" Silas said as he closed the corral gate.

All eyes turned to him.

He shrugged and said, "It's an old joke. Horse in the mud . . . dun mire . . . Well, he is dark brown after all. And he kinda looks muddy, from a distance. But Dunmire is a nicer way of saying he's a muddy-lookin' horse."

"I like it," Gwen announced.

The foal finished nursing and stepped away from his mother.

He stood still for a bit, surveying the corral. Then he took a few more steps, faster this time. He made a quick circle around Bessie, then moved even faster.

He stumbled only once, then picked up speed, trotting across the open area.

He headed toward the people at the fence and skidded to a stop, facing them.

All five smiled back at him.

Gwen said, “Welcome to our world, Dunmire.”

6.4

Later in the morning, Tom kissed Gwen goodbye and walked out the door.

From his front porch he could see Timmy standing watch. The robot stood with his back to the house with his front facing the river.

The horses wandered out closer to the river. Bessie and Dunmire had joined them, the little foal blending in easily with the other horses.

Already, Tom noted that the grass out there was fading. A couple nights ago, they had their first real frost of the season, and everything growing around them seemed to take that as a sign.

Soon, he would be relying completely on the hay so recently baled, as well as the oats from Farmer Asa's place to feed the horses.

Hopefully winter would not be too bad, he thought.

"Okay, Lisa. Put me in the Jet Stream."

He disappeared with a pop of displaced air.

Tom reappeared in his cabin aboard the sky train. He could feel the Jet Stream slowing down as they neared one of the final stops on their trek to the many towns and settlements across the planet.

They were now over the continent of Iliou, the least populated of the three major landmasses. From what Captain Isadore Montaigne said, they would hit the few larger populated areas on Iliou before swinging back around to Anatolia and stopping at Little York last.

Tom did not really care that Little York came last on the list of stops, since he had sensors there and could teleport to the town whenever needed. But Iliou, on the other hand, offered an opportunity for Lisa to branch out her network in a significant way.

Four small townships large enough to warrant visiting were out here, and in that regard the continent exceeded Anatolia, which had only three cities including Little York which was the largest. Two more were on the outer green ring going around the desert. Their population focused more on fishing and other maritime pursuits.

All the settlements on both continents did not have much in the way of retail. Tom knew the general store in Little York was small, and did not carry lots of inventory. He expected even less retail out here among the Illiou settlements, many of which were only a few months old.

But he wanted to look. Selling shovels and other tools was only a secondary reason for the visit.

A light knock at the door signaled Montaigne's presence. Tom looked around the cabin, grabbing his sidearm and belting it around his middle. He grabbed a small black backpack, then he opened the door.

"We're comin' up to Waller, Sonny! Maybe you'll make some sales here."

"Maybe."

He followed Montaigne to the passenger car and strapped in while Montaigne manned the controls. The car disconnected from the train along with a baggage car, and they descended.

When the cars landed in a field moments later, the doors slid open. Tom retrieved his floating platform filled with shovels, rakes, pitchforks and other tools.

In the distance he saw the town of Waller, built on the standard new settlement blueprint of two long buildings forming a main street, subdivided into different storefronts.

Closer to the landing cars, a handful of crude wooden buildings displayed signs of human habitation. In the dim light of mid-morning, Tom thought the ramshackle structures reminded him of tombstones. Patches of lingering fog swirling on the ground emphasized that feeling.

“I would say I don’t expect you’d find much to do here for three hours, Sonny,” Montaigne said from the door of the passenger car with a smile. “But from experience I know better than to get my hopes up.”

“Surely you make some deliveries this far out, Captain Montaigne. It can’t be all that bad here.”

“I’m sure it’s a fine place. Few people are settled here, though, as of yet. Lots of unclaimed land. Eventually it will fill in, but . . . it will be the last place to crowd up, I bet. Go look around and come back. We’ll see if you agree.”

Tom nodded and turned, pushing his floating cart toward the settlement. After walking several meters, he cast a casual glance over his shoulder. Montaigne had settled back in one of the passenger car seats, reading an e-book, the words floating in the air in front of his face.

Tom pulled out a handful of MicaBots and scattered them on the ground as he walked.

The little ant-like figures rolled onto their feet and looked around, gaining their bearings. Most scattered, heading away for all points of the compass at high speed. Some immediately began digging into the ground, burrowing their way down for soil surveys.

He stopped at the edge of the buildings and surveyed the town’s one street.

Tom counted four businesses. The general store, thankfully, stood in the center to his left. An inn and pub occupied the space across the street from it. Closer, and on his right, a doorway had no sign. It appeared the space was being used for apartments.

No one was on the street.

He sighed.

Tom pushed his floating platform ahead of him, and headed for the general store in the middle of the little town.

It's not that different from Little York, he thought. Maybe smaller . . .

The sound of distant hoofbeats interrupted his thoughts.

On the far side of the street, where the long buildings stood empty, a rider whipped around the corner and came straight down the middle, galloping hard.

He was dressed all in black, and the front brim of his hat flapped up in the wind from his speed.

He crouched forward, legs tight in the stirrups, riding with grace atop the mighty animal as if one with the steed.

Tom looked from around his cart and furrowed his brows at the sight of this man in black bearing down on him.

More hoofbeats rumbled around the far side of town, and three riders came into view giving chase.

Shots *thooped* out, and bolts flew down the street.

Tom hit the ground, red streaks flying overhead.

One of them connected with the man in black's horse. It screamed in agony and went down, hind quarters eviscerated.

The man fell at full gallop and rolled, stopping within twenty meters of Tom's location and lying on his stomach.

He looked up and locked eyes with Tom, also on the ground.

Tom took in a deep dark and flowing beard with rich red-golden hues, green eyes . . . and a white collar around the man's neck.

More bolts sailed down the street. The three riders pulled back on their reins, bringing their mounts to a sudden halt.

The preacher man's horse still screamed. All three shot at it, peppering it now with blasts. A bolt finally hit its head, putting the poor animal out of its misery.

Silence reigned in the streets for a moment.

Smoke from sizzling horseflesh drifted up from the animal's corpse.

The three men smiled, guns out and aimed at the preacher man.

Tom stared at them from his spot behind the garden tools, wondering what in the heck was going on.

Slowly, the preacher man rose to his feet.

As he stood facing the men, Tom noticed the gun belt around the man's waist. Twin pistols rested on his hips.

The men stared back, all aiming their guns and sneering at the pastor.

Slowly he opened his shirt, undoing the top two buttons. He grabbed a chain around his neck and pulled out a silver cross, ten centimeters tall.

"That ain't gonna do nothin', preacher," the first gunman said. "Faith can't help you now."

Grinning, the gunman squeezed his trigger. The other two followed suit, spraying the preacher with bolts.

But nothing hit him. A shield flickered with every shot, absorbing the bolts.

Tom suddenly realized the cross was more than a simple religious symbol . . .

They stopped shooting, with stupid looks plastered on their faces.

"What the . . ."

Before the gunman could finish, the preacher drew both his sidearms and returned fire while running for the wooden sidewalk.

Tom pulled out his own gun and squeezed off a careful shot at the first man's head. It hit him square in the face, making a red and gray cloud of mist explode. He fell out of the saddle, headless.

His mount bolted, racing back up the street. But a boot caught in one of the stirrups. The galloping horse dragged his headless corpse out of town, trailing blood.

6.5

When the preacher returned fire, the two remaining gunmen suddenly realized they had no personal shield of their own.

Nor anywhere to hide and take cover.

The preacher avoided aiming at their horses. This proved a remarkable display of self-control in light of the fact they shot his animal, Tom thought. But the preacher's bolts hit home on the riders.

Tom thought he had pretty good aim, especially under fire two to one.

The preacher got one gunman in the arm and knocked him from his saddle. This man's horse decided to follow the other one, galloping riderless out of town posthaste.

He scrambled toward the wooden sidewalk, taking shelter behind a water barrel. The gunman stuck his head up, returning fire and ducking back down before the preacher could shoot him.

The pastor now held his hands wide, holding down the man at the watering trough with his left gun, and shooting back at the lone remaining horseman with his right hand.

Tom watched, impressed with the dual action. It could not be easy, he thought, lining up another shot on the horseman.

But the man on horseback had other plans. He jerked his mount's reins and kicked hard, making the steed pivot in the middle of the street. The horse fled, bursting into a gallop when the rider dug his heels in.

Bolts from both Tom and the preacher sailed past, missing the rider. He yanked hard on the reins to the right and left, making the horse careen down the street in a zigzag pattern with red and green energy bolts whizzing by his head.

At the far end of town, where the twin buildings came to an end, he jerked his horse left and rode away, chasing the riderless steeds.

Tom and the preacher turned their undivided attention to the man behind the barrel.

He gave up immediately, shoving his gun back in the holster on his waist and raising his hands.

"Don't shoot!" he said, standing up slowly, hands still high and eyes wide.

He stared at the pastor, standing to one side with both handguns now trained on his middle.

Tom aimed at him too from his position behind the garden tool floating platform, but the preacher seemed more of a threat to the man. He held two guns and stood in closer proximity.

Also the tables had turned, Tom thought. It all started with them chasing the preacher.

Tom glanced at the man in black, curious as to what he would do.

He held the other man's eye for a moment. A drop of blood from the wound on the man's arm fell, splattering lightly on the boardwalk.

The preacher spoke for the first time. Tom thought he had a clear, deep baritone, the kind of voice that carried well in a sermon.

"Well go on, then."

The gunman's eyes grew bigger for a fraction of a second. Tom felt just as surprised as he looked.

He turned on his heels and ran down the wooden planks in the direction of the horses and his colleagues, making a stomping sound of boots on wood all the way to the end of the row.

Tom and the preacher watched him go in silence.

At last, the man of the cloth turned and regarded Tom as he stood up off the ground and holstered his weapon.

“Thank you, friend. I regret you killed your opponent.”

“Yeah, well. Better him than me. They did kill your horse, so I’d call it even. Who are you? And what was that all about?”

The preacher came closer, sizing Tom up, head to toe.

“That was an unfortunate attempt to persecute me for my efforts in evangelizing this town.”

“So, you were annoying them?”

“They had trouble accepting the truth. Perhaps I was a bit too insistent in my approach. It was a learning experience for me.”

“It was almost a death experience. Definitely a near-death experience.”

“This is true. But the Maker protected me. Thank you again for your help. In answer to your other question, my name is Leonwood Igleses. You may call me Leo. And you are Thomas Raleigh, son of Captain Christopher Raleigh of the Ultima Mule and his wife, Tetrarch Thrall’s youngest daughter. Well, his youngest real daughter. They said Jade Thrall was the youngest, but we all know that was a lie.”

Tom paused for a moment, staring at the man.

“I don’t know whether to be more surprised that you know who I am, or that I know who you are, Mr. Igleses. You’re a renowned felon. If I’m not mistaken, you’re wanted in more than one system. What did you do, come out here looking for a fresh start?”

Now it was Leo’s turn to look surprised. But his face quickly returned to normal.

“I am indeed here in part because it is more convenient. I am able to answer my calling with little fear of apprehension out here on the frontier. But as for my past, I have turned over a new leaf in my life. I was falsely accused of a criminal act I did not commit on Seychar. Here on Phaethon, I hope to avoid my persecutors in the Republic. At the same time, I am here to preach the Word of the Maker to the lost.”

“Is that right?”

Tom gave him a skeptical look.

“Yes.”

Leo gave Tom a calm, steady look. He did not turn away or avert his eyes.

“And . . . are you commissioned as a pastor somewhere? By somebody? An officially recognized church or something?”

“Yes.”

“By a real church?”

“Yes. I hold a master’s in divinity from Nanking Seminary, and I am commissioned to preach in the Church of the Maker.”

“Hm. Okay. I’m not familiar with that one. Is it like the Baptists or something?”

“The Church of the Maker insists that Jesus and God are one. Jesus is the Maker. ‘In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. The same was in the beginning with God. All things were made through him. Without him, nothing was made that has been made.’ Those are the opening verses of the Gospel according to John. Elsewhere the Apostle Paul states, ‘For by him all things were created in the heavens and on the earth.’ And, ‘All things have been created through him and for him.’ Thus stands the Church of the Maker, spreading the Word throughout the Galaxy so that the Maker may be known by all, throughout all His creation.”

“Okay. But are you, like, a *legitimate* preacher?”

Leo tilted his head slightly and stared at Tom. A trace of irritation crossed his face at this continued questioning of his bona fides.

“I admit my master’s degree was obtained at a distance. I attended all classes via holo from a secure location. My presence in the Republic at the moment is . . . unwelcome. While I did not attend my classes at the seminary in person, I nonetheless performed all that was required of me to earn my degree. My commissioning in the Church of the Maker is likewise legitimate. The church is recognized in both the Republic and the League. I hope that answers your questions.”

“But you’re a fugitive.”

Leo lifted his chin up.

“That is one way of putting it, yes. I disagree with the most recent charges leveled against me on Seychar.”

“That explains what you’re doing out here, with all the other felons and fugitives.”

“I am here to spread the Word to a new planet. The Maker shall be known. Even the very stones of this planet will cry out in praise to Him, if we do not.”

“Right. Are you really legitimately commissioned as a preacher in the Republic? Does your fugitive status affect that? I mean, if you were to marry somebody, here, would it be considered legit over there?”

“Of course. I don’t have a connection to PLAIR to have her vouch for that, but even as someone who is *persona non grata* in the Republic, you have my word as a man of the cloth that I am fully commissioned to perform marriage ceremonies and other rites that would be duly recorded by PLAIR.”

He looked over Tom once more, as if assessing the seriousness of this line of questioning.

“Why is this important to you? Most people out here are not concerned with my standing in either the Republic or the League.”

“Just checking. I’ve got a marriage coming up, and we need a pastor. One who is fully recognized in the Republic, or at least by one of the three systems. I think they all jointly accept marriages recorded in other systems. But a Republican pastor would be the best, if possible. The parents of the bride are Republican, you see. Unfortunately, out here in the middle of nowhere, pastors are a little hard to find. And I don’t know anybody in the big cities, either. And I’m kinda under a deadline before somebody goes back home.”

Leo sucked his stomach in and stood a little straighter.

“I’d be delighted to perform a marriage ceremony for you. My typical honorarium for the service is 200 credits. I insist on the opportunity to share the saving message of our Maker as part of the ceremony.”

“Two hundred . . . Never mind. I guess you do have to be paid for performing a wedding ceremony. I never really thought about it before. But then, I’ve never been married before. Okay, fine. But there is one catch. And it’s a big one. One you might not like.”

Leo raised a perfect red-golden eyebrow.

He really does have a photogenic face, Tom thought.

The preacher crossed his arms below the silver cross dangling around his neck and waited for Tom to continue.

“It’s for the daughter of the director of AOJ. You know, Gina Del Rio? She’s probably in charge of a task force looking for you. And I know she knows who you are because she’s mentioned your name before. That’s how I knew who you were.”

Leo’s other eyebrow lifted.

“Oh, and one more thing,” Tom said. “The director will be attending the wedding, too. She’s here. On Phaethon.”

6.6

“This is quite the surprise, Young Mr. Raleigh. I feel like this is a divine appointment, meeting you.”

Tom nodded at Leo, still standing on the sidewalk as Tom stepped back out of the rinky-dink retail establishment in the middle of town.

Leo had waited patiently outside the Waller General Store until Tom finished his business there, mulling over their recent conversation. During that time, he stripped his dead horse of tack, leaving the saddle, saddlebags, and everything else in a pile on the sidewalk.

Only one man remained inside the store, the proprietor who reluctantly bought two shovels and one axe from Tom's cart. Tom had wandered through the rest of the small shop, giving Lisa a chance to port away a large sensor to the top of the makeshift water tower outside town.

This municipal water tower was nowhere near as sleek or modern or tall as the ones in Glagia. A simple metal cylinder holding 2,000 liters, it stood on a squat metal tripod, elevated only a few meters off the ground. A pumping system connected to a well to keep it topped off.

But it was enough for the town. And Lisa.

Tom took the sensor out of his backpack in the rear of the store and applied some adhesive to the base. After Lisa ported it to the top of Waller's water

supply, he stepped outside and looked for it.

He could just barely see the tower's top over the rooftops toward the end of the street on the edge of town. Tom could barely make out the sensor up there. He decided it looked like it belonged there, sitting beside the pump and other machinery.

He turned back and faced Leo.

"This 'appointment' could result in a bad turn of events for you, Mr. Igleses. I'm sorry, shouldn't that be 'Iglesias?' My Spanish is a little rusty."

"It's Portuguese. My ancestors migrated to the stars from Portugal."

"I see. Look, I don't know what you're wanted for on Diego. The only reason I know who you are is Mrs. Del Rio brought your name up, listing off the really bad hombres who've made their way out here. Just so you know, she sicced the Marshal's Service on one of those guys, Mal Dalmont. And the marshals don't really concern themselves with jurisdictions. So, there's a very real possibility when this is all over and Mrs. Del Rio has gone back home, that your troubles might be just beginning."

Leo nodded, wearing a thoughtful face. But he looked undeterred.

"Thank you for letting me know. Yes, I am quite aware of how serious Del Rio takes her job. She is rather famous throughout the systems. However, and I want to repeat, I do not believe the charges against me on Seychar are warranted. I am willing to meet the director in the flesh and press my case. I see this more as an opportunity than a threat."

"You realize she's got nothing to do with the charges. She just enforces the law, she doesn't make it. I don't know that she can do anything about dropping any of your charges, even if she wanted to."

"Yes, yes. I am aware. I understand the role of law enforcement. But it won't hurt for her to know the truth. As the Maker said, 'The truth shall set you free.' And it will eventually free me from those baseless charges. This is not something I am called to worry about, Thomas Raleigh."

"Right. Well, so long as she's been here on this planet, she hasn't really done a whole lot of law enforcing, being out of her jurisdiction and all. But

if you're willing to risk it, and you fully understand what you're up against, I'd love to have you perform the ceremony."

"Excellent. And who will be wedding the young Ms. Del Rio?"

"I am."

Leo blinked, staring at him as the full realization of who all would be involved in the ceremony finally struck him.

"Come on," Tom said. "Time to go back to the sky train. I'll buy you a ticket to Little York, which is where the wedding will take place. We can load up your saddle and stuff on the cart."

Leo put a hand on Tom's shoulder, stopping him.

"Is Mrs. Del Rio aware that her daughter is marrying into the biggest crime family in the galaxy?"

"Crime family? Dude! That is a complete mischaracterization. The pirate label is bad enough, but everything Mule Corp does is aboveboard, believe me. At least, mostly. Some of it may be gray area stuff, but we don't stray outside the law. Much."

"I must say the perception that your family runs a crime syndicate is a very strong one indeed."

Tom turned back and stared at the man. Now it was his turn to defend himself.

"Yeah? Well, if it was that bad, both the Republic and the League would be rounding up our employees on their planets and investigating all of our partnerships and businesses, going through things with a fine-toothed comb. Since they're not, and you can bet both AIs keep a close eye on everything, I think the perception just lies in certain people's heads. Not in reality."

"Very well. But it seems we both have our reasons for being out here on the frontier. That's all I'm saying."

They loaded the pastor's belongings on the cart and the pair began walking down the dirt street, Tom pushing the load in front of him.

“Yeah, but my reasons are legit.”

“As are mine, Mr. Raleigh. I am here to spread the Word. One cannot go to heaven without accepting the blood sacrifice of our Maker, Jesus Christ. People on this planet need to hear that message.”

They walked in silence for a while, the cart gliding ahead.

Soon they passed the two long buildings and moved out into the pasture on that side of town. Tom turned left, angling toward the waiting sky train cars.

He said, “So, you’re not just running from the law or something? It seems like coming out here to preach is just a cover story, if you don’t mind me being honest.”

Leo nodded, unperturbed by the accusation.

“It’s a happy coincidence that my mission field, my calling, avoids being in either of the major systems. And the third one, yours, would likely hand me over to the Republic out of a perceived need to appease their erstwhile ally from the war.”

“Ah. Did you fight in the war? You look old enough.”

“Yes. I turned 13 toward the end and served with the Republican Navy aboard the George C. Marshall.”

Tom glanced over at him to ask another question. But at that moment, Captain Montaigne stuck his head out the open door as they approached.

“There you are, Sonny, with plenty of time to spare! And who is this? Going somewhere, my good man, or would you like me to deliver something for you?”

“Captain Montaigne, this is . . . uh . . . How do I address you? Pastor? Father? Reverend?”

“You may call me Leo, no honorifics are necessary. This is a frontier planet, not downtown Octavia.”

“Okay. Captain, this is Leo Iglesias.”

“Iglesias?”

“No, Iglese. It’s Portuguese.”

“He needs a ride to Little York, Captain. I’ll pay his fare. Please put him in a nice cabin.”

“Now we’re talking, Sonny! Hop aboard, Padre. We’ll have you to your destination by tomorrow.”

Montaigne stuck his hand out and Tom handed over some tokens while Leo strapped in.

6.7

Tom ate supper in the dining car for a change, chatting some more with Leo and getting him up to speed with what to expect in Little York.

“We’ll have a church that is outside of town a ways, at the main intersection of the highways. It’s near where the Fae Phalanx used to camp, but closer to the road and not in the trees.”

“I notice you’re saying this in the future tense,” Leo said, downing a bite of schnitzel cordon bleu.

“Well, the building is being constructed right now. But, it’ll be finished by the time we get there.”

Leo accepted this without further comment.

Tom noticed he ate the food with gusto.

Cook noticed it, too, sticking his head out of the kitchen. He timidly approached their table.

“Is everything to your liking, Father? Can I get you anything else?”

“The food is magnificent, Cook. Thank you for all your hard work, keeping everyone onboard well fed.”

“Oh, it is nothing. It has been quiet without any passengers, other than Mr. Savage. And he doesn’t eat very much.”

Both men turned to look at Tom.

“Yeah, I’ve got my own sources of food. But Cook is very good. I never hear any complaints when flying the Jet Stream, nothing but compliments.”

“Thank you, Mr. Savage. You are too kind.”

Cook gathered up their plates and silverware and headed back to the dishwasher with them. When the door closed behind him, the two men had the dining car to themselves once more.

“Perhaps I should stay behind once the wedding is over. When I first came to Phaethon a few months ago, I thought I should head out to the newest settlements, and so I landed in Iliou. However, now that I have visited Iliou perhaps it is time to discover if Little York is more in need of my services.”

“Plus you can avoid those guys we shot up,” Tom pointed out.

“Yes. One of whom you killed. I understand it was in self-defense, as was my shot to the arm of that other fellow. But they may not see it that way.”

“Right. Well, we’ll build you a parsonage up near the church. How about that? Then you can stay as long as you like.”

Leo frowned in thought.

“Who is paying for all this construction material?”

“Oh, the materials are free for the taking. They’ll be sourced from public areas. We’re not stealing anything. Or buying it.”

“And the labor? Who is building all this?”

“It’s robotic. We’ve got some new-fangled construction bots we’re using. We’re doing some field testing with them. It’ll be fine. You’ll like it.”

Tom stood up.

“Well, I’m headed to my room. I’ll see you in the morning, pastor.”

Tom left while Leo stretched back in his seat and opened a paperback version of the Bible.

-+-

The following morning Tom popped back into his cabin as the sky train slowed. He opened the door and headed to the passenger car where Montaigne and Leo already waited.

“Missed you at breakfast,” Leo said.

Tom waved his concern aside.

“I’ll be alright.”

“Well, Mr. Savage,” Montaigne said, smiling, “It has been my pleasure ferrying you around the planet these last few days. Will you be doing it again when your customers need to be resupplied?”

“Maybe. Maybe not. But if I do need sky train service, I’ll be sure and seek out the Jet Stream, Captain.”

Primarily, Tom thought, because this is the only sky train that I have a sensor onboard.

Montaigne beamed in pride.

“You too are welcome, Padre. Anytime I can help carry a man of the cloth somewhere, I’m happy to do so. Provided payment is made up front, you understand.”

“I understand, Captain. And thank you. May the Maker continue to bless your business.”

Montaigne manned the controls and disconnected the passenger and luggage car from the main body of Jet Stream. They descended quickly, the cars’ feet plunking down softly outside Little York moments later.

Tom smiled. It felt like he had not been to Little York in a long time.

The door swung open and the dour face of the elderly Oma Ferguson stared back at the men inside.

Her eyes grew wide when she recognized Tom.

“What are *you* doin’ in there?”

“Mrs. Ferguson, I’d like you to meet Leo Igleses. He’ll be the pastor for my wedding in a couple days, and maybe sticking around for a while.”

Oma stared at the newcomer, smiling politely back at her, then returned her dour gaze to Tom.

“We ain’t got no church building. Where’s he gonna preach? And who are you marryin’? I ain’t heard nothin’ about any of this. Nor has anybody else, or they’d’a said somethin’ at the pub.”

“Ms. Ferguson runs the public house here at Little York,” Tom said to Leo.

Turning back to Oma, he said, “It’s news because we haven’t been to town for a while. Remember, Gwen came out there with me to help me settle my homestead.”

Cognition blossomed in the old woman’s eyes.

“That’s right. You two done got rid of her suitor and headed for the hills.”

With all the pieces in place, she dismissed Tom and the preacher, turning her attention to Montaigne.

“Where’s my taters?”

“I do have a shipment for you, Mrs. Ferguson. If you will follow me . . .”

Montaigne walked outside and over to the cargo car, already open and waiting. He ducked in and came back out grunting, carrying a large polyresin box. He placed it on the ground with a huff.

Oma opened the box and inspected everything thoroughly. Satisfied, she handed him some tokens.

“Nice doing business with you as always, Mrs. Ferguson. Let me know if you need anything else.”

“Hmph. I got another load on Cloud Nine comin’ in later.”

Tom noticed her force bracers again. They were older than the kind Haley used, but they seemed to work just as good. The bracers hummed as she picked up the heavy box of food with little effort.

She looked at Leo and said, “Rooms are ten credits a night. Three meals a day included. No alcohol.”

“I’ll be covering his room, Mrs. Ferguson.”

“Well follow me and come on in, then. We’ll get him settled.”

Tom nodded at the pastor, encouraging him to go on ahead while he turned back to retrieve his cart.

When he pulled the cart out, Montaigne waved at him from the other car.

“See you around, Sonny! Don’t be a stranger!”

“Thanks! I appreciate you accommodating me on this trip, Captain!”

“We can do it again, anytime. Provided . . .”

“I know, I know. Provided I pay up first.”

Montaigne grinned at him.

The doors to the cars slid shut and they levitated, hovering a meter off the ground for a second. Then they shot up into the sky, disappearing in the haze above.

Now out in the empty field, Tom pushed his cart full of gardening tools toward the back door of Ferguson’s Freehold. Oma and Leo were already inside.

Quietly, he said, “Well, Lisa, I think we can wrap up this mission and call it a success. We’ve got at least one of your sensors in every town of any size everywhere on the globe, and we’ve got MicaBots exploring for resources in all those spots, too.”

Lisa responded through his implant.

“Indeed, Thomas. Thank you for your efforts.”

“Put me through to Silas, please.”

A moment later, his farm hand answered the com link.

“Hello?”

“Hey Silas. Could you please get Lucas saddled up and ready for porting over to me? I’m in Little York. Also, I’ve got somebody who needs a new horse. Their old one died. He’s already got a saddle here, he just needs a mount. Let’s give him one of the old Ever Rider steeds.”

“Yes, sir. I’m on it.”

Lucas popped into place a few minutes later, startled but not overly so. He had been teleported more than once by this time. Tom patted his neck and said a few soothing words. He grabbed the reins and tied them around a hitching post near the back door.

“Thomas, I predict a 75 percent chance this next horse will bolt in fright. I am bringing him in further out in the pasture so that if he does, he will not hurt himself or you.”

“I got Thunder ready for ya, Mr. Savage.”

“Okay, Silas. Thanks. Hey, put a mini sensor on him somewhere, would you? Lisa says she’s about to bring him over here and I don’t want to lose him.”

A few seconds later, a pop came from out in the field. A large roan, with a rich black base and softer white highlights in his coat, appeared.

He snorted at the change in air pressure and the sudden shift in location.

“Hey boy. Hey, there.”

Tom walked out toward the roan slowly, holding an arm out.

Thunder snorted and bolted. He turned and raced off into the wilderness, galloping at full speed.

Tom sighed and returned to the hitching post.

“Whenever he stops running, Lisa, please bring him back here.”

“Will do, Thomas.”

“And please go on and take the tools back.”

6.8

When the horse finally reappeared, Tom managed to grab his halter. He coaxed the animal to the hitching post. There he strapped on the preacher's saddle blanket, saddle and bags, and made sure everything fit. Then he stepped inside Ferguson's Freehold.

Oma saw him and walked up to address the preacher's money issues without preamble.

"How many nights is he going to stay?"

"Uh, two or three."

She held her hand out wordlessly. Tom dug in a pocket and pulled out two ten-credit tokens.

"If he's not here tomorrow, put that as credit on his account, okay? I want to make sure he eats well."

She nodded wordlessly and disappeared into the kitchen.

Tom made his way further inside and found Leo talking with the usual breakfast crowd, a handful of eight men and women.

The preacher had attracted considerable attention. Tom sat near the back, watching the crowd around him.

One of the older women turned and smiled at Tom. She drew closer.

“We ain’t had nobody new come through here since the marshal!”

“Uh . . . well, I’m still kinda new.”

“Oh, you’re old hat, darlin’. Pastor Leo is . . . he’s exciting! Do you know if men of the cloth in his denomination can get married?”

“Uh . . . I’m pretty sure oaths of celibacy are a relic of the past, Mrs. . . . ?”

“Schenck. Danielle Schenck.”

She stuck out a hand and Tom noticed her calluses right away.

“My husband and I have one of the farms out on the North Road, going outside of town.”

“Oh. You’ll be near the new church that’s going up out there.”

“New church?”

“Yes, for Pastor Leo. It’s going to be out in the public area, near the woods the Fae Phalanx used to stay in.”

“That was so sad what happened to those girls. Whatever happened to that man and his fighting machine?”

“He was taken out, don’t worry.”

“Well thank God! So, a church you say? Where exactly is it going to be? And who is putting it up?”

“I’m not exactly sure where it’s going to be, but I bet you’ll be able to see it from the road as you ride out of town.”

By this time Leo had wrapped up his conversation and he overheard Tom.

“What’s this about my church?”

“Let’s go ride out and take a look, pastor. I’ve procured you a horse.”

Tom had to practically drag the older man outside, as he said goodbye to everyone at least three times. The ladies in particular, who were all twice

Tom's age and married, seemed to really like the preacher man.

When Tom finally dragged Leo out the door, he said, "What is it with you? They all love you in there."

"An amiable personality helps spread the Word."

"Okay. So, what did you do back in Waller to piss those other three guys off? They didn't seem amiable at all."

"In my field, there are times when I may misjudge the character of someone, or say precisely the wrong thing at the wrong time. And it may prove to be particularly . . . inflammatory. The Word says if a man can control his tongue, he can control his entire life. Unfortunately, it also says the tongue is a restless evil. 'Who can control it?' Alas, not me. Not perfectly, no."

"It's okay. I've cussed people out before myself. I won't hold it against you."

The preacher's face turned beet red under his beard.

"It was not my finest moment, may the Maker forgive me. Who knew that strong words could trigger men to violence so easily?"

"Nobody's perfect. And it's the frontier. 'Them's fightin' words' still means something around here."

They rounded the corner of the building and approached the two horses tethered to the post.

"Is this . . . is this the mount you told me about?"

"Yeah. His name is Thunder."

"What a horse! Far finer than Fido was, I must say."

"You named your horse Fido?"

"No, the wag who owned him before me named him that."

They untied Lucas and Thunder, then mounted up. Tom led the way back around the pub and out to Little York's main street. They rode through the

middle of town and Tom pointed out the twin long buildings as they passed.

“This is a standard blueprint for frontier towns. Old West style. The difference with Waller is, this one’s been here longer.”

“I see. Yes, there’s definitely a larger population here. At least, there are more businesses.”

Slowly they rode down the street to the other end of town. Here, more buildings sprinkled the area, including houses and other stores. A stable and corral dominated this side of Little York.

“This is Cajun Cal’s place. He can board your horse tonight while you’re staying in the pub. Don’t let him sell you a horse, or buy this one off you. He’ll probably make you some kind of offer. It takes a lot of negotiation to get a good deal from him, though.”

Outside town they came to the crossroads and Tom told him the names of the three main highways. They continued straight down the North Road. Rounding a bend, they came to a pasture leading to the woods used by the Fae off to their left.

There, in a perfect spot and slightly elevated, a white church stood resplendent in the diffused sunlight.

It seemed to glow with radiance, white paint glistening. A thin bell tower stood up front, and a steeple graced the middle of the roof. Tall narrow windows lined the sides. Curved brown wooden doors on hinges made a nice contrast to the white siding. Out front, multiple hitching posts were spread out around the building.

“It’s beautiful! I’ve never seen its like out here in the wilderness.”

“Well, it was made off a pre-existing blueprint. But it’s got modern amenities. Its own power supply, running water, things like that. You won’t have to truck in water for baptisms or anything.”

Tom also knew that a sensor lay hidden up in the bell tower, artfully covered over by planks. Lisa did not miss out on the opportunity to place one high above the ground out here. It gave her coverage of the entire pasture, the road and part of the woods.

To one side and behind the church, they saw a square patch of stone sitting in the ground.

“And what’s that to be?”

“That’s the foundation for your parsonage. They’re cutting the wood for it right now. I hope it’s done by tomorrow. That’s why we’re putting you up in the pub tonight.”

“I . . . I am to stay here?”

“If you want. Like you said, Little York doesn’t have a church. If you decide to put some roots down here, then you can claim this building. I think somebody said churches are made up of people, not buildings. But, here’s a building your people can use.”

Leo stared at the fresh new structure for a long moment.

“I . . . don’t know what to say.”

Tom shrugged.

“Pray about it,” he suggested with a smile.

“I will.”

“Okay, I’m headed home. Can we meet back out here this afternoon, before supper? I’d like you to meet the bride and we can go over some things. We can do a rehearsal of the ceremony, things like that.”

“Alright. When’s this wedding supposed to take place?”

“Tomorrow. So, rehearsal this afternoon. Ceremony tomorrow morning. Oh, one more thing.”

Tom dug in his pocket and handed over two 100 credit tokens across their horses.

“There’s your honorarium. And don’t worry about eating for a while, either. We’ve got you covered until you get established. I hope you like poshbird.”

6.9

Tom and Lucas appeared in the middle of the corral with a loud *pop*.

Lucas jumped and moved forward a few steps before Tom could pull the reins and convince him to stop.

“Well, I am still in one piece. I’d say this counts as a success, Lisa.”

“Of course. As I said, with my increased processing power, granular control is no longer an issue. I can now teleport multiple organisms simultaneously with negligible risk of molecular contamination.”

Tom smiled and kept his mouth shut, not daring to ask what she considered “negligible” to be. It was enough that this experiment worked. He remained atop Lucas, and his legs were not fused to the horse’s side or a similar fate.

He dismounted and led Lucas to the stall so he could strip the saddle and everything else, then he brushed the animal down. At last he opened the stall door and let Lucas wander outside. The horse went out the gate and trotted out to the river, joining the others.

Tom walked outside and shaded his eyes with a hand, watching little Dunmire run around the herd in circles while the other horses grazed on the diminishing grass.

Before long, he thought, they’ll only be outside for exercise.

He shivered as a blast of cool wind hit him when he turned back to face the stables.

“Okay, Lisa. Take me to the star farm.”

Tom popped away again, this time appearing inside the force dome for SCU 4. Silas and Lola turned to look, smiling at him.

“Well, howdy, Mr. Savage. Lisa says the first of the buildings in the Projects went down just a minute ago. We’ve got a replacement lined up right here.”

Silas thumped an exceptionally large power pack sitting on the plus-sized charging platform connected to the star containment unit.

“Good. I think I’ll accompany this one to Little York. We’re going to have to ferry it down to the Projects and swap it out using the load bot. And from all my experience in the Southside Projects, those people are not exactly friendly to outsiders. Maybe they’ll show some appreciation for getting their lights back on. But we can’t count on it.”

“Well, they’ll have a hard time hindering ol’ Henry.”

“Henry?”

“That’s what we named your load bot, Mr. Savage,” Lola piped up. “He had an H and an F in his serial number, and I thought that’s like Henry Ford! So, that’s what we named him. I hope you don’t mind.”

Tom waved this off.

“I don’t care what you call it. Lisa? Is Haley ready for this big one yet?”

“Not yet, Thomas. Right now, Mr. Xu is trying to find her in the marketplace to see if she has anything large enough for a building.”

“Alright. We’ll let her do the negotiating. Port this thing over when you’re ready. I’ll go with it.”

Tom turned to the couple standing by the power pack. He noticed, for the first time, the unit was a big rectangle, roughly the shape of a king size bed.

His eyes narrowed as he came to a likely conclusion as to what the couple had been doing before he got there . . .

“Did you two hear all that?”

Silas and Lola nodded, looking innocent.

“Okay. As soon as Haley seals the deal, we’re going to put this puppy in the truck along with the load bot and go install it down in that building’s basement. You can come with us, but be sure and go armed.”

“How much are you gonna charge for these big uns, Mr. Savage?”

“I don’t know, Silas. Lisa? Figure out how much building-level power packs are going for, and determine an appropriate price for them, please. Then relay that to Haley.”

“Will do, Thomas.”

-+-

“Fifty thousand credits? That’s . . . that’s outrageous, Ms. Stonecipher!”

“On the contrary, Mr. Xu. Considering there are no more ships coming in that could bring you fresh Class Eight power packs, the price is quite reasonable. I remind you a new one that size fresh from the factory in Diego would run 45,000 credits. That is before shipping out to the frontier. My price is quite reasonable.”

“But . . . pardon me for asking, but where did you get a Class Eight power pack, young lady? Those don’t grow on trees, and besides the ones we have out in the settlements, I know of no others just . . . lying around.”

“I’m sure you can appreciate a merchant’s need for secrecy, Mr. Xu. I have one and can deliver and install it today. I will require the old one in trade. The price is 50,000 credits, payable upon delivery and installation.”

Xu stewed for a minute.

An older man, and dressed in a suit, he looked out of place in this part of the bazaar, so close to the agricultural wares. He carried himself in a

decidedly white-collar way that jarred with the hands-on approach of so many this far out in the bazaar.

Haley smiled up at him, unperturbed by negotiating with a man who was likely to be second only in power on this planet to Hizzoner. The Courthouse managed the affairs of all Phaethon, not just League City. But she was not prepared to go down much in price.

Perhaps if Xu wished to pay for more than one power pack up front, she might shave off a thousand credits on each. But she kept those thoughts to herself.

“Very well, Ms. Stonecipher. Give me your account info, and we will pay up after confirming the new unit is installed and working correctly. The building in question in number 314.”

He handed her an old-fashioned key, a mere seven centimeters long.

“This is a universal key for all the power rooms in the Southside Projects. Do you need a map to find 314?”

“No, I can find it. We’ll have it swapped out later today. Shake?”

She pocketed the key and stuck out her hand.

Xu took her hand, still scowling. But he shook it.

When he walked out of hearing range, heading back toward Commerce Boulevard, Haley softly said, “Lisa? Does the city have enough money to afford all the units that are going to need replacing soon? He’s right, 50,000 is a lot.”

“Yes indeed, Haley. The Courthouse coffers are quite full from various taxes and money-generating schemes run by the city. Funds are replenished on a daily basis, leading to a very swollen account. Anywhere from 25,000 to 40,000 credits are earned each day from table and booth rentals at the bazaar alone. There are many other sites owned by the city collecting money as well, such as the storefronts along the edge of the bazaar, all the warehouses in the Warehouse District, the fairgrounds, and even more throughout League City.”

“I see. Okay, I won’t feel guilty about this.”

“There you are! Who’re you talking to?”

Haley looked up and her heart skipped a beat, despite the fact she had told it not to get lost in Ashley Thallus’s eyes anymore.

“To myself. What are you doing out here?”

“I came looking for you. Wanna do lunch?”

“Uh, I can’t. I’ve got to make a delivery.”

“Yeah? Where to?”

“There’s a building in the Projects that has lost its power pack charge. I’m going to swap it out with a new one.”

“Really? Can you even lift one? A building takes, what? A Class Eight? Those things are gigantic.”

“I have a load bot. And some friends.”

“I’d like to come with you.”

“What? Why?”

“Well, I’m a friend aren’t I?”

“Yes . . .”

“And I think it’d make a good story, you know, swapping out the old power packs on a frontier planet.”

“Nope. No stories. Sorry, I’m kinda big on privacy right now. This is my business and I don’t want anything going out about our company’s power efforts.”

“Okay, okay. Sorry. But I’d still like to go along. The Projects can be dangerous. I know, I’ve poked around over on the south side of town before.”

Ash helped her gather up her remaining items and load them into the truck. They made light conversation on the drive out to the warehouse.

When she rolled into Warehouse 14, still smelling strong with the fresh aroma of the remaining hay stacked up on one side of the interior, he saw the bathroom unit as she pulled to a stop.

“I’ll be right back.”

When he shut the door, Haley pressed her implant again.

“Lisa? Make sure Tom knows Ash is here.”

“I have already informed him, Haley. Please back up and exit the warehouse so I can port things in without alarming Mr. Thallus. There is no one outside.”

She nodded and backed the truck up, then jumped out to close the large warehouse door. A moment later the large power pack popped into place on the bed of the truck. Tom, Silas and Lola popped in next, standing nearby.

Lola hugged Haley, hard. They spoke a bit while Tom opened the Warehouse door again and Silas went in to activate the load bot.

By the time Silas had the load bot climb up onto the back of the truck’s bed, Ash came out of the restroom unit.

Nervously, Haley introduced him to the other three.

“And this is Tom Savage.”

Ash squinted at him and said, “You look familiar. Do I know you?”

“I doubt it. I’ve been here on Phaethon, lately.”

“Well, come on, let’s go,” Haley said. “We can’t all fit in the front. Who wants to ride in back?”

Silas, reading the room, slapped Ash’s back.

“Come on, reporter-boy. Let’s you and me watch over the cargo.”

Reluctantly, Ash followed him around to the back of the truck while Tom climbed up into the driver’s seat. Haley smiled a silent thanks to Silas, and joined Lola on the passenger side.

Tom backed out of the warehouse and headed toward the Projects. He tuned the women out as they caught up on all their personal news.

Most of their conversation centered on Ash and Silas, who were conveniently not there to listen in . . .

6.10

Tom made his way down the boulevard from the spaceport, heading for Courthouse Square.

Traffic remained steady, increasing considerably as they neared the Courthouse. When he pulled off for the fairgrounds and the Southside Projects, traffic lightened up, but the number of idle people watching their truck from the sides grew in numbers.

The women stopped talking and Lola patted a hip to make sure a gun remained safely strapped to her side. Haley began scouting rooftops to find a private place for Lisa to port her to if she needed to change into her Night Shadow persona.

At last Tom pulled to the curb beside a five-story tenement building with “314” painted in white near the door. No lights shined through the openings. Nor did anybody hang out the windows to stare at them. The stoop, typically guarded by somebody from the X’s and O’s, remained unmanned, an empty stool near the doorway.

“This is the place,” Tom said.

He parked and jumped out the driver’s side door while Haley and Lola took the passenger’s side. They walked around back where Ash and Silas were climbing off the truck’s flatbed.

“Silas, you and I will go in first and locate the old power pack. We’ll come back out and direct the load bot in.”

Silas nodded and subtly checked his holster to make sure the gun at his side remained intact.

Of the five, Ash looked unnerved. He glanced around, sweat on his brow.

Guards from doorways down the street stared at them. People poked heads out of the open windows from nearby buildings. A cluster of young men standing several meters away watched them with their arms crossed.

“Uh . . . is it safe out here?”

“Not at all,” Tom said, smiling. “But Haley and Lola have guns. You’ll be fine.”

Ash glanced at Haley, who gave him a cheery smile. He glanced down at everyone’s hips. The look on his face seemed to indicate that he wished he too had a gun at this point.

As Tom and Silas headed for the basement entrance, a set of steps beside the stoop heading down instead of up, Ash said, “Everybody seems so hostile around here. I don’t like the way those guys are looking at us.”

“Southsiders aren’t too fond of outsiders,” Haley said. “Unfortunately, this is the main route to the fairgrounds and the sky trains, so they see a lot of outsiders coming through here. We should be fine so long as nobody does anything stupid.”

At the entryway going down, Tom saw a door at the bottom of the stairs partly open, darkness showing on the other side.

He turned to Silas and said, “Did you bring a flashlight?”

“No, sir.”

They walked down the steps together, disappearing below the street.

“Lisa, please grab two flashlights from the farm and place them into our hands.”

He and Silas held out a hand, palm open. Silas used his left hand, the one Lisa had not taken away from him when he and Tom first met.

Two tiny pops occurred, and flashlights appeared. Both men gripped the heavy cylinders to keep them from rolling out of their grasp.

Tom turned his on and smiled at Silas.

“Alright! Now we’re cooking with gas.”

He shoved on the door and pushed it all the way open. The hinges protested, creaking loud and long. Hazy sunlight from the street barely penetrated the dark hallway.

Tom and Silas slipped inside.

“Kinda spooky down here, Mr. Savage.”

Silas whipped his beam back and forth, displaying a filthy corridor filled with debris. Wrappers from food items, spent pneumatic syringes and other trash covered the floor.

“Dirty, too.”

“Well, when the government pays your rent, and you share the building with a bunch of other people with the same persuasion . . . nobody cleans up. In the collective, it’s never the individual’s problem.”

They walked deeper inside, shining their lights this way and that. The walls, floors and ceiling all shared a dirty shade of rough concrete.

Tom touched his implant and said, “Can you hear us, Lisa?”

No response.

“They spent some money on these buildings’ foundations, didn’t they, Silas? We’re already blocked from her signal, just a few meters in.”

“How did Lisa monitor the health of these power packs if they was all down here? I thought she couldn’t monitor things underground without daisy chainin’ sensors or somethin’?”

“There’s a gauge inside the entrance to each building so municipal staff don’t have to go trudging down into the basement. I’m pretty sure she just reads that.”

In the center of the long hall, Tom stopped at a closed door. It looked wider than a normal door.

“Solid wood,” he said, pounding a fist on it experimentally. “Also, secured with a mechanical lock. You don’t see those very often.”

He pulled out the key Haley had given him and tried it in the lock. The bolt snicked back, and he pushed on the door. It made a cracking sound as the wood reluctantly budged, then swung free from the frame.

“Prolly never been opened since they built the place, huh Mr. Savage?”

“Probably.”

They shined their lights inside a cramped cubic room. On the floor in the middle, a Class Eight power pack rested with a thick layer of dust on top. A thick cable from one end stretched up into the ceiling.

“Alright. This is what we came for. Pull the plug out, Silas, and I’ll go get the load bot down here to extract that thing.”

“Too bad Lisa can’t see down here. It’d be easier if we could just port it from here to the farm.”

“I know, but then we’d have some explaining to do, especially to that reporter upstairs. No, we’ll get it into the warehouse and then port it to the farm from there.”

Tom and Silas left the door open and made their way back down the hall toward the entrance on the street.

“Get back!”

They heard Haley yell out on the street.

Both men hurried through the door, drawing their guns as they took the steps up to the street two at a time.

When Tom stepped out on the sidewalk, he saw the group of thugs had approached the truck. Haley and Lola had drawn their weapons. Ash made a strategic retreat toward the truck's cab. But Tom saw movement in the doorway of a nearby building across the street. They could be easily surrounded in a moment.

He and Silas walked up to the group, aiming their guns at the men.

"Go on and get out of here," Tom said.

"Or what? You gonna shoot me?"

Tom aimed low and squeezed the trigger, sending a blast into the street at the man's feet. All four jumped back.

"Yes. That was a warning shot."

They backed off, a couple of them holding their hand up.

Tom kept his gun trained on them and said, "Silas, get Henry down in there to fetch the old pack."

"Yes, sir."

Now heads poked out of many more windows, the sound of the gunshot attracting curious stares.

Henry activated. The cubic robot stood, servos whining. He stepped off the back of the truck and followed Silas to the stairs leading down, metallic feet stomping on pavement.

"Keep your guns out," Tom said. "The sooner we can grab this power pack, swap it out and get out of here, the better."

The distant *thoop!* of a blast bolt came down the street.

The shot hit Tom in the shoulder and knocked him off his feet.

6.11

Tom rolled on the pavement in pain, shifting the pistol to his off hand.

Silas, Lola and Haley returned fire, three guns answering the one, peppering the thugs down the street.

Ash hit the pavement lying flat. He covered his head with his hands and watched, turning on his implant's recorder.

More shots peppered the street, now from windows and doorways in nearby buildings.

“Son of a . . .”

Tom held his hand out.

“Lisa?”

A pneumatic syringe popped into place, in the palm of his hand. He jabbed it into his arm's exposed skin and tossed it aside.

Pulling his gun up, he aimed at the thugs and flipped it over to full auto. A hail of bolts knocked two men down and scattered the rest.

The four by the truck shot up and out now, in all directions, aiming at windows and doorways and anything that moved.

Southsiders shot back, peeking out of openings, firing and ducking.

“It’s like whack-a-mole!” Lola shouted, shooting up at a window. One man kept popping up and shooting back.

“Keep after it, darlin’!” Silas said.

A flurry of bolts pattered on the street near Ash.

He yelped and scootched backward, up against the truck.

“Come on!” Haley said, reaching down and pulling him up by the arm.

They ran to the front of the truck. She opened the driver’s side door and pushed him inside.

“Do your deliveries always end in gunfire?”

“No, this is the first one!”

She slammed the door shut.

Inside the cab he said, “First delivery? Or first time for gunfire?”

Bolts spat into the hood, weak from a distance, but they rocked the truck.

He ducked down under the dash.

Outside, Haley squatted by the door.

“Lisa, if nobody is looking, now is a good time to . . .”

She popped away and found herself squatting on the rooftop of Building 314.

Haley stood up and her suit popped into place, complete with the mask and sand dragon skins underneath.

“Wow! That new processing power really is good.”

She jogged to the ledge and looked down. Across the street, the gunman persecuting Lola stood up in an open window, fired a potshot, and pulled back.

“Make me fly, Lisa! I want to take that guy out.”

“Will do, Haley. Jump when ready.”

Haley hopped up on the ledge, spread her arms . . . and jumped off.

She dropped, stretched out as if about to perform a bellyflop over the parked truck.

Haley ported once . . . twice . . .

She moved a few meters across the street with each port as she fell.

With the third port, she sailed into the second-floor window just as the gunman stood up to shoot . . . and tumbled into him.

They both rolled, landing on the floor of the apartment.

She pulled back with her right hand, wearing Tom's old brass knuckles. The force bracers activated as she hit his jaw, snapping it. His head slammed back to the floor, knocking him out cold.

Haley stood up and carefully peeked out the window. The truck below remained under fire.

Silas tried to guide Henry down the steps. For some reason, the old yellow load bot attracted a lot of shots. But he was sturdily built and remained impervious to the small arms fire.

Silas dashed down the steps to get out of the way and yelled for Henry to follow. The load bot lumbered after him.

Tom looked fully recovered from his wound, blood still on the front of his shirt. He shot from one side of the truck while Lola fired from the other side. They gave as good as they got, but the Southsiders had the high ground and better cover.

Nobody was going down easy.

"Lisa, I don't need to be seen by anybody. Port me in behind someone shooting at us."

Haley tensed her legs and brought her fists up.

Pop!

She appeared behind a woman facing out another window, standing with a rifle one meter away in a perfect sniper's nest. She could see everything through her narrow angle on the street, but no one out there could see her.

The woman aimed carefully, trying to get a bead on Lola.

Haley's force bracers amped up and she slammed her brass knuckles into the base of the shooter's neck, snapping it.

The woman flew forward, gun clattering to the floor. Her body fell halfway out the window. It stopped from going all the way out, but just barely. The dead woman's arms draped down on the side of the building, a thin trickle of blood dripping down off her neck.

"Again, Lisa!"

Pop!

Haley appeared behind a man with a pistol, standing to one side of his flat's window. He moved a bit for a better shot, appearing in the window for just a second.

Haley shoved him from behind, making him lose his balance and go tumbling out the window. He screamed all the way down to the pavement three floors below.

"Again!"

Pop!

The next woman had a crying baby in her room. She ignored the child while shooting at the truck. This woman looked distracted and kept making wild shots.

Haley made a careful chop with the brass knuckles to the back of her head, knocking her out but not killing her. She grabbed the woman's pistol as she collapsed and tucked it into the back of her belt.

She walked over to the crib where the baby wailed.

"There, there. Shhh. Mommy will wake up in just a little bit."

The baby looked up at the stranger dressed all in black and wearing a black mask, her little eyes growing round. Haley picked up a pacifier in the crib and popped it into the child's mouth.

"Again, Lisa."

Pop!

"Again!"

"Again!"

"Again!"

"That is the last one, Haley."

She looked down at the final gunman, lying in a bloody heap on the floor thanks to a vicious blow to the head. Haley kicked his rifle out of the way.

"Okay. Change me back and see if you can put me somewhere Ash won't see me."

Pop!

"Rot! You scared the tar outta me, Haley!"

"Sorry, Silas. I had to port in somewhere safe."

Haley stood at the bottom of the stairs, outside the entrance to Building 314's basement.

Silas stood just inside the doorway, with Henry looming behind him, carrying the enormous used power pack on his back at an angle to get it through the doorway.

"We're on our way up. Why don't you lead the way?"

Haley nodded and walked up the stairs first. Out on the street, the shooting had stopped. Tom stepped away from the truck, his gun still out. He saw Haley come up the steps.

"Are we in the clear?"

She nodded.

He sighed in relief, but kept his gun drawn anyway.

Silas appeared, mounting the last step. He looked down the stairs and nodded.

“You’re doin’ fine, Henry. Steady . . . steady . . .”

The enormous power pack appeared first, slowly coming up, step by step. Then Henry appeared, the yellow cubic bot ascending the stairs until he stepped out on the sidewalk with his load, then the truck. Powerful legs and arms connected to the main part of his body. He slowly and carefully moved the heavy Class Eight unit.

At the back of the truck, he gently set the old power pack down on the pavement.

Silas pointed up in the bed.

“Now get the fresh one, Henry. Atta boy.”

As he led the bot back down the stairs with his new load, Ash opened the door and came out of the cab. Tom noted his eyes reverted to normal, and presumed he was no longer recording.

“Has all the shooting stopped? What was that all about?”

“Southsiders aren’t too friendly. We had to persuade them to leave us alone and let us finish the job here,” Tom said with a smile.

“I don’t think I’ve ever been in a firefight like that before. It was like a warzone!”

Tom shrugged.

“Welcome to the frontier.”

Minutes later, the lights turned on inside 314, making dark windows bright again.

Silas reappeared, coming up the stairs smiling. Lola ran up to kiss him as Henry mounted the steps.

“That was so hot, baby!”

He said, “You’re hot!”

They kissed one another, hard.

The others watched in silence as the wet and noisy osculation continued for a long time.

Finally, after a couple of minutes, Ash cleared his throat.

“That’s, uh . . . very passionate.”

“You have no idea,” Tom said. “Break it up, you two. Henry, load the old power pack into the truck and then get on it yourself. Let’s head back to the warehouse before somebody decides to start shooting at us again.”

The women headed for the cab while Ash and Silas climbed onto the bed with the load bot. Ash looked like he felt exposed now, after going through the gunfire. But Silas remained unperturbed. He kept his gun out, though, for quick return fire if necessary.

At the passenger door Haley said, “First, let’s stop by the Courthouse so I can collect our money.”

“Yeah,” Lola said. “We should get hazard pay for this!”

6.12

Later that day, Tom and Silas stood under SCU 4's force dome staring at the old power pack from Building 314. Wiped free of dust, it looked virtually indistinguishable from its replacement.

Ash had been dropped off at his hotel, and Haley stayed behind at the warehouse while everyone else ported back to the farm along with the building's old power pack.

Standing nearby, Henry waited for orders. But now that the old yellow bot had placed the heavy load on the recharging pad, the men had nothing else for it to do at the moment.

"So, this will take a while," Tom said. "All other recharging should be done on Five and Six until this big one is complete."

"Yes, sir."

"Then, the next building that goes down, we'll repeat this procedure, swapping out this one for theirs."

"You know what's gonna happen, Mr. Savage. Buildings are gonna start coming down in clusters and we're gonna get overwhelmed."

"The company is sending us seven more Class Eights on the Pulsar."

“Oh really? That’s expensive. I don’t know what they run wholesale, but I know they ain’t cheap.”

“Yeah, my expense account is growing. Or rather, the amount I owe the Ultima Mule Company is growing. But, we should be able to pay them back with interest, as the sole power pack recharging business on Phaethon. Things are going to accelerate, like you said.”

The two men stared at the featureless rectangular unit for a while. The SCU’s recharging pad hummed softly as energy collected from the star chunk flowed into the old power pack.

Finally, Silas cleared his throat.

“Does it bother you any, Mr. Savage, holdin’ a monopoly like this? I mean, in a way you’re gainin’ control over all the electricity on this world. I imagine that’d be kinda uncomfortable for folks, if they knew about it.”

“I don’t see it as a monopoly so much as providing a service that no one else can right now, Silas. If shipments were going, and eventually you know that embargo will be lifted and shipments will resume, then somebody would be out there gouging the Courthouse for Class Eight replacements. We’re offering the same thing at a reasonable rate. No, this isn’t so much of a monopoly as it is a service that no one else can provide at the moment.”

“Okay. When you put it like that, that makes me feel better.”

Tom smiled at his farm hand and said, “You’ve still got too much of the League in your thinking, Silas. Embrace capitalism. It’s good for everybody. Ignore all that garbage they indoctrinated you with growing up.”

“I do like earnin’ those gold coins you give me.”

A roar overhead brought their eyes up to the sky. Pulsar flew in, braking hard on the last half kilometer to the farmhouse.

“Well, looks like Gwen’s dad is here along with all those fresh power packs. Lisa? Please port us to my back yard.”

Tom and Silas popped into existence near his back porch as the Pulsar came to a stop in the air. It slowly lowered, settling into its usual landing spot out in the field, avoiding the garden and not coming down too close to the house.

Gwen and Gina and Lola came out the back door and walked down the steps to join the men. Wink McKelway and Jinxie Malone popped into existence nearby, coming over to watch their ship land.

Tom said, "How's it feel not to have to make that trip and still get paid for it, Wink?"

"It's a bit disconcerting, actually. I guess it's like renting out the house you grew up in. Lots of memories are still there, and you know someone else is using it. But the extra money sure is nice."

"The only thing we're missing out on is personal profits on cargo sales," Jinx added, a note of sadness in her voice. "Ultima Mule decides the cargo under our arrangement."

"Yeah, that was kinda fun, finding something really cheap somewhere and turning a profit on it, like those candy bars. On the other hand, not going on the trip saves us four months or so of biological aging. I'm good with it."

"Your company does pay us well," Jinxie added, grabbing Wink's arm and pulling him in close.

The rear cargo ramp lowered as everyone's attention shifted back to the Pulsar. They began walking toward the ship to meet Javon Del Rio as he stepped off.

A tall man in his late 40s walked down the ramp, long legs covering the distance. He stopped when his feet touched soil, and he looked around at a new planet's scenery, turning in a wide circle. He wore a fedora and a brown vest.

"He looks just like the first time I met him," Gina murmured, smiling.

"What were the first words he said to you, Mom?"

“Hello. I’m Javon Del Rio with the Diego Zeitung. May I have a word?’
And that’s how you were born, dear.”

“I’m sure there was more that happened between those two events.”

Javon saw everybody walking toward the ship. He waved. Gina and the others waved back enthusiastically.

Then he turned to look up the ramp and motioned for somebody else to come down.

Jillian Raleigh came out, followed by her husband Chris. The couple walked down the ramp holding hands.

Jillian let go of Chris’s hand. She waved at Tom and the others and started walking toward the group, all smiles.

Chris stopped and looked up at the hazy, dust-filled sky and squinted at the shrouded sun. His words drifted over to the others.

“I’ve never seen a planet quite like this. Have you, Javon?”

“Nope. I’m sure you’ve been to more than I have.”

The two groups converged with smiles and hugs, and a few introductions.

“We’ve got one more surprise for you youngsters,” Chris said.

He turned back toward the ramp and said, “Come on out here and show yourself!”

A family walked out, carefully going down the ship’s ramp, another couple also in their late 40s, along with a 12-year-old boy.

The man looked ripped, despite his age. Muscles bulged out of his clothes. He could pass for a bouncer at any given bar.

The woman looked very attractive, and everyone present immediately noticed the strong resemblance to Jillian.

The boy looked to be a perfect blend of both. Good looking, with a young body not yet mature but showing promising signs of what could become a

carbon copy of his father's muscular build, provided he put the work in for it.

Tom said, "Aunt Julia? Uncle Biff? What are you two doing here? Hey Corey!"

The boy waved at Tom shyly, then looked around at the landscape and the hazy sky with wide eyes.

Julia raced ahead and joined the crowd out in the pasture.

"Tommy! You didn't think your favorite aunt would miss your wedding, did you? You must be Gwendolyn. Hi, I'm Julia Jones, Jillian's sister. This is my husband Biffender. And this is Corey. Say hi to Gwendolyn, Corey."

"Hello."

"When Javon contacted us and told us we could get a ride on a hypertime ship to come see you all, we jumped on the chance!"

The men showed up then. Javon and Gina hugged long and hard.

"Speaking of hypertime," Gina said, "It feels like forever since I've seen you, dear."

Javon nodded and said, "It's been a couple months since I left home. Weird that's it been only a few hours in real time, for both of us."

Chris said, "Yeah, we made a detour to Juventas and picked up the Joneses. That's why we're running a little late. We ended up spending more time in orbit there than we intended to. More real time, that is."

"I hope there wasn't any trouble with the authorities," Wink said, concern written on his face. "There should be no holds or anything on the Pulsar."

"No, nothing like that. We just had to figure out the best way to load up the Joneses without using teleportation. Took a little more time than we expected, coordinating with people on the ground."

Julia said, "Anyway, we are here for the party! When are you kids tying the knot?"

Gwen said, “Tomorrow morning. Tom? Where’s everybody going to sleep tonight?”

“Uh . . . We’ve got bunks in the capsules and spare bedrooms and couches in three houses. I think we can figure something out.”

Jinxie said, “Everyone’s welcome to use our place. We’ve barely moved in, so it’s not cluttered or anything. Wink and I can sleep on the ship tonight.”

“Yeah, it’s been a while since we’ve been in our cabin onboard Pulsar,” Wink said. “It’ll be like going home, in a way.”

“That sounds great!” Julia said. “Right now, I want to catch up on what’s been going on in everybody’s lives!”

“Come on to the house, then,” Gwen said. “We’ll fill you all in.”

Everybody headed for the back porch with Gwen and Tom leading the way.

His parents lingered behind, looking around at the homestead, the distant mountains, the desert and the river. They held hands again.

“You know, it’s almost like a reunion,” Jillian said, nodding toward her sister who continued talking it up in the middle of the crowd heading toward the house.

“Mm-hm. You know, I think Tom’s wedding is starting out as a memorable one.”

“More memorable than ours?”

Chris smiled down at his wife.

“Maybe. At least there’s not as much stress around this one.”

“Let’s hope it stays that way.”

6.13

“We’ve never had this many people over before.”

Gwen stood a bit in awe at so many friends and relatives crowded inside the farmhouse.

The wide angle holo showing “Lizard-topia” still took up half the living room, providing quite a stir when the crowd congregated there.

Conversation paused for a moment as soon as people entered the room. Everyone had to take in the swath of hot springs and sand dragons laid out before them, the holo showing a live feed from the sand dragon winter grounds.

Then conversation redoubled as Tom, Gwen, Silas and Lola tried to answer questions and explain all at once what everyone was seeing, how the camera got there, where it was exactly, and so on.

Corey raced in and out of the holo, chasing Mr. Biddles as they weaved between images of rocks and sand dragon eggs and baby lizards.

At first Gwen looked like she might say something to the boy, but then she realized he and the kitten were only playing. Biddles seemed to enjoy being chased. At one point, Corey ran off in another direction, and the cat started chasing *him*.

Gwen kept her mouth shut.

The conversation peeled off in different directions around the room.

“Uncle Biff, what have you been up to these days?”

Tom shook Biff’s hand as the older man watched his son running in and out of the sand dragon scene.

“Well, I retired from the Yorkton Police Department.”

“Great! Twenty and done, huh?”

“Yes. Although it helps that somehow Julia and I both receive veteran benefits from the Republican Navy every month. Not sure how that happened, but I have my guesses.”

He eyed Gina across the room as he said this. She spoke with Julia and Jillian, but she saw Tom and Biff staring at her. She smiled at them and continued talking with the women.

Chris walked up and joined the conversation with the two men.

He said, “I’m sure it’s all still classified, Biffender. No need to talk about it.”

“That’s just it, Chris. I didn’t do anything during the war. Well, not much. It was Julia that did all the work.”

Chris clapped him on the shoulder and said, “We all did our part during the war. Don’t look a gift horse in the mouth. You were there and supported Julia when she needed you. That counts for something. Besides that, you stayed on with the police force after the change in government. I’m sure that counts for something, too. Not everyone helped out those SSI bastards who used to run Juventas and the other League planets. The galaxy needs more honest cops.”

“I guess. It’s more like I was doing what I was supposed to be doing, you know? Anyway, Tom. To answer your question, now that I’m retired I was hired by this new college that started up a few years ago. It handles vocational certificates as well as degrees. I’m an instructor in their police academy . . .”

A few minutes later, Tom wandered over to the women now clustered all together.

Julia waved at the half-sphere holo taking up most of the space in the living room.

She said, “This is really phenomenal. How many times do you get unfettered access to an exobiological grouping this big without any human involvement at all? We’ve got this new university on Juventas. Biff is teaching law enforcement there and I know some of the professors. They’ve got a big exobiology department. We’re always learning new things about the creatures on these planets. We haven’t even begun to fully explore the old ones, especially all the marine biology. And Phaethon is still relatively new! We’ve got to send somebody over here to see this.”

Gina said, “I’ve been having Tom’s AI record everything. We’ve got tons of data already. They don’t even need to visit if someone wants to observe.”

“I know just the people to put him in contact with. This is going to be great!”

Tom smiled and walked into the kitchen. Here, the two couples living nearby congregated, holding their own conversation.

“Have you been out to Love Rock?” Lola said. “You’ve gotta carve your initials on it.”

Jinxie said, “I’m not sure I like the idea of defacing nature.”

She shook her head, making a mass of blue-tinted hair shake along with it.

“It’s a rock,” Silas said. “Out in the middle of nowhere.”

“I don’t like it.”

“Well, how about gravestones? They’re made out of rocks, right? And people carve stuff on ’em. Historical markers? Those are just flat boulders with inscriptions on ’em.”

“That’s different.”

“I don’t see how. They’re both rocks . . .”

“We’ll pop out there sometime and check it out,” Wink said, heading off the brewing argument.

“That’s a great idea!” Tom said, interjecting himself into the conversation. “In fact, we should take everyone on a little sightseeing tour. We can check out the church Gwen and I are going to be married in, too.”

His mother walked in from the living room.

“That’d be nice, dear. I want to see the church. And maybe meet this pastor you found.”

Tom made a beckoning motion to the couples in the kitchen and led them into the living room.

“Hey everybody, let’s take a little trip. First we’re going out to see Love Rock, then we’ll look at the trees being tapped for sap, then we’ll head over to the church near Little York, provided Lisa can find a private place for us to port into. We’re keeping our terrestrial teleportation on the down-low for the moment.”

Tom handed out mini sensors to everyone present and gently directed them out the front door.

A few seconds later, they all stood out in the desert at Love Rock.

“Back over there, you can barely see our solar operations. My land officially ends over there. We ‘belled the cat’ with our resident sand dragon a while back, letting our AI keep an eye on him, and when he did his winter migrating thing, we dropped off a trail of sensors as he headed north. I know, you think of animals heading south for the winter. Sand dragons are weird. Vicious, too. You don’t want to meet one in person. Anyway, this spot being the first, Mrs. Del Rio started a little tradition on the boulder over here where we left the sensor. We call this ‘Love Rock.’ If anyone wants to add a testament to their undying love for one another, I have a knife you can use.”

Biff and Julia locked eyes.

She said, “We’re doing this.”

“Oh, yeah,” Biff said. “You bet we are. Give me that knife, Tommy.”

As the couples congregated around Love Rock, picking out places to carve their initials, Silas and Lola stepped back with Wink and Jinxie.

Jinxie stood with her arms crossed, glaring at the scene.

Wink and Silas shared a look.

Silas smiled and said, “We’ve already dedicated our love on that rock.”

Lola whispered, “In more ways than one,” but only Silas heard her.

Wink glanced down at Jinxie beside him.

He said, “I mean, it’s not a bad idea. We are the first colonists on this world. So, that makes this a historical marker, of sorts. The initials are going to outlast us on this rock, out here in the middle of nowhere.”

Jinxie sighed and uncrossed her arms, letting them dangle at her sides.

“You’re right. I’m being petty. This stupid desert has millions of rocks. It won’t hurt to carve our initials on one of them, for posterity. Let’s find a knife and go put ours on there.”

Silas reached into a back pocket and pulled out a ten-centimeter straight blade, handing it over hilt-first to Wink.

Wink smiled and took it. He and Jinxie joined the crowd in front of Love Rock.

Soon, “W+J” was added to the rock’s face in the lower left corner.

6.14

Diffused rays from the shrouded sun illuminated a field near the crossroads outside Little York.

Here, in the midst of green grass and with a backdrop of wide-leafed trees, a beautiful white country church waited with double doors open and ready to receive visitors.

Nearby, a sturdy little house stood several paces away. The parsonage was finished, also in white made with local timber. Like the church building, it had been erected atop a foundation of stone quarried out in the desert, some 20 kilometers away.

A cozy little home, although barren of furniture at the moment, it looked ready to house a willing parson for however long he wished to stay.

The parson in question took a final amazed look at the little house before heading inside the new church building.

He walked down the aisle, minding his feet.

Near the front of the church, a mass of black three-centimeter-long robots crowded the way. He carefully stepped to one side, making sure not to step on any. Then he mounted the single step up to the raised dais.

Leo turned and smiled. As usual, he was dressed in black. He picked up a paper Bible in one hand and looked out at the empty pews.

He cleared his throat, making the white collar sewed into his shirt bob up and down nervously.

Before him on the floor, thousands of little MicaBots waited, sitting in rows and staring up at him intently.

He smiled down at the miniature audience and cleared his throat again. He reflected back on the morning's events leading up to this moment . . .

-+-

Eddie Ferguson served him marked owl eggs for breakfast.

Leo never had such a dish. The eggs tasted like a rich combination of chicken and duck. They were so good, he found himself wanting more. Alas, breakfast consisted of just two. He came away with the distinct impression marked owl eggs were a delicacy, and not lightly served. This was reinforced with Oma's deep scowl when he asked if she had any more.

Having grown bored at Ferguson's Freehold after breakfast, where people mostly just seemed to drink, eat and talk, he wandered around town for a while, exploring. There were more shops here than in Waller, and more people. Though not older by much, in the grand scheme of things, Little York had indeed been settled earlier than anything on the other continent. And it showed.

Eventually he ended up at Cajun Cal's corral. There he retrieved Thunder and rode out of town the short distance to the new church site.

He could have walked. The crossroads were not far from the corral. But he felt Thunder would probably like to get out and about some, too.

Much to his surprise, when he arrived the parsonage beside the church was mostly complete. He watched in awe as the front door seemed to walk itself up and onto old style brass hinges preset in the doorframe.

When he came closer to see how things were moving around, his nose came within centimeters of a tiny robotic black army ant. It saluted him, then returned to the task at hand, helping a hundred others of its fellows hang the front door.

Leo tried conversing with the tiny bots after the job was done. Apparently, they were mostly finished with the house now. Workers streamed out of the newly built parsonage. They all seemed content to simply gather around him. He had no way of hearing them speak, even if they could.

Nonetheless, they seemed interested in him and gathered around, returning the attention given. He felt surprised at their numbers, but then he surmised that many thousand were likely needed to assemble a house so quickly.

Even a small one.

“This is truly phenomenal technology,” he mused, staring down at one of the mechanical ants who had crawled up onto his finger.

The little bot saluted him.

Another one nearby performed a perfect pirouette, as if showing off what it could do.

After a while, he reluctantly stood up.

“I must go and practice what I’m going to say tomorrow, for the wedding. Tom Savage Raleigh and Gwendolyn Del Rio are getting married. Maker help us all. Two of the most powerful families in the galaxy are uniting.”

Reluctantly, he left his new house and returned to the church, with Thunder still hitched out front. He flung open the big double doors and walked inside, looking all around.

Light filtered in through the narrow windows. They were frosted but not stained.

Wooden pews could seat 100 people per side. Ten pews were wide enough for ten people, he reckoned, with an aisle down the middle.

“No organ or piano. But that’s okay. People can sing hymns a cappella for now.”

He walked to the front where a dais and podium waited, with fresh coats of varnish. Behind that a baptistry sat, waiting to be filled with water. He inspected it and found it to be a large stone tub carved out of local rock.

How the little bots had carried it all this way, he had no idea. He remained very impressed.

“That’ll do. That’ll do quite nicely.”

Turning, he approached the podium again and retrieved his paper Bible. That’s when he noticed the crowd of black ants on the floor, watching him.

They lined up in the aisle, as if copying the pew layout, with an “aisle” of their own down the middle. Some sat, and some stood. But they all seemed to be focused on him, waiting patiently. A few stragglers came running in the front door, quickly taking a place in the back rows.

“Well. I see I have a full house, of sorts. Very well.”

He cleared his throat again . . .

“Dearly beloved, we are gathered here today in the name of the Maker . . .”

He trailed off and noted the little bots seemed to be hanging on his every word.

They could not speak, but by their body language they were quite obviously paying close attention.

He stared at them for a moment longer.

“Do you know the Maker?”

Several black ants on the front row shook their heads.

“Ah. Well you see, the Maker is God. He made everything. Yes, you were made by people. But the Maker created people. And everything else, all that is seen and all that is unseen. Let me tell you the story about how the Maker became a man and dwelt among us for a while. There was no room in the inn at the little town of Bethlehem, so Mary and Joseph had to stay in a manger . . .”

6.15

In the hazy sky above Little York, three cars disconnected from Cloud Nine and began their long descent to the surface.

They plunged through the dusty haze and at last became visible to anyone on the ground looking up. But at this time of the day, they arrived unseen by all.

Out in the field behind Feguson's Freehold, the cars slowed their descent before metal landing feet gently kissed the ground. All the doors slid open at once, revealing the back of the pub and other structures in town to the occupants inside.

"Here we are, folks. Welcome to Little York," Captain Mathers mumbled.

Twelve members of the X's and O's, recently departed from the League City Projects, stared out at their new surroundings for a moment before undoing safety straps.

Reynard Gliph stood and gave Mathers a side-eye stare. No enthusiasm or warmth had expressed itself in the other man's voice. If anything, he seemed glad to be rid of his passengers.

The trip from League City had been relatively uneventful. Cloud Nine made a few stops along the way, picking up and dropping off packages and two

additional passengers. The sky train made record time to this distant spot, far north and west of League City and a continent away.

For the most part, everyone had stayed to themselves during the voyage. Gliph and Morgan took the nicest cabin, leaving the others to occupy three bunkrooms in second class accommodations.

If his people held any resentment toward Gliph and his woman traveling first class, they kept it to themselves. The occupants stepped out the door of the landing car and spread out, taking in more of their new surroundings.

“Thank you, Captain. We appreciate your hospitality.”

Mathers nodded, but did not reach out to shake Gliph’s hand or offer any words of parting.

Gliph carried only the stolen bags of tokens from the First Galactic Bank branch in League City. These had stayed close by his side the entire trip.

He turned to a bulky man, a big barrel-chested fellow who had given even Mathers’s bodyguards pause. This fellow had an extremely thick neck sitting on top of beefy shoulders, dark brown skin and jet-black hair shaved close to his skull.

A beard, evidently trimmed short the same time as his hair, punctuated his swarthy appearance.

“Cordana, see to it all our luggage makes it safely off the train.”

“Yes sir, Mr. Gliph.”

The other men and women in the party busied themselves with unloading the luggage car after Buster Cordana made a motion for them to help. Gliph and Morgan watched all the commotion, standing back. They seemed reluctant to sully their hands.

Gliph never let go of the money bags.

Mathers waited patiently, not offering to help either. Instead, he manned his position at the controls inside the passenger car, unwilling to leave his spot. He acted as if maintaining the position remained paramount in importance.

Gliph turned his back to the man, putting him out of his mind. His usefulness to the X's and O's had come to an end, it seemed.

At last, all the party's luggage was unloaded. Bags, suitcases, travel trunks, and polyresin boxes filled to the brim with clothes, guns and other supplies were unceremoniously piled in a cluster out on the grass just outside the car's sliding door.

Morgan had grown bored watching their people unload the stuff. She turned her attention to the structures nearby, visible from the field.

"It doesn't look like much," she said, eyeing the back door to the pub. "Everything's so . . . rustic."

"It's a frontier town, my dear. Far from civilization. The people here are likely unskilled and uncouth. Who else would live so far from the creature comforts of home?"

Buster pulled out the last crate from the passenger car and set it down near the others, his arm and shoulder muscles flexing.

He straightened and glanced at the back of the pub, privy to the tail end of this exchange.

"Well, ya know . . . League City ain't exactly Epsilon, either. I'd say we're all kinda 'uncouth' for bein' anywheres on this planet."

Gliph turned and glared at the big man, a stinging remark on the tip of his tongue. But Mathers interrupted the rebuke before Gliph could get it out.

"Thank you for choosing Cloud Nine, everyone."

They turned to stare at the man, still standing just inside the door.

He continued, expressionless.

"Should you need additional transport or delivery service, please remember us. Our schedule for when we swing by any town is available at the nearest public house. We'll have you on Cloud Nine in no time."

His face belied the cheery tone. He looked relieved, more than anything as he pressed a series of buttons.

“Is that an ad slogan or something?” Morgan wondered.

But Mathers did not reply.

The doors to all three vehicles slid shut and sealed hermetically with a hiss. Everyone watching took a step back as the connected cars suddenly levitated a meter in the air.

The sky train components paused, as if catching their breath. Then they ascended quickly, like an elevator going up.

Those on the ground watched as the vehicles became tiny spots, quickly growing smaller. The dusty sky swallowed them, and they vanished from sight.

“Well? Now what? We goin’ to the pub? I reckon that’s as good a place as any to start takin’ over this here town.”

Buster nodded to the back door of Ferguson’s Freehold, drawing everyone’s attention to it.

Gliph frowned, annoyed that the other man had taken the initiative.

“Yes, Mr. Cordana. It is best to introduce ourselves at the town’s central social spot. You and you . . .” he pointed to two of the men. “Stay and guard our stuff. We don’t know if there is enough room in the pub to accommodate us, or if we will need to confiscate housing. The rest of you, come with me.”

He stuck his elbow out and Morgan placed a hand in the crook of his arm. Together, they marched toward the pub. The others fell in step behind them as they approached the rear of the building.

Gliph stopped at the back door and twisted the knob.

“Locked?”

He twisted again and shook it. The door did not give.

“Go around front!”

The irritated old woman yelling on the other side of the door did not open it.

Gliph took a step back, surprised.

His brows furrowed.

He turned and examined those behind him. Most were hidden from view by the mass of Buster Cordana's bulk.

"Are the rest of you armed?"

"Course, Mr. Gliph. We don't go nowheres without a piece."

Buster patted the big black pistol hanging off his hip in a faux leather holster.

Gliph looked at Morgan.

She pulled up her white cotton top and revealed a little handgun stuck in her waistband. The rolls of cloth in front artfully hid it when she dropped her blouse back down.

Gliph sighed and nodded.

"I fear we may have to quickly perform some attitude adjustments in this town. Let us go around front and introduce ourselves properly."

Buster showed his teeth in a combination of a smile and a snarl.

The others nodded, restless. They looked eager to shed the monotony of their time confined on the sky train.

Satisfied, Gliph turned to head to the front of the building, sticking his elbow out again for Morgan.

Together, they led a small army beside the pub and out to Little York's main street.

6.16

The gang stopped at the front corner of Ferguson's Freehold. Everyone stared out at Little York's unpaved central avenue.

Two lines of connected buildings flanked either side, divided up into shops of all kinds. Everything was made from wood. Boardwalks stretched alongside the buildings, offering a place for people to walk above the dirt.

Horses stood patiently tethered to hitching spots set aside for them. Public watering troughs ensured the animals had something to drink.

Business looked light. The settlement's population was not huge, and most people in town seemed to be elsewhere right now.

However, people *were* here. They walked in and out of shops, mounted and dismounted their horses. Several glanced at the newcomers, but everybody appeared to be too busy to approach.

Other than displaying some mild curiosity, no one seemed to care that newcomers had arrived in town.

To their right, at the end of the street and capping off the parallel long buildings, the pub stood with its door waiting for them.

"Let us introduce ourselves, shall we?" Gliph said.

He turned and approached the entrance with Morgan. The others followed, their steps trampling over the boardwalk in front of the pub.

Diffused sunlight flooded the interior when Gliph opened the door. Three men at the bar turned and stared at him. Four more sat at tables, eating a late breakfast. They continued chowing down even after Gliph's entire party entered the pub.

Edward Ferguson stood behind the bar, a little old man in his late 70s. His eyes widened at the sight of ten newcomers coming in all at once.

"Howdy folks. What can I get you?"

"Are you the proprietor of this establishment?"

Gliph walked forward, a look of delight at making contact with somebody in charge.

"My wife and I run the Freehold, yes."

As if mentioning her conjured her appearance, Oma Ferguson burst through the kitchen's swinging door.

"We ain't got room to put you all up in separate beds. You'll have to share. Board is ten credits a night, each. That includes meals. No alcohol."

She stood, glaring at the party, drying her hands on an apron.

Gliph noticed the little old lady wore an old pair of force bracers, probably to help lift heavy items around here.

"Good morning. Mrs. Ferguson, I presume? My name is Reynard Gliph. These are my people. And we are laying claim to this town. As such, no payment will be required since this town and all within it belong to us now. No longer shall this settlement be known as Little York. Henceforth it shall be called Allegory. Here we shall establish the genesis of an anarchic society for this planet."

Silence greeted this statement. Everyone in the pub stared at Gliph with a mixture of astonishment and disbelief.

Oma Ferguson stared at him for a moment, expressionless. Then, a very rare smile crossed her face.

She guffawed.

As if releasing a pressure valve, everyone else in the pub chuckled, too.

People eating at the tables snorted and smiled, then resumed chewing their food.

Eddie grinned behind the bar and shook a thumb at Gliph.

“Get a load of this guy.”

One of the barflies doubled over in laughter, falling off his stool.

“Anarchy?” he said, climbing back to his feet. “What are you? Crazy? You don’t *establish* anarchy. Anarchy is what exists before a civilized government is formed.”

“By definition,” Eddie said behind the bar, still smiling, “there are no rulers in an anarchy, either. So if you created one, you could not be in charge of it. Otherwise, you’d just have a dictatorship.”

The laughter subsided, but the smiles remained.

All attention recentered on Gliph.

He took it in stride. He did not suffer any embarrassment by their laughter, or the rebuke evident in the men’s tone.

“I shall relieve you of your ignorance. One can indeed establish anarchy. It simply involves the removal of nascent authoritarian structures. And I do not seek to be the ‘dictator’ of such a society. I am merely its guiding light.”

“Oh. So, you’re in charge until utopia is reached? And then you’ll give up all your power and prestige?”

The man who had collapsed in laughter still had a gleeful tone in his voice.

“Something like that. I feel as if you might need some persuasion as to the seriousness of our cause.”

Gliph turned to Buster and nodded.

Buster pulled out his big black pistol and shot the grinning man in the face, knocking him off the stool.

Stunned silence.

The body lay spread-eagle on the floor, a touch of steam drifting up from the red blob that used to be the man's head.

Slowly, everyone turned to look from the fresh corpse to Buster Cordana and Reynard Gliph.

Everyone froze for a moment.

Then Eddie ducked down behind the bar.

The other two sitting on stools jumped off and rolled to either side. They came up brandishing pistols of their own, firing off shots.

The cluster of people at the door scattered, everyone drawing a weapon.

The four men eating at the tables hit the floor. One of them tipped his table over as a shield, knocking plates and silverware off.

Bolts flew in the air, smashing into all four walls, the front door, tables and chairs.

“Dagnab it!”

Oma Ferguson's rare smile dissipated. She marched over to the body on the floor, ignoring all the red and green energy bolts flying through the air.

She bent down and retrieved the man's sidearm and stood up, taking aim at one of the women in Gliph's party not blocked by furniture.

Thoop!

The girl screamed. She went down, seeming to shrink behind a chair.

Buster roared, he stood up, offering the largest target in the room, and switched over to full auto, peppering the bar with bolts.

Eddie reached over in a burst of adrenalin and pulled his wife up by the waist and over the bar. Together they tumbled down to the floor as energy bolts rained down, bursting glassware and cracking the mirror on the wall.

Someone opened the door off the street and stuck their head in.

“Hey Eddie! Oh shoot!”

The door slammed shut, pattered with bolts.

Buster’s power pack depleted. He clicked the trigger a couple of times, urging another shot, but nothing came out.

He looked down at the woman Oma shot, whimpering. Blood stained the floor around her.

He tossed the gun down and stomped over to the bar, dodging shots along the way.

By this time, only two of the pub’s patrons were left standing, both taking refuge behind tables turned over on their side. The shooting died off as Buster approached the bar, pockmarked with scorch marks and shattered glass.

He put his hands on the edge of the bar and pulled, muscles flexing. The wood groaned, then snapped as he yanked a huge chunk of the bar out and tossed it aside.

Eddie lay on the floor on top of Oma. He looked up in fright at the giant man towering above them.

Buster ignored him. He reached down and grabbed Oma’s blouse with one beefy fist and pulled her out from under Eddie.

He lifted her up, straightening to his full height. Her feet dangled half a meter off the floor as he slowly curled his arm and lifted her face up level with his.

Buster glared at her, eyes seething with anger. Lips stretched back in a snarl as he brought her face close.

Oma looked back at him almost expressionless, but with more than a hint of stubbornness in her wrinkled old face.

As soon as he stopped lifting her up, when her face came level with his, she activated her force bracers and slugged him in the nose hard as she could.

6.17

Buster dropped her and bent over in pain, howling.

Oma scrambled to her feet, bracers humming. She punched him in the ribs, about even with her face now, then slammed a fist into his kidneys.

Buster went down to one knee.

The old woman whaled on him, throwing punch after punch into his sides.

“Oma!”

Eddie walked through the missing chunk of his bar, hands outstretched.

Half a dozen guns from the X’s and O’s swung toward him, making him stop.

“Enough!” Buster yelled as another blow threatened to crack a rib.

He swung out with one giant forearm and flung Oma against the pub’s wall.

She slammed up against it like a starfish, arms and legs out wide, then slid down to the floor.

“Oma!”

Eddie ran for her, ignoring the guns. Nobody shot him.

He went down to his knees and cradled her head in his lap.

“Oma? Speak to me!”

Gliph appeared from behind a jumble of furniture. Morgan followed, tucking her little gun back in her waistband.

Gliph stared at the two remaining men, cowering behind the tables. They were armed still, but nobody dared shoot at the moment.

“Are you okay, Mr. Cordana?”

Buster groaned, but he stood up straight. He looked battered and bruised. He wiped the blood from a broken nose, grimacing.

“I am, Mr. Gliph.”

“And Ms. Pogam? Are you still with us?”

“I . . . I’m okay.”

The young woman Oma shot stood up, tying off her wound with a strip of cloth.

“Alright then. I believe we’ve made our point. Let’s look over the rest of our new town, shall we?”

Gliph held the door open for Morgan, then stepped outside after her.

But the man who ducked in and ran out had already spread the word. People came out of the shops, and others rushed to Main Street from their houses set off behind the buildings.

Everyone heading for the pub carried guns.

“Not sure I like the looks of this, Mr. Gliph.”

“Neither do I, Mr. Cordana. Places, everyone!”

They scattered in front of the pub.

Buster crouched below a watering trough and behind two horses hitched at the door.

Gliph jogged to the corner of the building and pulled back along the wall, hoping to stay out of the line of fire.

Morgan followed him, but she lingered near the corner with her gun out.

“There they are!” someone shouted. “Them’s the stranger that shot up Oma and Eddie’s place!”

“Get ’em!”

Bolts slammed into the pub, startling the horses tied up nearby. They jostled in place, tugging on their reins.

“I need another gun!” Buster said, still grimacing in pain from Oma’s blows.

Gliph heard him and jogged to the back end of the building. He shouted out into the field where the two men left behind still guarded their luggage.

“Bring some guns! And get over here!”

One of them opened up a crate and extracted four heavy rifles. The other one pulled out his sidearm, and they both came running.

At the side of the building, Gliph waved them on. They ran to the corner where Morgan stood, her back flat against the wall. Bolts flew in as men out in the street shot at the newcomers in front of the pub.

“Just hold on,” Morgan said. “I’ll cover you. Get over to where the others are.”

The two men nodded. One had his arms full of rifles. The other held his pistol out, but his hand trembled, making the gun shake.

Morgan stepped out and aimed carefully with her little gun.

Thoop!

A farmer across the street dropped, a bolt hitting him square in the head.

Morgan shifted her aim at a man galloping toward the pub on a horse.

Thoop!

The rider fell out of the saddle, blood spattering the dirt.

The shooting paused as the townsfolk digested their two new casualties. Men hidden in spots along the boardwalk tried to see who had just died.

Morgan turned back to the two behind her.

“Go!”

They ran around the corner of the pub.

Near the front door, the two horses at the hitching post lay dead, victims of gunfire. Behind the watering trough and the dead horses, six of the ten from Gliph’s group lay prone, two of them returning fire.

Of the remaining pair, one lay dead near the pub. The other had been wounded in the leg. He had his back up against a rain barrel near the door, out of the line of fire.

The man carrying guns ran up to Buster and handed off a rifle. Then he gave one to the wounded man at the rain barrel, one to Shalonda Pogam, and he kept one for himself.

Gliph came up behind Morgan, peering over her shoulder. She still aimed the little gun out at the street. But no one shot back.

“Perfect. A lull in the fighting.”

He raised his voice.

“Now look, people! There’s no need for violence! Put down your weapons!”

“Who are you?” somebody called back from further down the street.

“What’d you do with Oma and Eddie?”

“The proprietors of this establishment are doing just fine. We simply had a disagreement over the ownership of their property, and this entire settlement.”

This brought a pause as the men hidden in the street tried to reconcile what Gliph said with their understanding of things.

Finally, another man called out.

“What do you mean, ‘ownership?’ The pub belongs to the Fergusons!”

Gliph sighed, then he took another deep breath.

“This entire area is now known as Allegory! There is no more ‘ownership’ of property established in the League City Courthouse. We no longer live under the strictures and rules of a decayed and corrupted society. We live in total freedom. *You* live in total freedom now. There is no government control over anybody here anymore.”

“So, what? You just come in here and declare this? You just got off the sky train, I saw Cloud Nine taking off.”

“I ain’t givin’ up my farm, pardner. No way.”

“You don’t have to give up anything!” Gliph snapped. “This is not a commune! And we’re not socialists, either. Don’t you understand? There are no taxes, no duties or tithes. There is no government control. At all!”

This was met with a long silence as the men and women taking cover digested his remarks.

A faint voice came from further down the street, from one of the women hiding in a doorway. Gliph could just hear the remark.

“I kinda like our government in League City.”

Someone nearby said, “Yeah. They pretty much leave us alone.”

“They done good by me,” someone else said. “Heck, I got my place for 200 credits!”

“So did I.”

“Everybody did.”

Gliph frowned.

He shouted, “That’s just the start! They entice you out into the hinterlands to settle the wilderness with cheap land. But then they come back and demand retribution! They demand taxes! They demand control! But we are

establishing a society independent of their control! They're not going to tell us what to do twenty years from now! If anything, we'll be the ones telling League City what to do!"

Conversation continued. Gliph could no longer make it out. Several gunmen gathered near the storefront where he had heard someone saying they liked the government.

Finally, a man walked out into the street, holding his hands high.

"Don't shoot! Let's parley."

"Put your guns down, but be ready," Gliph said softly. "Let's see what he has to say."

The man walked fearlessly down the street, hands still up. No one shot him.

He came to within a few meters of the pub's entrance and stopped.

He locked eyes with Gliph, ignoring the others.

"I think maybe the best thing is for you folks to get settled some place and we can talk about everything like civilized people, instead of shootin' up the place. Do you agree?"

Gliph nodded slowly.

"That does sound agreeable. Where should we go in order to discuss things?"

"I and my brothers have a place right outside town. One of our houses is empty. Plenty of room for you folks."

Gliph shared a glance with Morgan, who smiled at this unexpected offering.

He called out, "What's your name?"

"I'm Britt. Britt Dalmont."

6.18

Happy chatter drifted out across the desert from Love Rock.

After all the couples had carved initials declaring their undying love for one another, everyone stood around and talked. Since there were no sand dragons nearby, and Lisa's large sensor would warn of other predators should they come close, everyone felt comfortable in lingering.

They discussed small things and big things, things of importance and things completely trivial. They caught up with families and came to know new ones.

Lisa interrupted Tom's explanation about the star farming operations to Biff and Julia.

"Thomas?"

"Hold on a minute, Aunt Julia. Yes, Lisa? What is it?"

"There has been a firefight in Little York. Oma Ferguson is badly wounded and could use some first aid."

His face dropped.

Biff said, "What is it, Tommy?"

"There's been a shootout in town."

Conversation around the rock immediately died.

Gwen said, “Who was involved?”

“I dunno, but Oma’s hurt. Lisa says she needs an injection of nanobots. Everybody, please excuse me. Lisa?”

He held out his hand and a pneumatic syringe popped into place.

A second later, a loud *pop!* carried across the desert as he disappeared.

Biff turned to Gwen and said, “Did he just teleport directly into a gun battle?”

A frown crossed her face.

“I don’t know. I hope not.”

-+-

Tom appeared in the men’s room of Ferguson’s Freehold, near the urinals and still holding the syringe. Here he had hidden one of Lisa’s mini sensors, so it made sense for him to show up by the stalls.

He pushed open the door and stuck his head out into the great room.

Tables and chairs were knocked over, showing the telltale scorch marks of a gun battle. Plates and food and silverware lay scattered across the floor, along with blood and two bodies strewn among the furniture.

The bar looked like it took the fight particularly hard. Not a single glass or bottle looked unscathed, with broken shards everywhere. The mirror showed large blaster holes and a spiderweb of cracks.

He walked through the door and looked around some more. On the far side, near the kitchen entrance, he saw Eddie sitting on the floor, crying softly.

“Mr. Ferguson?”

Eddie did not respond, rocking slowly back and forth. Tom jogged over to the other side of the room. He found Oma on the floor next to Eddie.

Oma looked battered and bruised. Her face was swollen. Blood covered the back of her head and Eddie's lap. One leg looked bent at an unnatural angle. Her clothes were torn.

Eddie looked up as Tom approached, tears trickling down his cheeks.

"Mr. Ferguson? It's okay. Let me see her."

Tom squatted down and gently laid two fingers on Oma's neck. He could feel a weak pulse, the heart beating slow.

He sighed in relief.

"She's alive."

"Not . . . not for much longer," Eddie said, sniffing. "We came out here to start over. To retire. I said, 'This is a funny way to retire, Oma. It sounds like more work than what I imagined retirement to be.' She told me to hush."

He smiled at Tom with red eyes, a fresh crop of tears streaming down his face.

"She's going to outlast you, Mr. Ferguson. That's usually what happens with married couples, you know."

Eddie wiped his nose with the back of his hand.

"I . . . I don't know that. She's taken it pretty bad. That big man . . . he threw her up against the wall. I never seen someone that strong before."

Tom put the tip of the syringe up against Oma's neck and injected the solution.

"These are milspec nano-bots, Mr. Ferguson, with the bone repairing stuff. Here, let's straighten her leg so it heals right."

Tom reached down and gently pulled the lower part of Oma's left leg straight.

She grunted in pain and her eyes fluttered open.

Tom moved back to squat beside Eddie.

“Howdy, Mrs. Ferguson. We got you a nanobot injection. You’ll be good as new in no time.”

The old woman’s eyes swam in pain, unfocused.

Then her pupils constricted, suddenly becoming sharp.

“Where is that bastard? I’ll kill him.”

Eddie’s face lit up with joy and relief.

“You’re gonna make it!”

“Of course I’m gonna make it, you old coot.”

She sat up, touching the back of her head where blood was already drying. She glanced at Tom and looked down at the empty syringe in his hand.

“That ain’t from my stock.”

“It’s from mine. They’re milspec. They work better and faster than yours.”

Oma looked down at her broken leg and frowned.

“I can wiggle my toes. Feels like a broken bone is bein’ mended. I suppose you’re right. That is quick.”

“Do you need anything else? I can get you some fast patches or something.”

“I got my own fast patches, boy. You keep ahold of your own supplies for out there on your farm.”

Slowly, she pulled her legs close. Very carefully, keeping weight on her other foot, she stood up. Eddie scrambled up beside her, holding her by the waist.

Tom stood too, still watching her. She turned to him, and for the first time gave him a softened expression.

“Thank you. I won’t forget this. You ain’t gettin’ any free meals or nothin’. But I won’t forget this.”

Eddie, beaming now, silently mouthed the words, “You will always drink free!” behind her face.

“That’s alright, Mrs. Ferguson. I don’t need anything. I’m just glad you’re alive. Who did this? What’s going on?”

“Them blasted newcomers came in here shootin’ up the place!”

Oma Ferguson’s usual dour look returned as she surveyed the damaged pub.

“Look at this mess! Dang it! I hate gunfights in here. Why can’t people shoot things up outside? Look at our bar, Eddie. That sumbitch done tore it down!”

Tom smiled as the old couple lost interest in talking with him and returned their focus on the mess in the pub. Eddie walked alongside his wife protectively as she limped toward the bar, cursing the X’s and O’s, Buster Cordana, Reynard Glyph, and all sky trains bringing in strangers to town.

Tom turned and headed for the door, stepping over busted furniture and broken plates.

Opening it, he stuck his head out again. This time, instead of a ruined pub, he saw two dead horses out in front, and various scorch marks from bolts shot at the pub.

He walked outside, looking in all directions. Further down the street, he counted three more dead horses and noticed part of a building where a fire had been recently extinguished, apparently using water from the troughs nearby.

In the middle of the street a group of citizens congregated, everyone talking at once.

Tom shut the door behind him and approached the crowd. A handful of people stood on the edge of the cluster, listening to the discussion at a distance.

“They can’t just come in here and take over the town.”

“Well, they’re pretty determined. Looks like they’re of a mind they’ll kill anyone who stands in their way.”

“With whose army? They’ll need one if they think they’re gonna take my place, I’m telling you right now.”

“That Gliph character said everybody gets to keep their place. Seems to me he’s just declarin’ independence from the Courthouse or some such . . .”

Conversation paused as Tom approached. Everyone turned to look at him.

“Who’s that? Is he one of them?”

“Naw, that’s just the Savage fella. Got a place out near the desert, past Asa’s old farm.”

Tom said, “Oma’s okay.”

“Well, thank God!”

“Where did the people who did this go?”

A dozen individuals in the crowd turned and pointed down to the other end of the street, straight at Cajun Cal’s corral.

A woman standing closer to Tom said, “Ol’ Britt Dalmont offered to put ’em up at his and his brothers’ place until things get sorted out.”

“Britt Dalmont is sheltering the people you just had a shootout with? Who almost killed Oma Ferguson?”

She nodded, along with several others in the crowd.

“And you just let him? You let them all go?”

An older man in the center of the crowd piped up.

“Well . . . they weren’t hurtin’ nobody on the way outta town, Mr. Savage.”

“Yeah! Maybe ol’ Dalmont can talk some sense into ’em.”

“More likely conspire with them,” Tom said, sighing. “Alright. Thanks for letting me know.”

He stepped around the crowd and headed down the street toward the corral.

“Hey . . .” the older man said. “Where you goin’?”

“To see if I can stop them before they get to the Dalmont family compound.”

“But . . . you ain’t even got a gun. Or a horse.”

But Tom did not bother to respond to this last comment. He marched resolutely toward Cajun Cal’s.

6.19

The party left the corral well before Tom could arrive. Twelve horses made their way out of town, heading north at two abreast.

The city slickers remained uncomfortable in the saddle, but they managed. Gliph's wounded personnel, including Shalonda and Buster, winced at every step their steeds took.

The horses did not care for the smell of blood on those two, but Cajun Cal insisted the animals would get them where they wanted to go. And they did, falling in line with others in the procession going out of town.

To get them to this point, Britt Dalmont had spent several minutes negotiating with Cajun Cal about the price for so many horses. He wanted to rent them rather than buy them from the stables. And he would have preferred a bulk discount of some sort.

Cal opened negotiations by asking twice the usual amount over his typical rental fee, saying he was putting his inventory at risk by letting Britt have so many all at once.

Britt countered with the fact that Cal knew where he lived, and could come visit the Dalmont compound any time if he needed to retrieve a horse early.

Britt soon gave up on hopes of a discount, but insisted on paying the usual rate. Reluctantly, Cal agreed. Then Britt asked him to carry it all on credit,

and the negotiations started over again.

Eventually, Britt gave up all the money he had on him, six five-credit pieces, for a total of 30. He promised Cal the rest of the money next time he came into town, by the weekend at the latest.

Cal agreed but insisted on Britt returning all the horses in good shape at that time. Any equine injuries or, heaven forbid, deaths would result in higher charges owed.

Britt assured him the newcomers would not hurt his animals. Cal returned to the stables and brought out a dozen saddled mounts in a remarkably short time. He also handed over Britt's horse which had been stabled there.

After a quick lesson on riding a horse, everyone mounted up. The X's and O's were all awkward at it. For many, it was their first time and it showed.

Buster insisted he knew how to ride, that he had done so before several times. But his injuries from the shellacking Oma Ferguson gave him made it a very painful endeavor. Cal clearly did not believe the big man as he watched Buster struggle to get into the saddle.

"Just take it easy," Cal said once everyone had finally mounted up. "Let the horses follow Mr. Dalmont's lead, and you will all be fine. Then you can bring them back safe and sound and Mr. Dalmont can pay me the rest of the money he owes for all this."

Gliph sat on his horse trying to look relaxed and confident yet failing to display either. His horse pranced nervously, its heightened senses detecting an inexperienced rider.

"What about our luggage, Mr. Dalmont?"

"Oh, yeah."

Britt rented a cargo wagon, wincing at the price as Cal added it to his bill. Gliph sent the same two men he had ordered to guard their luggage earlier back to the landing field to retrieve it all.

"Don't have them take the load up Main Street," Britt suggested to Gliph. "Go around to the side of town and try to avoid folks, instead. You don't

need any more problems this morning. Them people seeing your men carrying all that luggage will just stir up trouble. We'll wait at the crossroads for them to join us again before we head out to my place."

He turned to the men and said, "It'll be the first intersection on the road out of town. You can't miss it."

Gliph nodded and instructed his men to follow Britt's advice.

Minutes later, the larger group rode out of town. Gliph and Morgan followed directly behind Britt, who led the way. The remainder of their party, save for the two on the wagon, rode after.

At the crossroads, Britt urged his horse to go a couple meters off into the grass of the park.

"We'll be out of the way of any traffic around here," he explained to Gliph. "And the horses can graze a bit, if they want."

He dismounted and threw down a gravity stake. It activated and stood up straight, then he tied his horse to it. As the others dismounted, he threw down a couple more stakes for their horses as well.

Britt cupped his hand over his brows and looked back toward town.

He said, "How long do you think it will take your fellas to get out here and meet up with us?"

Gliph shrugged, watching as Shalonda and Buster struggled to dismount.

"Ow. Ow. Ow."

Shalonda seemed more vocal, while Buster suffered in silence.

"They'll be here as quickly as they can load up our stuff and ride out. Hopefully not that long."

"Huh. Would you look at that? That's new. I did not see it earlier."

Gliph turned and followed Britt's line of sight out into the field stretching before the woods. There, with its back against a wall of trees, a glistening white country church stood with a little parsonage nearby.

His eyes narrowed and his nostrils flared.

“The opium of the masses. I can’t believe that sort of nonsense is flourishing out here.”

“I don’t know that I’d say it’s flourishing,” Britt said, his eyes never leaving the picture-perfect sight. “Like I said, I’ve never seen that church before. I didn’t even know it was out there. I for darn sure didn’t see it on my way into town. Of course, I wasn’t looking for it, either.”

Gliph continued staring at the two fresh new buildings with narrowed eyes.

Finally, he glanced over his shoulder at Buster.

“Mr. Cordana, can you walk?”

“Yes sir, Mr. Gliph. It’s a little painful, but I can make it.”

“Good. Grab your gun and come with me. The rest of you, come along as well. Let’s go pay this new . . . religious establishment . . . a visit.”

When the others gathered around him holding weapons, Gliph flashed them all a smile, showing teeth.

He said, “There can be no room for organized religion in anarchy. Let us drop in on this church and establish Allegory’s claim on the structure. And anyone inside.”

He turned and marched toward the two buildings. The others followed.

Britt Dalmont stayed behind with the horses, frowning.

6.20

Gliph grasped the brass handles on both open doors and pulled them open, letting in the outside light. Behind him, all his people stood staring inside.

At the front of the church, at the podium, Leo froze in place. He held a Bible outstretched in one hand, his other raised high, pointing toward the ceiling.

He stopped, mouth open, and he stared down the aisle at the sight of Reynard Gliph glaring at him from the wide-open doors.

By Gliph's side, Morgan stood. Her eyes quickly took in the country church, looking for others and seeing none.

Behind them, the throng of gang members lingered, with Buster standing tall above them all.

Leo pulled his arms down and closed his mouth as the procession entered, closing the doors behind them.

“Welcome. It appears you are my first visitors. You are not, by any chance, part of the wedding party, are you?”

“Wedding party?” Gliph said with a snort. “Weddings are merely an outmoded government contract. They’re a modern social construct with no

bearing throughout history.”

Leo raised a red-golden eyebrow.

“On the contrary. Adam and Eve were married, as was Noah. Abraham and Sarah, Job and his wife . . . the practice dates back literally to the dawn of the human race.”

“Supercilious nonsense. Religion, just like government, is no longer needed in this modern age.”

Leo clasped his hands at his waist, still holding the Bible. The gang moved further inside, coming down the center aisle, all but Morgan who stayed near the door.

“Ah,” he said. “I see. You are an anarchist.”

“That’s right. I’m here to spread the ‘gospel’ of no government. And you . . .”

Gliph pointed from the middle of the aisle to the raised dais where Leo stood.

“. . . You are competition. And I cannot abide competition in my town.”

Gliph turned to Buster Cordana and waved at the pastor.

“Shoot him.”

“Uh, Boss? I ain’t got no gun. I left that rifle tied to my horse.”

“I’ll take care of it,” Morgan said from the doorway.

She lifted up her blouse and extracted her little pistol, aiming all the way across the sanctuary.

But already Leo was moving. He ducked and rolled as the first bolt flew over his head, slamming into the back wall of the church.

Gliph roared, “Get him!”

Everybody took out their weapons and started shooting.

Leo crawled along the floor of the dais. Most of the shooters could see him.

His shield flickered once . . . twice . . .

Scorch marks pocked the wood as he scrambled back and away from the pews.

Bolt after bolt came in, many slamming home. But his shield held.

At the back of the dais, at the baptistry, he crawled over the top and fell inside. Bolts sailed overhead while others splattered against the sides of the solid rock tub. More bolts slammed into the back wall of the church.

But Leo kept his head down.

“I can’t reach him!”

“Stop wasting your charges,” Gliph said. “Somebody go over there and put him out of our misery.”

“I’m on it, Mr. Gliph!” one of the young men said.

“Thank you, Mr. Bascone. Go take care of it.”

The young man jogged to the front of the church, holding his pistol out like a flashlight. In his late teens, pimple-faced and skinny, he looked eager to please.

At the dais, he stopped and turned back to the others with a worried expression on his face.

“Now, don’t y’all go firing your guns while I’m up here!”

“Go on, Bass,” Buster said. “Ain’t nobody gonna shoot ya.”

The young man nodded and mounted the dais. He aimed carefully at the big rock-hewn baptistry at the very back of the church and moved toward it. As he approached, he found the preacher lying on his back looking up, hands and feet pressing on the sides of the tub.

Bascone chuckled in delight.

“Say goodnight, preacher man.”

Thoop! Thoop! . . . Thoop!

Leo's shield flickered once, twice . . . thrice.

He breathed hard, a terrified expression on his face. But the shield embedded in the silver cross around his neck held.

"He gots somethin' blockin' the shots, Mr. Gliph!"

"He's wearing a shield."

Gliph motioned to Buster.

"Run up there and beat him to death, Mr. Cordana. A blaster shield won't stop your fists."

Buster pursed his lips. For once, he did not hurry to obey a directive.

"Well? What are you waiting for? Go kill the preacher!"

"It don't seem right to pummel a man of the cloth to death, Mr. Gliph."

"Nonsense. You were willing to shoot him a minute ago, if only you had your gun."

"Yeah, but that's different, sir. Shootin' seems more . . . I don't know. Humane or somethin'. It just don't seem right to beat a preacher to death."

Gliph's face flushed in anger.

"What's the difference? He's dead one way or the other!"

"Don't worry about it, Mr. Gliph!" Bascone shouted. "I gots plenty of charges. Take that! And that!"

Bascone shot the preacher over and over in the big dry tub, carelessly with one hand. He sent bolt after bolt into the man's middle.

Leo jerked and squirmed, but his shield held up.

Thoop!

On the last shot, the shield flickered several times . . . then it winked out.

"Ha! I think I got it, Mr. Gliph! They say those things act up before they die! I think this next one is it!"

He locked eyes with Leo and aimed the gun carefully down at the man's middle again. Then he moved the muzzle slightly, this time aiming at Leo's head.

Bascone gave him a smirk, relishing the look of terror on the pastor's face.

Leo said, "Maker save me!"

From the ceiling, a black army ant dropped, landing on the center of Bascone's head with a light *thwack*.

"What?"

He slapped his hair, knocking the little bot off.

"What was that?"

"Problems, Mr. Bascone? Hurry up and finish the preacher off."

Bascone aimed at Leo again.

This time twenty tiny black bots dropped down on him.

Then they poured, a solid black column with thousands of ants poured down from above.

"Get 'em off me! Get 'em off!"

Gliph said, "What's the matter with him? What's going on?"

"Somethin's fallin' down on him, Mr. Gliph, sir," Buster said.

Ants raced in from all corners of the church, quickly heading to the front and joining the pillar of black bots raining down on Bascone.

He flung his arms around, slinging ants off. They hit the floor and ran back to him.

Bascone looked down.

His feet and legs looked solid black, covered in metallic ants. They crawled up his sides, to his waist, locking into place, going higher by the second.

He screamed.

He shot down at the floor near his feet.

Tiny shards of black metal blew apart at close range.

But the MicaBots kept coming.

They held his legs now. He pulled hard as he could, but thousands of the tiny robots held firm, sealing him in place.

They locked into position, tiny faces glaring up at him as they held onto each other tight.

“I’m stuck! I’m stuck!”

More and more bots raced into the building through the open doors. They crawled along the ceiling, the floor, the walls.

They all converged on the front.

From the door, Morgan shot down at the floor, making everyone in front of her jump.

“Stop it!” Gliph yelled as others waved their guns around. “There’s too many of them!”

Buster Cordana looked horrified.

“What is it, sir? Is this some kinda alien life form we didn’t know about on this planet?”

He kicked at a stream of bots moving at speed along the floor. Three went flying. But they did not stop.

Bascone was completely covered in black now. He could no longer move at all. The ants locked into place along his chest and shoulders, quickly moving up to his neck and on top of his head.

They weighted down his arms so he couldn’t move. He could no longer squeeze the trigger of his gun.

When they covered his eyes, he opened his mouth and screamed.

Bots flowed inside him, into his mouth and down his throat, a solid writhing mass of black . . . and choked off his voice.

The body fell over like a tree with a shuddering crash on the wooden dais.

Everyone watched as the black covering slowly withdrew almost like a liquid. The solid mass reverted to individual ants once more.

Then the ones inside him exited his body.

Each little bot marching out of the dead man's mouth carried a piece of his internal organs. They deposited their bloody loads unceremoniously on top of Bascone's stomach.

Watching from the giant tub, the look of terror had disappeared on Leo's face.

He stood up slowly and deliberately, then stepped out of the dry baptistry, unconcerned with the guns turning toward him.

Leo walked to the body of Bascone and pointed down at it.

In a rich baritone hearkening back to the preachers of old he said, "Behold! He is unmade!"

Leo ducked as a flurry of bolts shot out, peppering the dais.

MicaBots rose up in front of him in a low black barrier, proving surprisingly resilient to energy bolts shot at a distance. Tiny bursts killed a few where they hit, but no shots made it through.

"What is this?" Gliph shrieked. "Kill him!"

The front doors slammed back against the outer wall as Tom Savage pulled them open.

"What's going on in here?"

6.21

Most of the gang turned to shoot at the door and the man standing there.

Morgan jumped and rolled out of their way, then crawled under the back pew as bolts sailed overhead.

Tom dodged to the right, taking refuge behind the outside wall of the church as a barrage of energy bolts shot through the open door.

He pulled the pistol out of his holster and stood up against the wall, waiting for the salvo to subside, and pressed the implant under his right ear.

“Hey, Lisa? Could you send everybody over here, please? Don’t port them in front of the door, or anywhere else they could get shot.”

“Will do, Thomas.”

Pops started sounding all around him as neighbors and family members ported in.

Christopher Raleigh looked around at his new surroundings, frowning.

“What’s going on, son?”

“Shootout. I don’t know who these people are, but they’re tearing up the church I built for the wedding. Plus, they’ve got our pastor.”

Others gathered around, some who had been abruptly interrupted in the middle of conversations.

Tom said, “Everybody without a gun, please hold a hand out, palm up.”

As one, all the visitors followed his instructions.

Silas’s face paled. No one noticed as he stuffed his hands in his pockets. He and Lola, along with Wink, Jinxie and Gwen were already armed.

“Lisa, please give everyone a gun.”

Weapons popped into place, one into every outstretched hand. Many in the crowd smiled.

Biff grinned and said, “A shootout! I haven’t been in a real gunfight in forever.”

“This is not the time to go and get yourself shot, dear,” Julia said with a frown. “Remember, you are retired from the police force.”

“Yeah, but I still teach at the academy. This will be good practice.”

“I’m sure it’s a little different out on the frontier than back home.”

Tom said, “Now please hold your other hand out. Everybody this time. Lisa, give each person a shield.”

Tiny discs the size of poker chips appeared in everyone’s hands.

“This is the newest model,” Chris said, smiling. “I bought a ton of them from Tony Kim’s outfit and brought them along with us this trip. I figured they’d come in handy.”

“Yeah, thanks Dad.”

A light glow enveloped each person as they each pressed the center of the discs and activated their shields.

Javon pocketed his, then looked at the gun in his hand with furrowed brows.

“I feel a little bit out of place here with you all,” he said. “I’m a newsman, not a gunman.”

“Do you know how to use that thing?” Chris said with a note of genuine concern in his voice.

“Yes. One of the first things Gina made sure to teach me when we got married was how to shoot a gun.”

“I changed the policy at the AOJ facilities allowing family members to use the range as guests,” Gina said, smiling. “He gets lots of practice.”

“Every weekend,” Javon said.

“Alright, is everyone ready?”

Gwen nodded back at Tom, looking pissed.

“This is *my* wedding they’re messing up. I like the church, by the way.”

Silas and Lola nodded, looking determined.

Wink and Jinxie nodded too. Wink looked committed to yet another fight. Jinxie seemed eager to join, as if looking around for someone to shoot.

The older couples displayed various expressions ranging from resignation to anticipation.

Tom said, “Let’s go in first, Silas. Everyone else, come in pairs behind us. Shoot everybody but the preacher. He’ll be the one dressed all in black.”

“We know what a preacher looks like,” Gwen said.

“Good. Don’t shoot him. Ready?”

Silas nodded, flicking over his pistol to full auto.

“Let’s go!”

Tom and Silas raced around the corner, through the open wooden doors and into the church sanctuary.

They grimaced, ready for the shields to absorb blasts. Tom put an arm up in front of his face so the bolts wouldn’t blind him.

Both men slid to a stop partway down the big center aisle.

Standing on the dais at the front of the church, thousands of MicaBots clustered around the preacher. They wrapped around his body but let him move, forming a black layer of armor.

Tens of thousands more formed a living wall in front of him, adding yet another layer of protection. All the bots moved in sync along with the preacher as he shifted around the stage, save for one small lump of several hundred ants covering the paper Bible on the floor and protecting it.

One of Gliph's men rushed the dais with a gun, trying to get a closer shot.

Leo flung his arm as if throwing a baseball. A huge mass of black ants rose up from the floor and rushed to meet the man, covering his body like a black tidal wave.

He screamed going down, clawing his way through the bots. But there were far too many. He disappeared under a pile of army ants.

Leo held his arms out wide and brought his hands together.

The MicaBots responded as if he directed an orchestra, and they were the instruments. Ants smothered the front of the room, knocking down men and covering them like oil.

Already, three more of Gliph's people were gone, covered in bots. Human-sized piles littered the front of the church, smothered in black. Nothing moved underneath.

Gliph turned and looked at Tom and Silas, wide-eyed with terror.

“Get out! Get out now!”

Gwen and Lola raced through the doors next, guns drawn. They stopped and stared at the living black wave washing over the front of the church. Behind them others crowded the doorway.

Gliph ran to the wall since the exit was blocked, climbing over pews. At one of the narrow windows, he kicked out with his foot, shattering glass. He squeezed through the space and ran out into the open field.

Those close by followed him through the new exit. Silas aimed at one of the last to leave, but Tom pulled his arm down.

“Nah. Let them go.”

Morgan crawled out from under a pew and raced for the broken window. She paused for just a second and locked eyes with Tom, then squeezed through the narrow opening and raced outside.

“Where are they going?” Gwen said.

She approached the broken window carefully, holding her gun out in case someone still lingered nearby. In the distance she saw people running for the crossroads, and horses tethered to gravity stakes. The biggest man limped in last place when Morgan passed him.

A wagon pulled up to the crossroads, loaded with luggage. Someone directed them to pull onto the West Road.

She squinted, magnifying the view with her enhanced vision to see who gave orders at the head of the line.

“Britt Dalmont. It figures the Dalmont boys would be involved in this.”

Everyone scrambled up into saddles as soon as they reached the horses. Britt untied them and gathered up the stakes. He pulled the riderless horses together and tied them off behind his.

Tom and Silas stared at Leo, still standing on the dais. Only his eyes showed through the mass of black ants covering him.

“Pastor? What are you doing?”

Bots retreated off his face. Slowly, they drifted off the rest of his body. MicaBots wandered aimlessly now that the threat was over, the mass of black at the front of the church slowly dissipating.

“My, uh . . . friends here were just protecting me.”

Tom looked down at the bloody bodies left behind as the mounds of black covering them seemed to dissolve like magic.

“You weaponized my MicaBots?”

“They were a gift from the Maker. What a blessing.”

Gwen stayed at the broken window.

One rider lingered behind the others as they set off down the road toward the Dalmont property. Gwen watched as Morgan pulled up one of the group's heavy rifles. She made her horse stop for a moment and aimed long distance at the church.

Gwen's eyes went wide.

"Incoming!"

She dropped to the floor on her stomach.

The bolt slammed into the outer wall of the church, blowing a hole through the wood and shattering the glass of two more windows.

6.22

“**Y**ou, uh, look like you’ve sold out of stuff today.”

Haley looked up from behind the table where she sat in the bazaar. Her eyes dilated at the sight of Ash, but she forced the enthusiasm at seeing him down when she responded.

“Oh, hi. Yeah, it was a good morning. What are you doing out here?”

“Well, it’s close to lunch. Honestly, I was hoping to find you. I wanted to see if you felt like going somewhere to eat.”

Haley smiled and stood up.

“Sure. I just need to clean things up and drive the truck back to the warehouse. Want to come with me? We can take my car from there to whatever place you want to eat at.”

“Okay. Can I help you with anything?”

“No, I just need to throw these old power packs in the truck and I’ll be ready.”

He watched as she tossed several small units scattered on a table into a polyresin box.

“Are you buying those from people?”

“Yeah.”

“Why?”

“They’ll be worth something someday. Call it an investment. I sell new ones, too. Sold out today, though.”

He looked at the other two tables, which remained empty.

“What else did you sell?”

“Farm implements. Shovels, pitchforks. You know. One of the stores in town made me a deal and bought me out first thing this morning. I almost could have gotten by with just one table.”

“And the syrup?”

“Ha! The syrup is long gone.”

She finished packing up and made a “follow me” gesture with her head, nodding toward the parking lot at the periphery of the bazaar. Ash fell in step with her as they headed that way. Many vendors in this area had already gone, and empty tables stretched off in all directions.

“So, this is what you do every day when you’re not helping out with a building’s Class Eight? Seems a little dull, if you don’t mind me saying so.”

Haley shrugged while holding the box.

Seeing this, Ash took the box from her. She let him, with a look of relief at relinquishing the heavy load.

Haley said, “Making money is never dull, even if you do it by sitting in a chair all morning. Maybe especially if you can do it while sitting in a chair.”

“You really make a lot of money buying up depleted power packs?”

“Well, that’s an investment. That’s for future money. Today’s profit came when a store manager made me a good deal on the farm tools.”

They walked on for a while in silence, drawing near to the cars and the outer loop road going around League City.

“Where do you get the farm tools, again? There’s a factory or something?”

“You could say that. They’re assembled back home, where the farm is. The wood is locally sourced for the handles, and so is the metal.”

“Right. And home is back on the continent of Glagia, right? That’s where Little York is.”

“Correct.”

“I’d like to visit sometime. You know, I’ve hardly been out of the city.”

Haley said nothing as they crossed over from the open area reserved for tables and into the paved parking lot where ground vehicles waited. Here, trucks from the surrounding farms and moving vans for different stores mingled with the rare car belonging to out-of-town visitors.

As they approached her truck, she finally said what was on her mind.

“We’ll just have to see if you stick around long enough to make it out there.”

He sighed, because he knew this was the big wedge between them.

“I really think I’m going back home, Haley. Not because I want to . . .”

She gave him a look.

“Okay, I take that back. I do want to go home. I miss Diego. I miss Octavia. But it’s more than that.”

“Is that right?”

He nodded, either ignoring or missing the slightly sarcastic tone in her voice.

“I have a job, Haley. I mean, I have a life. I am a somewhat successful reporter for the Zeitung, and that means something. I hope to make editor one day. I don’t know if that makes a lot of sense to you. You’re out here on the frontier selling shovels and syrup and buying up old technology. And that’s great. That’s what you want to do, and I’m all for people doing what they want to do.”

They reached the truck, and he placed the heavy box on the flat bed behind the cab. Haley went around to the other side and tossed the end of a smart strap over to him. He tied it off and the material tightened, snugly securing the load.

They traded places. She walked around and climbed into the cab on the driver's side. He took the passenger door.

"I'm all for letting you stay out here and make a difference on this new world. What I want to do is go back home and make my mark there. I want to reach the editor level and help guide the direction of the Zeitung. We feed the news to millions of people across multiple planets. Even the old League bigwigs pay attention to what we have to say. We're the biggest name in news, period. Our voice is heard throughout the whole galaxy."

She started the truck and eased into the cluster of vehicles waiting to exit the parking lot.

He looked across the seat at her.

She kept her eyes facing forward.

"Does that make sense?"

"Of course it makes sense. You have a life back on Diego. I have a life here on Phaethon. What's not to understand?"

Her eyes still did not meet his as she eased out onto the Loop Road.

He sighed, feeling the wedge between them.

"I hope we can still be friends."

His voice sounded miserable.

Finally, she glanced across the seat at him.

"Of course we can still be friends, Ashley. What a crazy thing to say."

"Well, you've just been so distant ever since I first mentioned something about going back."

She remained silent for a while as the truck picked up speed on the highway, heading back toward the Warehouse District.

Finally, she sighed and said, “Whatever. It’s not like it matters now, anyway. I was upset because I really, really like you, Ash. I started developing feelings for you, and when you said you were going back to Diego, I realized you didn’t feel the same way toward me. So, never mind then. It’s just stupid ol’ Haley, her heart getting ahead of her brain again. It’s fine. We can be friends. You will go back home and become a bigshot in the media. I’ll stay on this frontier world and maybe I can meet a farmer who can carry on a decent conversation, and I’ll have his kids.”

Ash looked at her in shock.

“I . . . I didn’t know . . .”

She glanced across the seat again and saw the expression on his face. Haley smiled, genuinely amused at his surprised look.

“I’ve got nothing to hide from you, about my feelings or anything. I mean, you’re going back anyway. I gotta say, it’s kinda refreshing. From here on out, I’m going to speak my mind around you. I’m not holding anything back anymore.”

“Um . . . Okay?”

She accessed her implant and sent a quick text as she pulled off the road into the industrial part of town.

Lisa? Please get rid of everything in the warehouse that Ash shouldn’t see.

6.23

Haley parked the truck in front of Warehouse Fourteen and opened the big rollup door.

She let out a little sigh of relief when she saw the interior remained mostly empty, save for a few racks of tools stacked on floating carts along with several pallets of recharged power packs. All the hay had been sold.

Most important of all, her Night Shadow costume, which she had left lying on the cot in the far corner, had been ported away somewhere.

She brought the truck inside and parked it in the middle next to her car before climbing out. She and Ash climbed out of the truck.

“So, this is your lair?”

Haley stopped for a moment, wondering if he meant something about Night Shadow.

He saw her reaction and mistook it for offense.

Ash raised his hands.

“Don’t get me wrong. It’s just that this does not seem in any way like a place for a young woman to live. Do you sleep on that cot?”

Her expression softened.

“Yes. And it’s not that bad. It’s quiet around here, mostly. The job covers it, so it’s basically free rent.”

“Hm. And you’ve got another round of tools ready for tomorrow, I see.”

“Right. I’ve got plenty of merch.”

“How do they get it to you? From the farm, I mean. Isn’t Anatolia a whole other continent?”

“Well, you know. Freight. That’s not really an interesting angle for a story, Ash. And I thought we agreed I’d stay out of your articles.”

“I’m just curious. Do ships go between the continents?”

“We have these things called sky trains, and they’re the most efficient way to move people and goods around the planet.”

“Oh.”

He looked around the warehouse some more.

Haley breathed another little sigh of relief. Technically, she did not lie, although the goods here were not transported by sky train. They were teleported.

But Ash doesn’t need to know that, she thought.

Out loud she said, “Come on. I’m getting hungry.”

She went to her car and climbed in on the driver’s side. When Ash got in, she drove it out and parked it in the alley, then walked back to close and lock the warehouse door.

As they headed out of the Warehouse District, Ash smiled while watching her drive.

“See, back home in Octavia, you can just ask PLAIR to take you to the nearest restaurant. All the cars fly, and she controls the traffic.”

“I know how AI works.”

“Anyway, out here it’s like you’ve stepped back in time or something. Everybody has to drive themselves, and then it’s along the ground. I heard the Sheriff had a flying car but it got shot down. Everything is so . . . twentieth century.”

“I kinda like the simplicity of it all,” Haley said as she turned onto the Loop Road again, heading back to the marketplace.

“It does have a rustic quality to it. I could get used to this.”

She jerked her head sharply toward him.

He raised his eyebrows and quickly added, “You know. If I had to stay here.”

She frowned and kept driving.

“Look, Haley . . . I’ve got to go back. I can’t rise in the ranks at my job out here in the middle of nowhere. I hope you understand that. They call this a frontier planet because it’s . . . well, it’s way out on the edge of civilized space. There’s nothing after this. Someday there will be. In a hundred years, this won’t be the frontier anymore. There will be new habitable planets found and people will move out to them. Phaethon will join one of the governmental systems, and steadily grow more advanced. This pattern has been repeating itself for almost two hundred years. You know this.”

She said nothing, keeping her eyes on the road.

“I want to do something with my life back home, Haley. I want to rise up in the ranks. One of the ways to do that is to take remote assignments like this. And I jumped at the chance. But to cash in on it, I need to go back home. And then go on some more assignments. Eventually, I’ll move up the ranks and when promotion time comes around, hopefully I’ll make assistant editor. And then editor. That’s my career trajectory. I can’t do anything besides this job. I’m not good on a farm, I promise you.”

“You don’t have to live on a farm on a frontier planet, Ashley. Look at this city full of people. They’re making a difference. Look at all the merchants in the marketplace and in the storefronts. Look at the people working in restaurants, in the bank, in the Courthouse. Everybody contributes to

society. You don't have to grow food to be useful. Although, I admit that is very important, especially during this embargo."

They rode in silence for a while.

Haley turned off the Loop Road and drove through the network of streets abutting the outdoor marketplace. Soon they merged with traffic on Commerce Boulevard.

"Journalism is important, too. Maybe not so much on a frontier world like this, although everyone always wants to stay up with the latest news. But we serve society. We can shape perceptions. I think what I've written and broadcast about Phaethon has cast everyone here in a positive light back home."

"Yeah, we know. Everything's slanted in the news."

"Well, there's no such thing as objective journalism. That's a quixotic concept. Every media organization leans left or right. It's up to the individual which take on the news they wish to consume."

"So, it's an echo chamber."

"Not really. A good media outfit will present both sides, even if favoring one over the other. Consumers can decide for themselves which side is right, even if their mind is already made up before getting into the story."

"Somebody once said news is two parts entertainment, one part informing."

"Yes, 'infotainment' is part of it. You have to present your information in a compelling way, or no one will pay attention."

"Is that why you hit upon the Night Shadow story? To make Phaethon compelling to your audience?"

"Hey, Night Shadow put this planet on the map. That series is interesting. I bet when the embargo is lifted you'll have tons of young people migrating here all because of her."

And at least one person will be heading back home when that embargo is lifted, she thought.

Haley pulled into an open spot across the street from Arthurus. Business there had not yet recovered from the X's and O's attack. She noticed no line stretching out the door, despite the fact everything had been cleaned up from the gunfight.

“We need to eat here, at Arthurus. I've got to ask the guy at the door about reservations for later tonight, so we can kill two birds with one stone.”

“Reservations? What's going on?”

“It's for a wedding party, a rehearsal dinner. You wouldn't be interested.”

6.24

Corey popped into place outside the front of the church.

The X's and O's were gone. The building itself looked in poor shape despite its recent construction.

Shards of broken glass littered the sides. Blackened chunks of the wall surrounded holes still smoldering with smoke.

Tens of thousands of MicaBots quickly smothered the fires threatened by Morgan's long distance heavy rifle barrage, so the church was not a total loss.

Corey walked through the open doors, wide-eyed, and joined his parents inside.

"It still looks pretty bad," Gwen said, eyes sweeping over the interior. She stood with Tom and the others, surveying the damage.

"What happened?"

Everyone turned and looked at Corey.

He eyed their pistols.

"Can I have a gun, too?"

"Absolutely not," Julia said. "Biff?"

Her eyes darted to the bodies on the floor, and back to her husband. The black dots covering the corpses had receded, leaving bloody messes behind. She obviously did not want her son to see all the carnage.

“Come on sport,” Biff said, wrapping an arm around the boy’s shoulders and guiding him back to the open doors. “Let’s go take a look outside.”

“But I want to stay here with everybody else!”

Biff cast a glance over his shoulder to make sure nobody was listening as they made their way out.

“You can’t shoot this gun inside, son.” Biff winked and displayed his pistol briefly before tucking it back under his belt. “Let’s go find something out there we can take some shots at. Maybe a rock or something to do a little target practice.”

“Oh, boy!”

Little black bots swarmed around the building’s interior and exterior as they walked out, assessing all the damage.

“Lisa?” Tom said. “Tell me Mica can fix everything in time for the wedding.”

“That is correct, Thomas,” the AI responded in his implant. “Mica assures me she can have the Maker’s house completely restored overnight.”

“The Maker’s house?”

He looked over at Leo who stepped off the dais, now shorn of all protective ants save for six riding on each of his shoulders. The preacher walked up and joined the group.

“I may have explained to them the fundamentals of Christianity. The Church of the Maker focuses more on His Creator aspect. That seemed to appeal to them.”

“You were proselytizing my MicaBots? Is that why they were protecting you?”

“I’d like to think they would have protected me regardless. These little bots are good people.”

The twelve mechanical ants on his shoulders stood up a little straighter, puffing their chests out in pride.

One of them gave Tom a jaunty salute.

Chris rubbed his chin while studying them.

He said, “I do have to admit, we considered the possibilities of using MicaBots in combat situations. Mostly, though, we thought they would be constructing campsites and such. It also crossed somebody’s mind they could deconstruct things on the enemy’s side. But . . . using them as a protective organism? As an offensive and defensive weapon like we saw you using them? That is not something our company considered. At all. Our engineers are going to be receiving an interesting field report after this.”

He paused and stuck his hand out.

“I’m Christopher Raleigh, by the way. This is my wife, Jillian. Her sister Julia Jones. Do you know everybody else here?”

“I’m Leonwood Igleses. I know Director Wilcox by reputation. Or should I say, Director Del Rio?”

He nodded toward the others, then turned back to Gina.

She squinted at him.

“Leo here is a known conman and a fugitive from justice,” Gina said, crossing her arms and frowning. “During the war, he spent time in the brig for running a Ponzi scheme on the George C. Marshall. That scam netted him 83,000 credits before it unraveled. Even the Captain of the Marshall contributed to it. After the war he was involved in other financial shenanigans, going to jail three more times over the last two decades. Most recently, he was charged with grand larceny for trying to cheat Navy vets out of their benefits in a complex scheme on Seychar, where all the gold ore from Gotha Mu is processed. You’ve been a bad boy, Leo.”

“I turned over a new leaf about five years ago, Director.”

“Found Jesus, did you?”

“I did.”

“How convenient.”

“The Maker doesn’t protect me from the consequences of breaking the law, Director Del Rio. I’m sure you know that. I served my time, and I’ve tried to make amends for my past. And I can assure you that the Seychar incident of which I am accused was a setup. It was indeed very convenient somebody with my past happened to be there at the time that gold ore went missing.”

“Hm.”

Gina put her fists on her hips and regarded the preacher with a cool stare.

Gwen turned to Tom and said, “*This* is the guy you got to do our wedding? He’s a common criminal!”

“I’d like to think, young Ms. Del Rio, that when I *was* a criminal . . . I was uncommonly good at it.”

“That’s true,” Gina said. “Fortunately for us, you were also good at getting caught. Until you fled to a frontier planet and disappeared, that is.”

“I was unjustly accused on Seychar. I’m not the man who stole that gold.”

“Then stand trial. Defend yourself in court.”

“All things considered, I doubt my ability to receive a fair trial on Seychar, Director.”

Tom said, “He’s a good guy. Look at that, he took out four bad guys without a gun.”

“That was your little robots,” Gwen said. “Not him.”

“Yeah, but he was directing them. Or something. He told them what to do, I guess. What exactly *were* you doing up there, Pastor?”

Leo shrugged, making the little bots on his shoulder roll up and down with the motion.

“I’m not exactly sure. They don’t talk, so . . . I believe they were following my hand gestures. They certainly understood my intent. They acted together, like a single unit.”

The ant closest to his right ear nodded vigorously, but only Tom stood close enough to see it. The black bots blended in perfectly with Leo’s dark shirt.

“Okay. Well, if it’s alright with you, I’ll have you file a report later with Dad so he can relay what the Mica system did today over to his engineers. Right now, these little guys have a church to repair. Let’s get out of their way, everybody.”

As the crowd headed for the door, Gina looked over at Javon, tucking the gun behind his belt.

“Are you sorry you didn’t get to use that in a real gunfight today, dear?”

“Not at all. I don’t have near the training that you and Biffender do. Although, with these shields on it might have been fun, being able to take some shots while firing back. I’m not sure I’d like to actually shoot at somebody, though. On the other hand, if they were trying to kill me, I’m sure I’d look at things differently.”

She held his hand as they walked out the door with the others and said, “You lead such a sheltered life.”

They walked out onto the grass with everyone else.

Javon said, “I know. This little jaunt has been fun. Maybe we can vacation here in the future. Perhaps we’ll get some grandchildren out of this whole ordeal.”

“That would be nice.”

Thoop!

Everybody tensed at the sound of gunfire.

“Nice one, son! Now, hold your breath and squeeze the trigger. It should feel like glass breaking . . . Just keep squeezing until it fires. Don’t jerk the trigger.”

Biff heard Julia clear her throat behind him.

He turned with eyebrows raised.

She frowned at him.

Those behind her, especially those who knew Julia, smiled.

“Oh, hi everybody! Corey and I were just doing some target practice.”

Thoop!

A distant rock out in the pasture the size of a bowling ball rolled backward in a cloud of dust.

“Good shot, son!”

“Again! I want to shoot some more! This is so much more fun than in the games!”

Everyone watched as Corey took more shots, with Biff coaching him.

Chris walked up next to Julia and said softly, “That boy’s got some Thrall in him, just like his cousin. You can’t suppress it forever, you know.”

“I know.”

She watched her husband help Corey line up another shot, aiming for a rock further out in the field.

“I just . . . don’t want the bad parts of my father to come out, you know?”

“Is that what you’re worried about? He’ll be fine. You and your sister turned out okay. Tommy has done okay. It’s not like vampire blood or something that’ll turn him into a monster every full moon.”

“I know, I know. I’m just worried, that’s all.”

Thoop!

“Good shot! You’re a regular marksman, Corey!”

Biff looked back at the watching crowd and shouted, his voice tinged with fatherly pride.

“He’s a natural!”

6.25

“**W**hat in the blue blazes was *that*?”

Buster Cordana was first to speak as the party silently followed Britt along the West Road, heading to his family’s homestead.

No one enjoyed the beauty of the surrounding countryside. No one looked around at the scenery. No one spoke.

They rode quietly, stunned at the recent carnage and unwilling to speak until Buster’s question broke the wall of silence.

Of them all, only Morgan looked satisfied with the end results. Shooting up the church at a distance as a final parting word to punctuate her feelings seemed fitting, at least to her. She alone did not seem to have a black cloud hanging overhead.

“*That* obviously was some kind of new technology that we don’t know about,” Gliph said over his shoulder.

He followed the four riderless horses behind Britt, a mute testament to the deadly effect of their last encounter. Beside him rode Morgan. The remainder of the party followed behind her.

“It weren’t no animals?” Buster said. “They looked like ants up close. I seen one when I was down on the floor.”

“No. When shot at close range, they disintegrated. I picked up a piece. It was metal. Those were tiny robots. A giant swarm of them, but definitely robotic, not organic.”

“That was horrible, seein’ that preacher man control ’em. He would just wave his hands and . . . Miggy died. They swarmed all over her.”

The party rode on in silence for several minutes.

Buster stared down at the ground, not caring which way his horse went. For its part, the animal moved along with the others.

“The way they dug out the stomachs . . . I ain’t never gonna get that outta my head . . .”

“The entrance is up here,” Britt said over his shoulder, perhaps wishing to short-circuit any gruesome descriptions.

They rode past three burned trees, standing like blackened skeletal guardians beside the road, an indicator of a prior battle.

The party rounded the bend and Britt led them onto a private road, going under a wooden arch with the name “Dalmont” carved in big block letters along the top.

“One more kilometer to go,” Britt called back.

No one seemed heartened by the news.

At last, they crested the final ridge. The fields in front of the four Dalmont brothers’ houses stretched out before them. Dogs saw the approaching party and barked the alarm. Those within the homes came out to see who approached.

Newt Dalmont stepped out with the others and walked through the gate to greet his brother as the party rode up to the house.

“Where’s Emmitt?”

“He’s out t-t-tending cattle,” Newt said, eyeing the newcomers.

Newt stopped at the sight of Morgan near the front, his eyes lingering on her a moment too long.

“Well, that can’t be helped,” Britt said, dismounting.

He handed the reins to a young farm hand who jogged up to help. The others dismounted as well.

“Make sure all the horses are tended to. Don’t lose any of the tack. These are all rented from Cajun Cal, I want to get them back to him safe and sound.”

“Yes, sir.”

Britt turned back toward Newt, who stared at Morgan.

“These folks are new in town. They need a place to stay. I’m putting them up in Mal’s house until they get settled.”

“Okay. M-m-most of it has been repaired by n-n-n-now.”

Britt turned to Gliph and the others as they gathered near.

“This is my brother Newt. He’s the youngest. Don’t mind his stutter, that’s just a little nervous habit.”

Newt flushed at this, his eyes returning to Morgan.

“My other brother is out in the fields, and our oldest is offworld. He was . . . retrieved is a good word. He was retrieved by a Marshal recently.”

Gliph’s eyebrows rose at this statement.

He said, “I was unaware Marshals spent much time looking for people on frontier planets.”

“Yeah. Evidently, whatever Mal was involved in back home was bad enough to warrant a Marshal looking for him here. Tracked him down, attacked the house and everything. But that’s all water under the bridge. Us four brothers, we built houses next to one another. That means his place is empty right now. You’re welcome to stay there until you get your feet under you.”

“That’s awfully nice of you, Mr. Dalmont. I’m sure some sort of compensation is in order.”

“We’ll figure something out. Well, come on. I’ll show you your new digs.”

Newt stood by, out of the way, as the procession marched by him to follow Britt through the front gate. His eyes remained fixed on Morgan.

As she passed him, she met his gaze. The corner of her mouth curved up.

He couldn’t tell if it was in amusement or interest.

Newt watched her backside as the crowd continued through the yard and around the corner of the front-facing house.

When she finally slipped out of sight, he shook himself like a dog casting off water.

He followed the crowd of newcomers, but at a distance, as if concerned that approaching the beautiful newcomer too quickly might scare her off.

6.26

Late in the afternoon, Emmitt Dalmont rode home, along with four of his hands. The five headed for the corral and stables in the back of the compound.

“What’s with all the new horses?” one of his men said, pointing to the overfull corral.

“I dunno,” Emmitt responded. “We got company, apparently.”

The five men stopped and dismounted. They let two stable boys take their mounts, then Emmitt and his men turned and headed for his house.

Between the front doors, in the cross section of yard between all four houses, Britt came out to meet his brother.

“I guess you saw the extra horses.”

“Yeah. What’s goin’ on?”

Britt cast a glance at Malcom’s house. They were out in the open, and that fact obviously made him uncomfortable.

“Come inside and we’ll talk.”

Emmitt nodded and followed his brother, leaving his men behind.

In his house, Britt and Emmitt sat down in the den near the front door.

“So, there’s a new gang in town, of sorts.”

“What do you mean, ‘of sorts?’”

“They’re not cowboys. In fact, they have very little outdoor skills at all. But they can all shoot. And there’s at least one guy who can handle himself just fine, even without a gun.”

“What are they doin’ out here?”

Britt shrugged.

“I dunno, but the leader has some moneybags that he always keeps close by. They’re runnin’ from the law or somethin’. But their story is they want to start a new civilization on Phaethon, one completely free from government oversight.”

“Anarchists.”

“You’ve heard about them?”

“I’ve heard about the X’s and O’s. They’ve generated all kinds of problems for both the League and the Republic. But I didn’t know they were on Phaethon.”

“Evidently they’ve taken over the Projects. The way their leader talks, Mr. Reynard Glyph, just about every resident in League City’s public housing follows him.”

“If that’s true, then why leave League City and travel all the way out here?”

“According to him, and again I’m just going by what he said, they want to take over this whole planet. He came to the ‘end of the line’ to set up an outpost here. I think eventually they want to take over all the towns of any size. Like I said, he wants this entire planet to be an anarchy.”

“Hate to say it, but that’s stupid. You ever live under anarchy?”

“No.”

“Neither have I. But I’m sure it’s nothing short of chaos.”

“Well, he’s determined to try. Walked into the Fergusons’ place like he owned it, shot it up and killed some people.”

“That’s not a good way to introduce yourself to your neighbors.”

“Half the town came out to take them on. I managed to diffuse that situation.”

“Think we can use them?”

“That’s what I’m hoping for. When Mal got James Ever’s gang, things started out well.”

“Don’t remind me of the Ever Riders. That ended in total disaster.”

“I know. But I think it’s different this time. And I think Newt’s sweet on the leader’s woman.”

Emmitt snorted.

“That could be good or bad. Good in that it would be amusing to watch her shoot him down. Bad in that the leader might get jealous and try to do something about it.”

“I’ll have a word with Mr. Gliph, see if I can’t short-circuit anything from starting before it gets out of hand.”

“That might be for the best.”

“Oh, and one more thing. We saw a new church built outside of town at the crossroads. Have you seen that?”

“No. I didn’t know anyone was even thinkin’ about buildin’ a church out here.”

“Yeah. Well, evidently this Gliph guy has a thing against organized religion, too. He took his gang in to tear the place up. But something happened in there, I don’t know what. They lost four people.”

“Four?”

“That’s right. I don’t know what happened because none of them are ready to talk about it yet. Evidently, it was fairly traumatic. Gliph’s woman took

out a heavy rifle they was carryin' on the horses and laid waste to the church from the road before we left. I guess she was still mad about it."

"She seems like a real firecracker. You say Newt's smitten?"

"He was all googly-eyed over her, yeah."

"Hm. So, how are we thinkin' about leveragin' your new friends?"

"Well, to be honest I ain't thought it all the way through yet. But anybody wantin' to take over the town has my attention."

Emmitt nodded slowly.

"Yeah. Maybe we could let 'em, and see about dividin' the spoils or something."

"Or maybe we let 'em have the run of the town and we take over the countryside. How would you like to own all the land around here? If the Courthouse homesteading deeds are no longer recognized in an anarchy, all the land could be up for grabs."

Emmitt nodded, faster this time.

"Brother, I like the way you're thinkin'. Let's go knock on their door. I'd like to meet this Gliph fella for myself."

6.27

“O kay. I think we’re all set. The MicaBots will finish repairing things overnight. We’re all going home. Are you going to be alright?”

“Yes.”

“Alright. And you’re staying in the parsonage tonight?”

“Yes.”

“Keep this new-fangled shield in your pocket.”

Tom handed Leo what appeared to be a poker chip at first glance. Leo stared at it in the palm of his hand.

“You press the center to activate it. It’s a newer model.”

“I wish the one in my cross still worked. I had it custom made. The protection is symbolic.”

“What happened to it?”

“The one they called Bass kept shooting me and depleted the power pack.”

“I see. Well, give it to me. We might be able to do something about that.”

Leo pulled the silver chain off his neck with the cross on it and handed it over to Tom.

“I’ll bring it back in the morning. Now, we’re going to show up around eight. There won’t be an audience, I don’t think. Just the people you saw today.”

“Okay.”

“So, I’ll come in and be up there with my dad. Then maybe the girls will walk down the aisle. Dang it, we’re gonna need music. We’ll figure that out. Anyway, after everybody comes through, we’ll let Gwen come down the aisle last. Then you say the words, we take our vows, and that’ll be about it.”

Leo nodded.

He looked up and locked eyes with Tom.

“Thank you. Thanks for all this. Your machines, your friends . . .”

“Hey, thank you for agreeing to marry us. You okay? I know going to a gunfight without a gun had to be scary.”

“I left them in the parsonage. I suppose out here I should always keep one on me. Even in the pulpit.”

“I had to learn that the hard way too, pastor.”

Tom clapped him on the shoulder.

“Alright, we’ll see you in the morning.”

Tom tilted his head closer to one of the preacher’s shoulders and looked at the six MicaBots perched there.

“And you guys watch over him. Don’t let anything happen to him, and have Mica tell Lisa to tell me if anything does happen.”

One of the bots gave him an affirmative nod.

“What if they come back in force?” Leo said. “And now they know my ‘secret weapon,’ such as it is.”

“Oh, don’t worry about that, pastor. We’ve got lots more things to help take care of a bunch of outlaws.”

“I try not to worry. The Maker said no one has added a single hour to their lives by worrying.”

“Good. That’s the spirit.”

Tom walked toward the door of the church, deftly stepping over a line of army ants carrying a new glass pane toward a busted window.

He walked out the church’s double doors and shut them behind him. He looked both ways. Then he checked the field. No one was out on the road.

“Okay, Lisa.”

Tom disappeared with a *pop!*

Half an hour later, he walked into Arthurus with the others. They were greeted by Haley who was already there and seated in the back of the restaurant waiting for them.

“So good to see you. I’m Haley Stonecipher. It feels like I’ve known your daughter since forever. She rode with me in the Fae Phalanx, a group of rangers that patrolled Anatolia.”

Haley shook hands with Gina and Javon, then everyone else. A large table had been set up, and they all sat down. Tom glanced around and noticed they had the restaurant mostly to themselves.

“You know, if what you said about that riot happening outside has been hard on this place, maybe we could start coming here more often. Give them a boost.”

“Anything would help. I don’t know what’s going on. It’s like they’re cursed or something, now. But the food’s still good. Up until the last week or so, this has been one of the busiest places in town. I think it’s still a great place to eat. In fact, I was telling Ashley he needs to bring me here more often.”

Gwen’s parents both grew attentive.

Javon said, “Is that our Ashley? Ashley Thallus?”

“Yes. We’ve been sorta dating, I guess. Nothing much has come of it, though. He is very intent on going back home.”

Gina said, “Really? He hasn’t been here all that long.”

“Yeah, I don’t know. Something about continuing his career. He wants to make editor, and he doesn’t think that’ll happen unless he’s back in Octavia. So, yeah. He wants to go home as soon as possible.”

Gina and Javon exchanged a glance as the waiter showed up and introduced the restaurant’s holo menus to everybody.

Later the party wandered out into the street for a late night stroll. Tom served as a tour guide, pointing out things he thought people would find interesting.

“You’ll have to come back during the daylight hours when the shops are open, although honestly, other than a souvenir or two I don’t think you’ll find much of anything you really need here. But the outdoor bazaar is fun. You can wander around there all morning looking at stuff. You never know what you’ll find.”

“Anyone’s welcome to sit out there with me and sell farm tools, and buy up old power packs,” Haley added, walking arm-in-arm with Gwen.

“Speaking of power packs,” Christopher Raleigh said, looking up at the apartments, “do I understand correctly that each building operates off its own? No one considered a central electricity plant?”

“That’s right, Dad. Everything is self-contained. It was thought at the time to be the fastest, easiest way to power things. And I guess it was. But yeah, terrible timing in that now things are starting to go out with the embargo on.”

Gwen said, “The Projects are losing power. We did not have fun swapping the first one out the other day.”

“Let’s go look at the Courthouse,” Tom said. “The only other thing maybe worth seeing is the spaceport, but it’s just a giant circle of concrete. And you can’t see anything at night over there. But the Courthouse is always lit up.”

He waved everyone over to a line of rickshaws and handed over some tokens to the drivers. Soon they were all on their way down Commerce Boulevard.

When they arrived at Courthouse Square, Tom tipped the drivers handsomely and sent them on their way.

“That is nice,” Julia said, taking in the sight of the stone building all lit up in a nighttime glow.

“And I take it Lisa is . . . watching over it?” Chris said.

Tom nodded, smiling.

He said, “She’s watching over the entire city.”

They walked around the perimeter of the building. At the next corner, Haley pointed out the damaged bank entrance.

“We had a nasty little fight here.”

Gina said, “Oh, yeah. We read about that one. Good thing your city’s Night Shadow was on the case.”

Gwen leaned over and whispered, “Mom, she is Night Shadow.”

Gina blinked.

“Oh. And our Mr. Thallus is completely clueless, isn’t he?”

Gwen nodded.

Gina and Javon exchanged a glance with one another again.

6.28

After making a complete circuit of the square, and Tom pointing out the direction of the Projects, telling the visitors about the fairgrounds and the general location of Lisa's local core, they made their way back to Commerce Boulevard once again.

"Well, that's about it," he said. "Sorry. Not much to see out on the frontier. In fact, this is as metropolitan as we get here on Phaethon."

"It's very nice. I like it," Julia said.

She glanced at her husband.

"We should think about retiring here."

"I'm already retired," Biff said, smiling.

"I'm not so sure a frontier planet is a good retirement destination," Chris said, rubbing his chin. "I think it's better suited for young folks, just starting out."

"That's right," Javon said. "And it's perfect for a certain young couple starting out their life together."

Gwen said, "Aw, thanks Daddy."

The group walked back down Commerce, heading toward the marketplace again. The rickshaw drivers lingered in the area in case they wanted to hire one again, but the party passed them by.

Tom checked with Lisa and led everyone into the first alley between apartment buildings. When they stepped far enough away from the street and out of sight of pedestrians, Lisa began porting them back to the farm.

“Well it was certainly a unique rehearsal dinner, I must say,” Javon said as they all gathered back in Tom’s living room.

“Can I go out and visit with Timmy?” Corey said.

Julia said, “It’s dark, dear.”

“There’s nothing out there,” Tom said. “Timmy is a very good guardian, even if there was something nearby.”

“He’ll be fine, sweetheart,” Biff added.

Reluctantly, she nodded. Corey made a break for the door, racing out into the night to find the battle bot at his usual location out front.

“What’s he going to do with a battle bot? Can it even hold a conversation?” Julia said.

“Timmy’s actually a pretty good companion,” Tom assured her. “I had a lot of fun with him growing up.”

Julia gave him a look that conveyed disbelief at that statement.

Javon stood up and cleared his throat, putting his back to the giant holo in the room displaying the dark sand dragon breeding ground.

“I think at this point, it’s traditional for speeches to be made. I’m not usually one for speeches. We have people for that over at the paper.”

Light chuckles went around the room.

He sniffled a little bit.

“We thought quite a bit about what would be a good wedding gift for our lovely Gwen. She is out here on the frontier, and . . . it’s been an exciting

life, judging by all the stories she's told us. What would be good for her to have? She already has Big Bertha, her grandmother's old gun from when she and Gina saved the Firedog Armory."

More chuckles.

"So, to make a long story short, we settled on this."

He pulled out a small velvet pouch.

"Come here, sweetie."

Gwen stood up and approached him.

"What is it?"

He reached in and pulled out a long diamond necklace. The stones sparkled in the light of the room.

"This was your grandmother's. My mother's mother. My grandfather gave it to her on their 25th anniversary years ago. It's from Italia. The diamonds are from the Belsid Asteroid Belt in the Italia solar system. I don't know how much it cost him, but . . . well, it wasn't cheap, even back then. She cherished this necklace until the day she died. Then it was passed to my mother, and I received it when she died. It belongs to you, now, Gwendolyn. Turn around."

Gwen's mouth opened. Then she met her father's eyes and she teared up.

Turning around, she pulled her blonde hair back. Javon draped the heavy diamonds across her chest and latched the necklace behind her neck.

"They're beautiful!" Haley said.

"Stunning," Wink said. "They'd fetch an even higher price in certain quarters these days."

Jinxie elbowed him hard in the ribs.

"What? They would. Belsid diamonds . . . They don't mine there anymore. Just one of those is worth three years' salary, I'm sure."

Jinxie said, "Will you quit evaluating the wedding gift, please?"

Gwen hugged her father, then she hugged her mother.

“Thank you both, so much. I will always treasure this.”

Chris cleared his throat and stood up.

“I guess it’s our turn,” he said, winking at Jillian. “Our wedding gift is not as pretty as that, I’m afraid. In fact, all it is, is . . .”

He made a plucking motion toward the implant under his right ear and pulled out a holosheet. This, he pushed in the air over to Tom.

“A piece of paper.”

Tom reached over and grabbed the holosheet, pulling it closer. He skimmed the text.

“Well?” Gwen said. “What is it? Don’t keep us in suspense.”

Tom looked back at his father, then his mother.

He turned to Gwen, his eyes wide, and said, “It’s controlling shares in the Phaethon Solar Corporation.”

“That’s right,” Chris said, beaming. “We consolidated everything under a new corporate banner, and spun off what Ultima Mule was doing for this project. The MicaBots, the solar containment units, everything else . . . it’s all under one corporate umbrella now. And you, son, are in charge of it all. We’re still private, but eventually the shares will debut on the Octavian Stock Exchange, and . . . well, that’s where the real money is. You’ll get there. For right now, you’re firmly in the driver’s seat.”

He grinned at his son.

“Not bad for a young shopkeeper. You know, it was just the other day your mother and I set you up with a place of your own in Port Ryan. Look at you now!”

“Thanks, Dad! This . . . I mean . . . this is independence from you and UMC. It’s kinda scary. But at the same time, it’s exciting.”

“You’ll do fine. We’ll continue taking care of things back home for you. You can keep focusing on expanding what you’ve got here on Phaethon.

Who knows? Maybe the cards will work out and Phaethon will join the Lutian Alliance instead of the Republic.”

Half an hour later, Haley dragged Gwen away from a conversation with Biff.

“Sorry, I’m taking the bride-to-be. It’s time for a bachelorette party! All ladies in the room are invited to join us. We’re going back to League City for a night on the town!”

This led to laughter and a few whoops. Soon, half the room emptied out, leaving men only.

Silas looked forlorn without Lola, but he clustered in with the other guys as they gathered at the middle of the room.

“Would you like to go to a bachelor’s party, son? I think that’s traditionally done without your father and uncle and future father-in-law. But we can make the most of it, if you want to go out. Or if you’d like to take Silas and Wink along, I’m sure the three of you can have some fun together.”

“You can take Corey, too,” Biff said. “Just don’t let his mother know ahead of time. Especially if you go, you know, somewhere he shouldn’t really be going.”

“Nah, thanks. I think I’ll just stick around here. Maybe turn in early.”

“That’s boring,” Wink said, smiling.

“Yeah. Yeah, it is. I dunno. I guess we *could* do something dangerous, if you guys feel up to it.”

“Like what?”

Tom looked at the dark holo showing the breeding grounds. He could just make out Big Ugly, nestled in for the night with his mate.

“I was just wondering what you might think we could get in the League City marketplace for some sand dragon eggs . . .”

6.29

Haley led the women to an upscale bar in the commercial district called The Aquifer. In the center of a large dance floor, a huge saltwater aquarium featuring colorful domestic specimens held untold liters of liquid volume.

A young crowd gyrated around the clear walls holding aquatic creatures swimming lazily through flashing red and black lights. The music beat out a strong and steady beat.

They danced and drank and danced some more.

Several men approached the younger women, but all of their invitations to dance or go home with them were politely declined.

Julia had a bit too much to drink and found it uproariously funny when she and her sister Jillian were both propositioned at the same time.

Much to Gina's surprise, someone flirted with her, too. One of the few men as tall as her evidently had enough liquid courage to approach her despite the hostile glare keeping others away.

She asked her would-be suitor, "Are men that desperate out here on the frontier? Do you have any idea how old I am? I'm old enough to be your mother!"

“Aw, come on. You don’t look that old.”

“You see that girl over there?”

“Yeah?”

“That’s my daughter. She’s your age, kiddo.”

“Well hey, baby. If it doesn’t bother you, it doesn’t bother me . . .”

“Oh, it bothers me, believe me. Plus, I’m married. Get lost.”

Julia wandered over to her carrying two drinks as the young man slunk away in defeat.

“You should lighten up.”

“I’m not having an affair.”

“No, none of us are. But we are having fun tonight.”

“I think this is why the mother of the bride doesn’t traditionally go to the bachelorette party. I’m no fun. I’m a big wet blanket. I’m a parade-rainer, a sourpuss.”

“No. No, you’re not. You’re not any of those. You’re just an off-duty cop. I know what that’s like because I’m married to one. Here, drink this.”

She handed Gina one of the glasses of amber liquid. Gina held it up in the dim light with a critical eye.

“What’s this?”

“You’ll have to taste it to find out!”

She took a little sip.

“Huh. It’s not bad, whatever it is.”

“Drink up, Gina. Have a little fun tonight. Your daughter’s getting married in the morning. To my nephew. You’ll be a grandma before you know it.”

“When you put it like that, it does make me want to drink.”

Jillian came over and plucked the other glass out of Julia’s hand.

She downed half of it and said, “They’re spending Christmases on Lute, by the way.”

Julia cackled and bent over, placing a hand on Gina’s tall shoulder.

“You should see the look on your face, Gina! Now drink up, you two.”

Gina relaxed and took another sip.

“All of it!”

She downed the liquid.

“That *is* good,” she said, wiping her mouth off with the back of her hand.

Jillian smiled at her, finishing her own glass.

She looked at the two women and said, “But seriously. You and Javon can come, too. But they’re spending Christmases on Lute.”

-+-

Three hours later, the girls stumbled out of The Aquifer. The street was bathed in lamplight. Traffic remained light this time of night.

“I guess you’re not gonna set up in the bazaar tomorrow, huh Haley?” Gwen said.

“I wouldn’t . . .” Haley paused to burp lightly. “I wouldn’t miss your wedding for the world. Those farmers can wait for their hoes.”

For some reason, this struck everyone in the party as funny.

“Oops! I didn’t mean for it to come out like that.”

“Yes . . . hic . . . Yes, you did!” Gina said.

“So, what’s it like being the fearsome Night Shadow, huh?” Gwen said.

“Goin’ around fightin’ bad guys all night. Must be fun.”

“I can give you an idea of what it’s like, kinda. Except for the bumps and bruises. Let’s get back off the street and I’ll show you.”

They wandered into a dark alleyway between two buildings. Both Haley and Gwen used their enhanced vision to scan the darkness for anyone lurking.

Gina hiccupped as the shadows surrounded them.

“Okay, we should be good. Lisa? Please suit me up.”

“And could I have a flashlight, please, Lisa?”

Gwen held out her hand and Lisa ported one to her with a small *pop*.

Then another *pop* occurred as Lisa placed Haley’s full black costume on her, complete with sand dragon armor underneath.

Gwen shined a light on a heroine now dressed all in black with a matching mask.

“No one can see my pointy ears with this thing on. And I have wall crawler boots along with force bracers, all looted from the X’s and O’s I might add.”

“Very cool!” Jinxie said. Among all the women, she had had the least to drink.

She said, “Let’s see you in action. Run up that wall.”

Haley obliged, taking a running jump and scaling the wall all the way up to the roof in a burst of energy. Gwen followed her up with the light.

At the ledge she turned around and jumped off, plummeting almost all the way back down before Lisa arrested her fall by teleportation.

She landed in front of the group lightly on her feet.

“That’s very impressive,” Jillian said. “It shows a lot of trust in your local AI.”

“It also explains some of your acrobatics that have been reported in the Zeitung,” Gina said. “I think Ashley believes you can practically fly.”

“Yeah, nobody knows about Lisa yet. Including him.”

Lola said, “Can we go out and find some bad guys and watch you beat them up?”

“Watch?” Jinxie said. “I wanna help!”

“Crime’s been way down in the city, lately. If anything happens, and Lisa keeps an eye on it all, it’s usually over in the Projects. But out here for some reason there’s not nearly the number of problems we used to have, even just a few days ago.”

“I don’t think I’m up for any crime fighting tonight,” Gwen said, switching the flashlight off and stifling a yawn. “I think I’m ready to go home and go to sleep. I want to thank you all for a wonderful party. And thank you, Mom, for not embarrassing me too much.”

“Too much? I didn’t do anything embarrassing.”

“You let that one guy hit on you.”

“I most certainly did not!”

“What do you call it, then?”

“I shamed him! Did you see how young he was? There was no ‘letting’ him hit on me in any way.”

“You should have seen your mother during the war,” Jillian said, grinning. “She was a Marine sergeant. Her men were all in love with her . . . and scared half to death of her at the same time.”

“That’s just the way things should be, in the Marines. Are we going home now, or what?”

A series of pops sounded in the alley as Lisa brought the women back to the farm.

6.30

Tom, Chris, Biffender, Javon, Silas, Wink and Corey popped into place out in the desert several hundred meters from the sand dragon breeding grounds.

“I don’t know how good their hearing is,” Tom whispered as everybody gathered around him. “So keep it quiet. We’re all within range of Lisa’s large sensor on one of the bigger rocks over there. Plus you all have a mini sensor in your pocket, if you don’t have one of Lisa’s implants. Corey, don’t lose yours.”

Corey nodded as Biff patted him on the shoulder.

“This is a very dangerous, and perhaps stupid thing to do,” Tom continued.

Wink nodded and said, “And that’s why we’re doing it.”

“But if you get in trouble, Lisa will port you back to the house. And we’ve got lots of first aid if something tears into you.”

Corey’s eyes grew wide at this statement.

“So, try not to let that happen. You can ask Lisa to port you away at any time, too. She can hear you, even with the sensor in your pocket.”

Everyone nodded. Chris and Biff glanced toward the slightly higher elevation in the distance, marking the outer edge of the sand dragon’s hot

spring oasis. A gentle breeze rustled everyone's clothing and hair. This far away from the warm waters, temperatures hovered in the mid-single digits.

"How are we going to do this?" Javon said. "It seems more likely we'll be noticed going in as a group."

"I say we split up," Tom said. "We'll make it a game. Whoever retrieves the most eggs wins. Of course, we can form teams if we want to. Silas, you're with me."

"What do we win, son? Is there money involved in this?" Chris said with a smile.

"Nah. You win bragging rights, Dad. I just want to see if pilfering their eggs is even possible. I have a particular bone to pick with one of them who has been a thorn in my side since I got here. Okay. Everybody ready? Grab your eggs and have Lisa port you home as soon as you get them. Last one back is a rotten egg."

Chris and Biff and Javon watched the younger men spread out and quickly pick their way among the rocks and sand as they edged closer to the breeding ground. Wink tapped Corey on the shoulder and made a "follow me" gesture. They peeled off from Silas and Tom.

"Oh to be young and dumb again," Javon said.

"I don't know," Chris said. "We're doing *this*, aren't we? That at least makes us dumb, if not young."

"Yeah, it's the strangest bachelor party I've ever been to," Biff said, scratching the back of his head. "Not that I've been to that many. Every now and then a young cop in the precinct would get hitched. I think I can show these young fellas a thing or two about infiltrating a secure site."

"Now you're talking," Chris said. "That's a good way to put it, 'infiltrating.' I think I'll walk around to the other side and try to approach the site from a different angle."

Javon said, "I'll go with you."

“I’m in,” Biff said. “He said we could work in teams. This is not a time to be the lone wolf, judging from what I’ve seen of these creatures on the holo.”

Together, the three older men set out on a longer and more circuitous route to the nesting grounds.

-+-

Two heads slowly poked up over a large boulder close to the hot springs. Tom and Silas scanned the way ahead, looking to their right and left.

“Kinda makes you wish we had the enhanced sight those rangers paid for,” Silas whispered. “I’m pretty sure they can see in the dark.”

“Yeah, maybe I should order some night vision units on the next shipment. That might come in handy when Gwen’s not around to help us out.”

“Yeah. Lola had not yet gotten the surgery before the Fae disbanded. But we haven’t needed it so far. Until now.”

“Alright,” Tom whispered. “I think I’ve got my bearings. That little lump on that boulder over there is the camera Lisa placed for us. So, everything facing that way, in that direction, is what we’re seeing in the living room holo.”

“Got it. And that mound over there would be Big Ugly and his female, all curled up in their nest.”

“Right.”

Tom’s eyes lit up with excitement in the night.

“Let’s go see if we can grab one of his eggs.”

They tiptoed around the boulder, heading deeper into the nesting area.

-+-

Wink and Corey stopped in an open area several meters away. The moon was out, but occluded by the haze as usual.

“I think that’s a nest over there,” Wink said, pointing at a dark hump that looked different than the surrounding boulders.

Corey nodded, though Wink could barely see him. The boy seemed nervous and excited and a little scared, all at once.

Together they crept forward, heading deep into the nesting area, approaching one of the massive dark mounds.

Corey came near to the closest one. He looked down and could barely make out in the gloom two giant lizards, bigger than horses. They were lying down next to each other, curled up like a reptilian yin and yang symbol. He heard very soft breathing from the nest.

Wink crept up beside him, carefully placing his feet so they would not make a sound.

Softly, barely louder than a sigh, Wink said, “The eggs will be under them.”

They looked at each other in the darkness, the whites of their eyes barely visible.

“Come on,” Wink breathed.

He took another step closer to the sand dragon nest.

Now he was near enough he could see where the lizard’s belly met the sandy pile underneath it. Silently, he pointed at a faint gleam of white eggshell visible just beneath the creature’s skin.

Corey nodded, and slowly reached for it, his hand trembling.

Gently, he placed fingers around the edges of the big egg, slightly smaller than a basketball.

He tugged on it, gently.

The sand dragon made a groan. Both Wink and Corey froze.

The big lizard shifted slightly, covering the egg with its bulk completely, and returned to sleep.

6.31

“I ’m thinking this is hopeless,” Javon said, peering into the dark.

The three older men came near the oasis from the far side, opposite the others. Here, they met the same issues in the darkness as their younger counterparts. Piles of rocks and other features of the landscape made lumps and mounds difficult to distinguish. Only upon drawing close could they tell if something was a boulder or a sand dragon nest.

The three stopped on the very edge of the grounds, taking their time to decide what to do.

“I say we just go home,” Biff said. “Let the youngsters win this one.”

“Not a chance,” Chris said.

“It’s your son’s bachelor party!”

“We’re not just going to give up. Let’s at least give him a run for his money.”

Reluctantly, Biff and Javon agreed to stay with the former pirate.

Tom and Silas crept closer to Big Ugly's nest, placing their feet carefully on the ground and slowly moving forward. They could barely see one another in the dark, much less their surroundings. But as they passed the camera, the view grew familiar even without much light. The big mound with the two sand lizards loomed ahead of them, much closer now.

At last, they drew close enough that Tom could reach out and touch the sleeping lizard. He looked down, trying to see under Big Ugly's stomach. He could barely make out thin slivers of white, just visible in the night.

He glanced over to Silas, looking at the same thing.

Silas shook his head slowly. Reaching under Big Ugly and grabbing an egg without waking the beast seemed nigh impossible, and Silas relayed that fact with his head shake.

Tom frowned, clearly disappointed.

He reached out and very lightly brushed the sand dragon's thick hide, taking consolation in the fact he had come so close.

In the darkness, Big Ugly's one good eye flicked open.

-+-

Corey had six fingers around an egg near the edge of the monster's belly now, three on either side of it.

Gently, ever so gently, he worked it out from under the folds of thick leathery skin.

He pulled on the base with his fingers, carefully working the big egg free from under its mother. He squatted and pulled just a bit harder. Wink watched off to one side, keeping a close eye on the sand dragon in case she woke up.

Corey pulled a little harder and the egg budged closer to the edge of the folds of skin.

"Just give up," Wink whispered. "We're not gonna get one."

“I almost got it.”

Corey braced his feet and wrapped his fingers around the egg tighter. He pulled hard, using his body weight to help leverage the egg out.

Crack!

Yolk dribbled down his fingers.

The eyes of both sand dragons in the nest popped open in the dark. Simultaneously, they took a long deep sniff of the dusty air.

The mother jumped up and turned to face the boys.

“RAHHHHHHH!”

The horrific snarl rolled across the dark breeding grounds, echoing over the rocks.

-+-

Every sand dragon for meters around woke up at once. Heads popped up out of nests and nostrils sampled the air.

The males jumped out and scattered, seeking the intruders they smelled.

Chris froze, slightly ahead of the other two men.

“Time to go. Lisa?”

Three *pops* sounded as five adult male lizards charged at the men in the dark.

On the other side of the breeding grounds, Big Ugly darted out of his nest.

Tom and Silas froze. Big Ugly ran straight for the sound of the roar, disappearing in the surrounding gloom.

His mate looked to her left and the right, sniffing the air. Slowly, she turned and stared at the dim figures standing next to her nest . . .

-+-

Corey stumbled backward, yolk dripping from his fingertips.

Wink said, “Uh . . . Lisa?”

The sand dragon’s head whipped out like a snake, snagging a bite out of Corey’s arm in a lightning-fast strike.

Corey screamed.

Both he and Wink popped away.

The female’s head whipped back and forth in both directions as she tried to see in the dark. She took several long sniffs. The scent of the mammals lingered, but she could not locate them.

Her mate scampered back to the nest. His nose went to the ground and he found where bits of yolk had dripped. The broken egg remained in its spot, in the nest.

He snorted, blowing out dust and scents in disgust.

-+-

Tom reached down and grabbed one of the eggs left uncovered by Big Ugly.

The female snarled and her head whipped out, mouth wide open.

Tom and Silas jumped back.

“Take us out of here *now*, Lisa!”

Dual pops sounded as the men disappeared just before the female’s teeth snapped the empty air where they had been.

Big Ugly ran back to the nest. He looked down at the eggs he had left uncovered, sniffing.

Then his head jerked to the side.

He sniffed the ground hard where the two men had been standing.

His one good eye narrowed as he recognized a hated scent . . .

6.32

Screams filled Tom's house as Corey felt the full pain from the chunk taken out of his upper arm.

"You're okay! You're okay!" Wink said, desperately looking around the room for something to make a tourniquet.

"Lisa? I need help!"

A first aid kit popped into place on the floor beside them, a white box with a large red cross on top.

Gratefully, Wink opened the lid and found some cloth and bandages. He tied off a strip above the boy's arm and slapped a fast patch on to stem the bleeding.

Tears streamed down Corey's face. He blubbered now, but no longer screamed in terror and pain.

"It's gonna be okay. Where is it?"

Wink dug through the box, finally coming out with a pneumatic syringe.

"Here we go. Hold still, Corey. This'll fix you up."

Biff rushed through the door, followed by Chris and Javon.

"Corey!"

Biff hurried to his son's side.

"Lisa put us outside," Javon said to Wink. "I presume so we wouldn't crowd the room."

Chris came in and looked over at the holo in time to see the dark shapes of Tom and Silas disappear.

Pops sounded from the kitchen. A moment later, the two young men walked in.

Tom said, "Corey! Aw, man. Yeah, give him that shot. It's milspec, buddy. It'll fix you right up, good as new. Give him some pain meds, too, Wink. He probably should go to sleep. Hey, Corey I'm sorry you got bit, man. Those sand dragons are mean."

"Should I give him the shot or the pill?"

Wink motioned to the first aid kit, the two options sitting on top.

Tom shared a glance with Biff and said, "Give him the shot. That bite looks like a nasty one."

Wink nodded and gave the boy a shot with a different syringe.

The tears stopped almost immediately. Corey shuddered a couple of times, looking down at the fast patch covering his wound.

"Part of my arm is missing. That thing ate it."

"Only a small part, son," Biff said. "You'll be alright."

Chris squatted down beside them, on the floor.

He ruffled Corey's hair and said, "You know, my dad always said if a boy hasn't broken a bone, or at least had a few trips to the doc for injuries by the time he became a man, he wasn't growing up right."

Biff smiled at Chris.

He turned back to Corey and said, "My dad, your grandad, said much the same thing. 'A boy who gets through childhood without a few scrapes and bruises is missing out on life.'"

They stayed with him on the floor a few moments longer. Slowly, Corey's breathing returned to normal. He stopped shuddering.

"Can you stand up, son? I'm thinking it's time for bed. For you and me both."

Corey nodded and stood, holding onto his father's arm for support.

Biff turned to Wink.

"We appreciate the use of your house while we're here."

"My pleasure. You guys are always welcome, anytime you want to come back. Jinxie and I are more than happy to stay in the ship."

"And uh . . ."

Biff glanced around the room at all present.

"Maybe we don't mention this to his mother, hm? At least not for a little while. We'll tell her all about it on the way home. Maybe."

Chris, who knew Julia better than most of the others in the room, smiled.

"We won't say anything if you don't. It'll be our little bachelor party secret."

"That's right," Tom said. "Bachelors don't tell on one another. Okay, Corey?"

"Okay."

"At least not right away," Biff added. "Maybe later. Much later."

Then he said, "Take us back to our place, please, Lisa."

Father and son popped out of sight.

"Well," Chris said with a sigh. "That went over okay, I suppose. It certainly could have been a lot worse. He could have lost the entire arm or something."

"Yeah, too bad Corey is the one who got bit. I hope that doesn't put him off from coming back here to visit later."

“I’m going to bet if he does return, he won’t be sneaking into the sand dragon’s breeding grounds late at night next time.”

“I guess that was kind of a bad idea. So anyway . . . did you guys get any eggs?”

“Eggs? Ha. No, that was the last thing on our minds when they sounded the lizard alarm in there.”

“Wink? How about you?”

Wink shook his head, smiling.

“We came close,” he said. “Corey had his hand on one, but it broke when he pulled it out from under the mama. In fact, that’s what woke her up. She’s the one who started screaming. At least, I assume it was a ‘she.’”

“Well, son. I’m sorry,” Chris said. “Looks like you’ll have to wait to obtain a sand dragon egg. I’m not sure what you planned on doing with one, anyway.”

“Not so fast,” Tom said, smiling.

He walked back into the kitchen and returned holding up a large off-white egg.

“I grabbed this when Big Ugly got up to answer the alarm. And for the record, that’s probably the best way to go egg hunting in the future. Now we know. Somebody creates a distraction, drawing away all the males from their nests, and then somebody else can snatch the eggs.”

“While avoiding the females, I presume.”

“Yeah, it’s still not easy. But it’s a heck of a lot easier than trying to pry one out from under a sleeping sand dragon, that’s for sure. Poor Corey.”

Pops sounded from out in the yard, followed by the tinkling sound of female laughter.

“Ah, the women are back,” Javon said. “I hope they had more fun than we did.”

Outside they heard someone say, “Oops! Don’t trip, Julia!”

They all burst out laughing.

Chris said, “I’d say they almost certainly had more fun than we did.”

6.33

Morning dawned across the continent of Anatolia.

Out in the Skoni Desert near a hot springs oasis crowded with sand lizards, agitation remained high. The scent of mammals lingered, along with a busted egg. And at least one egg was missing from Big Ugly's nest.

Predators sniffed the sand and rocks surrounding the breeding grounds, tracing the paths of the mammals from where they paired off and entered the area from different directions. But there were no trails leading away. And try as they might, the lizards could find no further trace of the hated interlopers.

Eventually they returned to the ponds and warm streams flowing in their domain. They scooped up frogs and fish and other wildlife to break their fasts.

And another winter's day began in the land of the lizards on Phaethon.

Many kilometers to the south, in the green belt reaching into the desert, the sun rose on a parsonage and a pristine white church, fully restored to its former glory along with some new enhancements.

Leonwood Iglesias set aside his Bible, wrapping up his quiet time with a silent prayer for the day. He walked out of the parsonage and headed for the front doors of the church.

Before he went in, he stopped and checked out the side of the building where Morgan Fisher had shot at it from a distance with such devastating effect.

“Ah, wonderful. I can’t even tell where the bolts hit.”

The wall looked pretty and white, with a fresh coat of paint. All the broken glass had been cleaned up and replaced.

“It’s almost like the attack never occurred.”

While here, he noted a new addition on this side of the church. Some distance away, the MicaBots had erected a metal fence in a large square, complete with a gate. There, along one side of the plot and facing east, four headstones had been erected. Fresh mounds of dirt showed where the bodies from yesterday were newly interred.

“Ah. I suppose that is a function of a church, after all. One of them, anyway. A place for ceremonies dealing with major life events, including funerals. Perhaps people in town will want their loved ones to be buried out here someday. Very good.”

Leo turned back to the double front doors with their curved tops and pulled them open by their heavy brass handles.

Morning light flooded the sanctuary, and he found a clean and fully restored interior.

“Marvelous work. You have outdone yourselves this time.”

He looked down at tiny dots on the floor near the front. Several headed his way. Many streamed out the door, miniature dark processions heading out to new assignments.

Some stopped at his feet. One of them looked up at him and saluted. Then twelve ants crawled onto his shoe and made their way up his pants, quickly climbing to his shoulders. Six sat down on the right, six on the left, making themselves at home on the black cloth.

“Alright, then. I suppose we are as ready as we can be for this big event. And then, I suppose, if Director Del Rio insists on taking me back to the

Republic and extraditing me to Seychar to stand trial, I will do so.”

One of the ants on his right shoulder shook its little head.

Another stood up and swung a fist in the air in defiance.

“Well, we’ll see what happens. The Bible says, ‘A man’s heart plans his course, but the Maker guides his steps.’ Whatever will be, will be. The Maker is ultimately in control, after all.”

The little bots settled back down on his shoulder as he strode down the center of the church and mounted the dais.

On either side, he noticed one dramatic difference from the day before. Now two large black columns stood from the floor up to the ceiling.

“What is this?”

He walked over to the one on the right to inspect it. Drawing near, he could make out the many thousands of ant robots comprising it. They interlocked, creating what appeared to be an obsidian column at a distance.

“So. This is where you rest? Or is it merely storage?”

One of the little bots closer to his face and interlinked with others on the column raised its head and nodded at him.

“I will need to be careful how I phrase my questions in the future, I suppose. No matter.”

A distant series of popping sounds drifted through the open front doors of the church, but Leo did not hear them. He continued staring at the column, marveling at the number of bots comprising it.

“Fascinating. There surely must be tens of thousands here. And many more were headed outside for parts unknown when I walked in. Hmm.”

Tom walked through the door, followed by the other men in his party. They all wore soft gray tuxedos, even Corey.

“Hey, there he is! The preacher man! Say, the MicaBots got this place restored very nicely. I told you they could handle it overnight. They’re quick!”

“Indeed.”

“And here you go, as promised. Fully recharged.”

Tom handed Leo his cross.

Leo’s eyes lit up as he placed the silver chain around his neck. The cross looked accentuated with the black of his tunic as a background.

“Thank you!”

“Alright,” Chris said. “Corey? You’re in charge of the music. Whatcha got for us?”

The boy pulled out a tiny cube with a little button on top.

“Every song imaginable.”

“Including Mendelssohn's Wedding March?”

“Yes. I checked.”

“Good. Let’s do the Bridal Chorus by Wagner as the others are coming down the aisle. You guys head outside and escort the ladies in. Tom and I will stay up here and wait for everybody with the pastor.”

As everyone else exited, leaving Tom, his father and the pastor alone on the dais, Chris turned and slapped his son on the shoulder.

“I’m proud of you, son. You know that, right?”

“Thanks, Dad.”

“She really is the right one for you. Your mother and I both approve, wholeheartedly. And thank you for letting me serve as your best man. I think I’ll do a better job than Timmy would have.”

Tom glanced at Leo, then back to his father.

“Somebody might have freaked out over Timmy.”

Leo raised a questioning eyebrow, but he did not say anything, evidently deciding now was neither the time nor the place for personal questions, such as who Timmy might be.

The doors opened again, and Corey ran back inside.

“We’re ready!”

He laid the little speaker box down on the back pew and pressed a button before running outside again. Richard Wagner’s Bridal Chorus started playing, filling the entire church with rich orchestral notes.

Once again, the doors opened. This time, Corey appeared with Gina on his arm.

She wore a splendid dress in light pink, with curls in front and a holographic sun that twirled in a circle around her midriff. She towered over Corey.

He brought her down to the front row, and she took a seat on the bride’s side.

Corey hurried back to the door.

Next, he escorted Jillian down the aisle, wearing a different dress but in the same shade and with no holographics. He set her down on the groom’s side.

Julia and Biff followed him, sitting down on the front row on the groom’s side.

A third time Corey returned to the door, reappearing with Haley on his arm. She wore a light pink silk sheath dress with matching heels.

The pair slowly marched down the aisle, looking straight ahead and smiling.

At the dais, they parted. This time, Corey sat down on the groom’s side of the aisle while Haley took up a position on the bride’s side of the dais as Maid of Honor.

Silas and Lola were next. She wore the same bridal dress as Haley. They smiled at everybody on the way in before taking their positions up front.

Next came Wink and Jinxie. She also wore the same bridal dress as the others. They parted at the dais and took up their spots.

About this time, the Bridal Chorus faded and came to an end. There was a dramatic pause. Then Mendelssohn's iconic Wedding March burst out from the music box, and the doors swung open one more time.

Gwen walked in wearing a tight silk white dress that flared at her feet. A long ruffled train stretched out behind her, floating a few centimeters off the ground thanks to antigrav threads skillfully sewn into the fabric.

She carried a bouquet of flowers in different shades of red, and her face was covered by a long white veil.

Gina teared up while looking at her daughter.

Gwen held onto Javon's arm as they slowly came down the aisle together, their steps matching the cadence of the music. But all the way down she locked eyes with Tom. He never looked away.

They stopped at the foot of the dais, where the preacher and the wedding party waited for them.

The music stopped. Silence reigned in the church, but just for a moment.

"Who gives this woman's hand in marriage?" Leo said, his rich baritone filling the empty space.

"I do. Her father, along with her mother."

Gwen gave Javon a tight hug. He hugged her back, then they parted. Javon moved to the front pew and sat down beside Gina while Gwen stepped up onto the dais.

Gwen handed her bouquet to Haley, who held it for her. Then she took both of Tom's hands as they stared in one another's eyes, smiling.

"Dearly beloved," Leo said. "We are gathered today in the Maker's name to celebrate the union in holy matrimony of this man, Thomas Savage Raleigh, and this woman, Gwendolyn Wilcox Del Rio . . ."

On the preacher's shoulders, twelve ants watched the ceremony unnoticed by anyone else.

They nodded their heads at appropriate times, sometimes raising their front “hands” in praise as the preacher spoke.

At last Leo said, “You may now kiss the bride,” and Tom lifted her veil.

Their lips met, and they kissed long and hard.

All present applauded, including eleven of the MicaBots.

One black army ant on the preacher’s shoulder simply swung its little fist in victory.

6.34

Newly ringed and newly married, Tom and Gwen walked back up the aisle and outside the church, music from Corey's little box following them out.

Gwen no longer wore the veil over her face, and Haley returned her bouquet of flowers to her before they walked off.

The others followed the new couple, and moments later everyone congregated out on the lawn in front of the church.

Leo came out too, the MicaBots still mounted unseen on his shoulders. He shook hands with everybody, smiling. Then he turned and headed for the parsonage, leaving the friends and families to their own devices.

"Mr. Igleses," Gina said, following him away from the group. She jogged to catch up.

He turned to her, eyes showing alarm and concern.

Gina put an arm around the top of his back. She stood a head taller, but that was not unusual. She stood taller than most people.

The MicaBots on his shoulder turned to watch her, but they remained undisturbed by the proximity of her arm. She did not brush his shoulder and thus posed no threat to their perch.

“I want to thank you for all you’ve done. I don’t know the details of your case back on Seychar, only that you are a fugitive from justice. But, I will not be filing a report about your current whereabouts when I return to the office later today. I wanted you to know that.”

He nodded, relief flooding his face.

“That’s all I could possibly ask for, Director. I have faith that the Maker will take care of everything. Ultimately, I remain in His hands.”

“That’s not to say that Metger or one of the other marshals may come looking for you some day. They don’t need my report to come and find you, you understand? And if you’re not an itinerant preacher, you’ll be easy for them to locate out here.”

“I understand. Nonetheless, I still have faith in the Maker. He will take care of me, come what may.”

“Well . . . just so you know, it may be easier for everyone if you were to return to Seychar and face the music. If you truly are innocent, perhaps you should let the Maker do His thing in the courtroom. If you were exonerated in a court of law, then you could travel anywhere you wanted without fear of being hounded by my agency or the marshals, or anybody else in law enforcement.”

“Thank you for your concern, Director. And you may indeed be right. If the Maker guides me, then perhaps I will seek passage on a ship back to Seychar, and there confront my accusers. I have little in the way of evidence that proves my innocence, however. And my word of honor, saying that I did not steal that gold, is not very trustworthy in light of my sordid past. I believe I would not stand much of a chance at trial. But, like you say . . . with Him, all things are possible. And, if He wills for me to go to prison, then I should yield to His will. Perhaps I can serve Him in a prison colony just as effectively as I could here. The Maker only knows.”

“Well, think about it,” Gina said, squeezing him softly in a sideways hug. “In the meantime, my department won’t be pursuing your case. Or you. I’ll keep an eye on things from Octavia in regards to your case.”

He nodded gratefully, and she returned to the group.

“So, what are y’all going to do now?” Lola asked the bride and groom as Gina drew near.

Tom and Gwen looked at one other, smiling.

“Well, ordinarily back home I think there’d be a reception for everybody involved. However, since it’s just us, we thought we’d bring all of you into town and enjoy lunch somewhere. We’ll say goodbye to everybody who’s leaving. And then, after our parents and relatives board Pulsar and leave, we’ll go on our honeymoon.”

“You’re not going to reveal to us exactly where that’s going to be?”

Gwen smiled at her friend and said, “Nope. We’ll let you know after we get back. I don’t even know where we’re going.”

“Oh, really?”

Tom nodded.

“That’s right. It’s a surprise.”

He turned back to the group.

“Okay everybody. Ready for one last meal together?”

He received nods all around.

Corey said, “I forgot the box!”

He ran back into the church, returning a moment later carrying his musical device.

“Okay. First, we’re going to let everyone change out of these fancy duds,” Tom said. “Then we’ll all port into League City.”

6.35

For the reception, such as it was, Lisa first teleported everybody back to the farmhouse. There, they took a final picture, using Timmy to snap the holo with everyone in front of the porch.

Gwen then stepped away and all the women gathered behind her. She threw the bouquet over her shoulders. The others made sure Haley caught it.

“Yeah, we’ll see how prophetic this is,” Haley said, laughing. “Don’t get your hopes up.”

“I’m supposed to toss a garter belt or something, Corey,” Tom said as they watched the girls talking. “But I don’t have anything like that. Instead, I got you this.”

He handed Corey an egg shard, with the date engraved on it, along with “The Wedding of Mr. and Mrs. Thomas Raleigh, Little York, Phaethon.”

“What’s this?”

“I had Lisa port over the shell of that egg you broke. Then Mica had her bots inscribe the words on it. Then she coated it with this shellac that should preserve it. So, you know. It’s a souvenir.”

“Wow! Thanks, Tom!”

The boy’s eyes lit up in delight.

“You bet. Don’t lose it. It’s a long flight home. At least, it will be for you. You’ll show up back home later today in real time.”

Corey nodded and tucked the shell fragment in a pocket for safekeeping.

Tom raised his voice to grab everyone’s attention.

“Okay, I think we’re all going to change and meet back in the warehouse. Then we’ll wander around and have an early lunch with you people before saying our goodbyes.”

Couples waved goodbye and started popping away.

“I’m, uh, going straight to the warehouse since that *is* home, for me,” Haley said.

She gave Gwen a quick hug then disappeared.

Jillian said, “Dibs on the bathroom!” and ran inside the house.

Chris smiled at the newlyweds and said, “See you in a bit,” then followed after his wife.

“She was always like that, you know,” Julia said.

She smiled as Lisa teleported her to Wink and Jinxie’s house along with Biff.

“I hope we haven’t been crowding you out too much while staying here,” Javon said, making his own way to the front door of the farmhouse alongside Gina.

“Not at all,” Tom said. “In fact, I used to sleep in the cargo capsules. We both did. They’re cozy.”

Gina said, “It is convenient to have *two* of those capsules so you could stay in one while our daughter used the other one.”

“Like I said, we’ll always have room for visitors. Whenever you want to come out here, we’ll have more than enough room to spare.”

Soon, only Tom and Gwen remained outside on the front porch.

In the distance, closer to the corral, Robert the Rooster looked their way. For a moment he seemed to be trying to decide if he should run all the way over and challenge them. But they were too far off to pose a threat, so he quickly abandoned the notion and moved on, strutting in the other direction.

Alone, the couple embraced and kissed, long and hard.

When he came up for air, Tom said, “I hope you like your ring.”

Gwen looked at her hand where a gold band and a sparkling diamond twinkled back at her.

“I love it! Where’d you get it? I never saw you sneak away to a jewelry store in League City. I never told you my ring size, either. Did I?”

“You can thank Lisa for telling me your ring size. I know, no privacy with an AI, right? As for the gold, it came from the same mine we’ve been paying Silas with. The MicaBots just fashioned the metal into a ring instead of a coin this time.”

“Aww!”

“And the diamond came from a deposit the bots found further out in the desert. Evidently, there’s more where that came from. The bots cut it up and mounted it for you.”

“It’s precious!”

“I wanted you to know that everything for both of our rings was locally sourced. We met on Phaethon, or at least we met as adults here. I know we saw each other as kids at the Lute reunions and all. But I wanted our rings to signify what this planet means to us. So no matter where we go and no matter what we do in life, a part of Phaethon will always be with us, signifying our love.”

“Awww! That’s so sweet. Thank you!”

She kissed him again.

This time when they came up, she said, “Now, where are you taking me on our honeymoon?”

“That’s a little bit of a surprise, too. I know a lot of couples like to honeymoon in Italia, but there’s no way we can get there without spending a couple of months with our parents if we join them on their way home this afternoon. So, I thought we’d stay domestic.”

“Okay. Why not? I don’t need anything glamorous. So long as I’m with you, that is.”

They kissed again.

“I’ll show you after everyone leaves.”

“When are we supposed to meet everyone at the Warehouse, again?”

“Whenever they all get there, I guess.”

“You mean, whenever *we* get there.”

“Yeah, I suppose. Why? What did you have in mind?”

“I think you need to come help me change, over in my space capsule.”

He grinned at her.

“Okay.”

6.36

Tom and Gwen were last to show at the warehouse. They popped in during the middle of an intense conversation the adults had regarding the Phaethon embargo.

Gina felt it was probably time to let the embargo lapse. Chris thought it might be better to let it stay in place. Sides had formed, and both aired their opinions back and forth for several minutes before the newlyweds showed up.

No one said anything, but more than one person noted that both Tom's and Gwen's hair was out of place. It seemed obvious why they were late to all but Corey, who happily explored every square centimeter of the warehouse and ignored all the grown-up conversations.

Tom said, "Come on, everybody. Let's go eat lunch! Climb onto the truck."

"Haley, you're sitting up front with me," Gwen said.

"This is different," Jillian said, climbing up onto the flatbed in back with her husband's help.

Of all those loading up, only Corey found the experience fascinating. He treated a ride through the city on the back of a truck as a great adventure.

Tom made his way through the streets, following directions from Lisa. Several minutes later, he parked on the curb and everybody left the truck, heading for a five-story building.

“Sorry,” he said. “We’ve got some stairs to climb. But the effort will be well worth it!”

Moments later they made their way out to a rooftop café with a wonderful view of the surrounding city. They were close enough to the loop road that they could see the fields leading outside the city, too.

“Oh, this is nice, Tommy,” Julia said, taking in the sights.

“You never have to worry about a sunburn out here, either,” Javon said, smiling. “What with that shrouded sun and all.”

“I kind of like the sun,” Gina said. “I think I would miss it if I had to live here.”

Gwen said, “It doesn’t bother me. The sun’s always getting in my eyes back home. I haven’t missed it one bit. And you do see it every once in a while. A weather event will push out the haze once in a blue moon, and it’s all nice and sunny for a day or two.”

“That usually happens before a bad storm,” Haley added. “Like a hurricane or something.”

A waitress scooted some tables together for them and took their orders. The food came out quickly. Conversation continued as the group shared a final meal together before the visitors departed for home.

An hour later, the time came to say goodbye. The couples stood up to go. Tom made to pay for the meal, but Chris stopped him.

“I’m pretty sure the father of the groom has to pay for something.”

“You’ve done a lot already, Dad.”

“You’re not the richest man in the galaxy just yet, son.”

Christopher Raleigh handed over several tokens to the waitress, including a fat tip.

As the group headed down the stairs, Javon said to Gwen, “Gina and I need to make one more visit before we leave with everybody. And for that I need a favor from your AI.”

As the others headed back to the truck, Gwen raised her eyebrows, waiting for her father to continue.

“We need you to ask Lisa where Ashley Thallus is, at this very moment.”

-+-

Ash sat at an outdoor café sipping coffee and reading a holosheet when two of the table’s chairs were pulled out.

He looked up, brows furrowed at the interruption.

Javon and Gina sat down beside him at that table.

“Hello, Ashley.”

“Mr. Del Rio! Director!”

“You look stunned,” Gina said with a smile.

“Is this . . . is this a holo call? No, you moved the chairs. I . . . how did you get here? What are you both doing here?”

Javon looked at his wife. In turn, Gina smiled at Ash.

“It’s complicated, and it’s somewhat classified. So, let’s skip the hows and the wherefores of our being here, at least for now. Suffice it so say we *are* here. And we have some modifications to your mission to tell you about.”

She looked over at Javon and handed it off to him.

Javon said, “Look, Ashley. I know you are on the editor’s career path. And I know that traditionally, that path leads you back to Octavia after a lengthy away assignment.”

Ash nodded, his surprise at seeing both his bosses in the flesh starting to fade.

“But the times, Ashley, are changing. Did you know that La Galaxia has a department committed to starting new bureaus on the outer planets?”

“No, sir. I did not.”

“Well, they do. And before long they’ll be here, too. The Zeitung is interested in starting bureaus in the far-flung corners of the galaxy as well. The far-flung corners don’t stay far-flung for long. We think in twenty years, Phaethon is going to be far more significant than it currently is.”

“Twenty years, sir? But this is just a . . .”

“A one-cow town of a planet?”

“Well, I . . . it is rather *insignificant*, sir. I’m sure in a few decades, maybe a century from now it will be a major hub. But right now . . .”

Gina and Javon exchanged yet another glance.

She took over.

“Ashley, there are things going on here that you know nothing about. Things that are so classified, nobody will know about them for decades, probably. However, they are *big* things. Stuff is happening that’s going to change the galaxy as we know it.”

“That’s right,” Javon said, picking up the thread again. “And we want you to be here for it.”

“Me?”

Javon nodded.

“AOJ needs you here, too,” Gina said. “We’re willing to increase your stipend significantly. We appreciate all the intelligence you’ve gathered so far, and we want that to continue.”

Javon said, “You see, you are already here. That’s worth a lot. And you’ve made a name for yourself. This Night Shadow thing is far bigger than you realize. Yes, if you came back home today, you’d be on the fast track to associate editor at the Zeitung within five years, no doubt about it.”

“I’m sensing a ‘but’ here.”

“Yes, *but* . . . I think you’ll like it . . .”

6.37

At long last, everybody gathered at the Pulsar. The loading ramp came down in back, and Timmy helped carry luggage into the hold.

The droid pilot walked out and gave a perfunctory greeting to the passengers about to board.

“This is the thing that Director Del Rio took over on our first time out with it,” Jinxie said by way of introduction of the pilot. “I’m still not sure how you did that.”

Gina smiled, but said nothing.

“Our agenda,” Chris said by way of announcement, “our travel agenda, that is, is to head to Lute first because it’s closest. Then the pilot will take you to Juventas and Diego. About two months altogether that you, Gina, and you, Javon, will be onboard. But in real time you’ll be back home in just a few hours from now.”

“Good,” Javon said. “I’ve got to go to work tomorrow.”

Everyone laughed at this remark.

“Well, I suppose this is goodbye,” Julia said.

She gave Gwen a long hug.

“Come and visit us anytime Julia, Biff,” Gwen said. “I think Corey enjoyed it. Right, Corey?”

The boy smiled, showing no sign of the sand dragon bite he suffered the night before.

He said, “I’d love to come back. Can we, Mom?”

“Maybe. I must say using a ship with a Machro-drive makes it a lot more convenient. There’s not very many of those available for civilian use, though.”

“For right now,” Chris said, “we’ve got an exclusive contract with the Pulsar’s owners.” He nodded at Wink and Jinxie. “So long as that arrangement stands, you can come visit using this ship any time.”

Julia looked at Biff.

He nodded and said, “We’d like that, thanks. Maybe let us know when you plan on coming back, and we’ll hitch a ride with you again. If you don’t mind making that detour out to Juventas, of course.”

“That can be arranged,” Jillian said, smiling.

Gina smiled, holding hands with Javon.

“We’d like to come too, of course. If you don’t mind another detour to Diego.”

Chris nodded in agreement, smiling wide.

Another round of hugs and well wishes occurred. The men all shook hands and slapped backs.

Finally, the families climbed aboard Pulsar. The younger couples staying waved at them as the ramp went up, then hurried back to the farm house to get out of the way.

Pulsar rose up in the air a hundred meters and hovered there for a moment. Then it shot off into the sky, quickly swallowed up by the dusty haze.

“Well,” Tom said, smiling at everyone. “That was fun.”

“We actually enjoyed staying on the ship for a change,” Jinxie said, casting a doleful glance at the sky where Pulsar had disappeared.

“We’ll probably get a chance the next time they come to visit,” Wink said. “Bye guys. It’s been fun. Congratulations, you two.”

Tom shook hands with Wink, as did Silas. The women hugged one another. Then Wink and Jinxie popped out of sight.

Silas turned to Tom and said, “Well, sir. I suppose I should get on that garden. More weeds are comin’ up. And there’s lots of other things I need to catch up on around here.”

“I’m sure everything’s fine, Silas,” Tom said. “But go on and do whatever you think you need to.”

Silas smiled and held Lola’s hand. They walked away together.

Tom turned and locked eyes with his bride.

“Everybody’s finally gone.”

“Can we go on our honeymoon now?”

“Yes. Are you packed?”

“No. Do I need to be?”

“Not really, no. We can come back home to change clothes whenever you want to.”

“That sounds good to me. I hate lugging around luggage. Where are we going?”

“You’ll see. Lisa? Can you take us there now?”

They both popped away.

A second later, Gwen found herself on a hill standing outside a small city. In the distance, ocean waves rolled onto shore, lapping on a sandy white beach.

She said, “Oh, hey! I think . . . is this New Galveston?”

“It is. It’s not quite resort-level here just yet. But, they do have one crown jewel, probably the finest hotel on the whole planet. Better, even, than anything in League City. The Phaethonian.”

“Oh, I’ve heard of that. I thought it went out of business.”

“Not yet, but it is struggling. The guy who built it a couple years ago was convinced that shipping was going to be big. And since New Galveston is the biggest port on this world, he built a fine hotel for it. But . . . no other ports of any size have been erected since. And the hotel has not seen nearly the amount of traffic they expected to see.”

He smiled at her.

“I booked the biggest suite they have. And I think we’ll probably have the entire hotel to ourselves most nights.”

“Oh really?” Gwen said in a seductive tone.

She snuggled up closer to him.

“Yeah. A big four corner bed. A marble fireplace you can walk inside. Gold plated toilets.”

“No!”

“I’m serious. They went all out for this thing. It’s pretty impressive considering this planet’s frontier status and all. They did it without MicaBots, too. Everything fancy was imported at great expense.”

“I can hardly wait.”

“Yeah, it’s kinda crowded out in the street down there. We’ll have to walk into town so we can check in to the hotel.”

“Okay.”

“Ready?”

“Yes! Let’s go start a life together!”

Together they held hands and walked down the hill.

6.38

Ash tapped on the smaller front door to Warehouse 14.

Haley opened it with raised eyebrows.

She had been warned by Lisa that Ash was approaching, so that was not surprising to her. But she wanted to know why he sought her out.

“Hey. Sorry to barge in on you like this. But, I knew where you lived and I wanted to talk, so . . .”

“How did you get into the warehouse district? There’s a guard out front and everything.”

“Oh, well he recognized me. I told him I was here on a story, and he graciously let me pass.”

“Hmph. That guy needs a demotion. I’m pretty sure he wasn’t supposed to do that.”

Ash shrugged.

“We get away with a lot in the press.”

“Well, come on in so long as you’re here.”

She pulled the door back and he walked in. The truck and car both remained parked in their respective locations. Garden tools still lined one wall. The

strong scent of fresh hay from the fields beside the Little River lingered in the air, although Haley had long since sold all the hay off.

They walked back to her cot. She pointed at an Adirondack chair she swiped from the farm, and he took a seat.

She sat on the cot and waited for him to speak.

“I, uh . . . had a visit from my boss. Actually, both my . . .”

He stopped and looked at her.

She knew Ashley was an AOJ informant. But Ashley did not know that she knew.

“Anyway, uh . . . yeah. So, my boss showed up.”

“That’s interesting.”

Ashley did not know that Haley had spent several hours talking to both of his bosses, and that she was best friends with his bosses’ daughter.

“And, you know what? He made a, uh . . . an interesting offer.”

“Really?”

“Yeah. So, I have . . . I have been promoted.”

“Awesome. To what?”

“I’m actually an associate editor bureau chief at the Zeitung now. Mr. Del Rio told me I’m the youngest one ever.”

“That’s great! Congratulations!”

“Yeah, I’m in charge of our Phaethon Bureau. That’s something else that’s never happened before. We don’t open bureaus on frontier planets. But Mr. Del Rio said they think this place is . . . special.”

“Well, it is.”

“Yeah. I guess so. I didn’t realize it. Anyway, I’m bureau chief. It’s kinda funny because I’m a bureau of one. I don’t think that’s ever happened, either.”

“It’s exciting, even if nobody serves under you.”

“Yeah, that’s another funny thing. I’m to be paid a full salary, too. Just as if I was still in Octavia at the main office.”

“Wow. I bet an Octavian salary goes a lot farther out here than it would back on Diego.”

He nodded, still looking awed and humbled at his sudden change in fortune.

Haley smiled slightly, waiting for him to continue.

“So anyway. I, uh . . . it looks like I’m going to be here a while. All of this . . . the promotion, the raises . . . it all hinges on me staying right here. I can go home. I can visit on a vacation after the embargo is lifted. I still don’t know how my boss got here in person, by the way. He wouldn’t tell me. It’s classified or something, so maybe the Republican Navy is involved, I don’t know. Certainly the government is on some level, I’m pretty sure. Anyway, what I’m trying to say is . . .”

“You’re stuck here?”

His ears grew red.

“It’s not that! I mean . . . yes, I am stuck here. But, it’s like all my dreams are being fulfilled. All my career goals have suddenly shifted to requiring my presence here, on Phaethon. Does that make sense?”

“It makes perfect sense, Ash. Welcome to our little party.”

His ears reddened again.

“I’ve been at this party. But I just found out I live here now, and I’m not going home at midnight like I thought I was.”

“Well, I’m glad. We can be friends for much longer, now.”

He paused and looked at her for a long time.

She maintained eye contact.

“I’ve been thinking about what you said, and . . . I’ve been a jerk.”

“Don’t say that. I had unspoken expectations.”

“No, I’ve been a selfish jerk, only focused on myself and what I want. I wasn’t thinking about you, or anyone else. And I’m sorry. I truly am.”

He stared at her for another long moment.

“Can we start over? I promise that this time I will be much, much more considerate of you. And if I get wrapped up in myself again too much, just whack me on the head or something. Okay?”

She chuckled then, and the tension in Warehouse 14 ebbed away.

“Come on, Mr. Zeitung Phaethon Bureau Chief. Take me out on the town and show me a good time. Maybe we can actually find you a story to report on while we’re out and about.”

They both stood up, smiling.

He said, “Yeah. Maybe we’ll get lucky and see Night Shadow taking out some bad guys.”

She chuckled as they headed for the door, thinking about her costume under the covers on the cot.

6.39

The morning started out well in the Dalmont family compound.

The four houses built by the four brothers had a compliment of servants and ranch hands living there. At dawn's first light, young men lower on the status rung scurried out to clean stalls and put out fresh oats for the horses.

Others hit up the chicken coops fenced off a ways from the property, checking for any dead birds and collecting eggs. Still others went to the bovine stalls and prepared to milk the three Jersey cow variants kept on hand for the brothers' households.

Emmitt ate a quick breakfast provided by his cook and lead maid. He neither acknowledged her presence nor thanked her for the meal, as usual. When he finished, he met the men coming out of the servants' dining room and nodded at them.

At the door, he pulled his hat off a hook. They followed him out to the stables where a couple of boys had their horses waiting.

Without a word, the five men mounted up and rode off into the vast pastures of the Dalmont holdings.

Besides the four square kilometers claimed by the brothers originally, they had doubled the size of the place by pressuring their neighbors to sell. A

full eight-square kilometers now fell under their domain, and Emmitt seemed determined to make money off it by raising cattle.

-+-

Britt, third in the Dalmont line after the second-born Emmitt and just before Newt, the youngest, did not care about fooling with cattle. He had a mind for numbers, and in his opinion a budget was the most powerful thing in the galaxy.

Budgets made complex and abstract things like organizations into something tangible. He could control the entire family enterprise just by adjusting some numbers in a spreadsheet.

In Britt's mind, Emmitt was the nominal head of the family operation, at least so long as Malcolm, the oldest, remained incarcerated off-planet. And that suited Britt fine. Because he remained in charge of the budget. And that, he felt, was where the true power of an organization lies, in its purse strings.

Britt met his only maid in the kitchen and hugged her from behind, kissing her on the neck.

She smiled and continued beating scrambled eggs on the stove.

His brothers did not know that he slept with his maid, and Britt was in no hurry to tell them.

Her name was Angarita, or Rita for short, and she obviously hoped for the relationship to blossom into something permanent. She doted on Britt and gave him everything she had, catering to his every whim.

Already she acted like his wife, bossing the other servants around as if she were his equal. They looked at her with a touch of jealousy, but no one dared go against her orders. One young woman did, weeks ago, and Britt kicked her out of the house.

Working under the arrogant Dalmont brothers might be infuriating, especially for those who had no background as domestic servants when

immigrating to the frontier. But the plentiful food and very nice houses more than made up for the men's attitude toward their help.

No one really wanted to leave their employ.

Britt headed to his study to examine the ranch's main spreadsheet. Rita followed him in.

"What are we looking at today, dear?"

He sat down at the desk and pulled up a holo screen full of numbers.

"If prices for beef in League City go up by another quarter credit, we can actually make a decent profit on the next round of calves we send to the auction house over there. That's assuming, of course, that the Courthouse continues subsidizing livestock transport on the sky trains. Without that, it would just not be profitable at all to ship them out."

"Mmm. Must be nasty shipping those animals around the world. Imagine the poop they leave in the cars."

She bent down behind the chair, her arms holding him tight.

Britt smiled and switched off the holo. He would not be getting much work done this morning.

Rita did not know it, but she was actually the second "lead maid" employed in Britt's household.

He had no intention of marrying her, just as he had no intention of the relationship with her predecessor progressing any further than it did. That woman left after a screaming match that occurred when she finally realized he had no plans to marry her, preferring to maintain the master-servant roles perpetually.

Britt turned his chair around to face Rita, and she crawled into his lap.

For now, he was happy to let Rita presume they had a future together. He did nothing to discourage those thoughts as they began kissing.

Newt walked out of his house into the shared yard area. He had no servants, save for one old man who suffered from arthritis. “Old Slow” made sure the boy was fed, and he kept the house clean as best he could.

Newt did not have the personality needed to manipulate young servants into thinking he would marry them. In fact, it never crossed his mind to try and sleep with a female servant. He remained happily oblivious to the goings-on of his brothers.

This morning he tarried near his door, keeping a close eye on the door to his brother Malcom’s house, currently hosting the X’s and O’s.

He watched as the two men assigned to take care of their meals walked out the door, their breakfast duties obviously complete.

Half an hour passed before somebody else walked out, looking around at the houses in the compound. This woman, however, was not the one he sought.

Newt sat down in a chair in front of his door and waited.

About an hour later, Reynard Gliph stepped out with Morgan Fisher trailing him.

Newt sat up too quickly, knocking the chair over. He made his way toward Malcom’s front door.

“We need to try again,” Gliph said to Morgan. “I realize the first time was a fiasco. But I believe I may have taken the wrong tack. We cannot persuade by force with only a dozen people. I shall have to persuade them in other ways to see the light. Oh, hello young Mr. Dalmont. Perhaps you would like to accompany us into town today?”

“I w-w-would like that!”

Newt’s eyes never left Morgan’s, but Gliph was too caught up in his monologue to notice.

For her part, Morgan smiled at the love-struck young man. Her eyes seemed to be calculating his potential, in more ways than one. Slowly, she looked down at his boots, then back up to his face.

The unspoken look thrilled Newt. He started feeling things in his heart he had never felt before.

And elsewhere, too.

“Come along, then,” Gliph said. “Have your people prepare our horses, and we shall ride into town. I have work to do.”

6.40

Three horses rode out from under the massive wooden arch over the Dalmont estate's entrance a couple hours before noon.

Both Gliph and Morgan were still uncomfortable riding horseback, but they showed improvement from the day before.

Newt spent the first kilometer out from the compound looking over his shoulder at them, mainly at Morgan. When they reached the West Road, Morgan pulled up alongside him so they could talk without him straining his neck.

"So, you and your brothers run the land out here?"

"Y-y-yeah. All this land you see is ours."

"How is that possible? I know the Courthouse only hands out one homestead per person."

"W-w-we got four. Then, we b-b-bought the rest."

"I see. And were the sellers willing? Or did you help encourage them to sell?"

The look she gave him and the way she said it, made Newt realize that Morgan rather liked violence.

A surge of adrenalin and other hormones flooded his bloodstream.

“W-w-we, uh . . . Yes, we pretty much g-g-get what we want.”

“I’ll *bet* you do.”

She looked him over again, head to toe, across the horses.

He flushed, his face turning beet-red.

Soon they came to the crossroads.

“We g-g-go this way to town,” Newt said, pointing south.

Both Morgan and Gliph turned to look out in the pasture leading to the woods.

“Hold it,” Gliph said. “How is that possible?”

Newt turned to see what held their attention.

There, out in the field, a pristine white country church sat nestled next to the woods.

“That can’t be,” Morgan said. “It was ruined. I saw smoke coming up when we left. It should be a pile of rubble by now!”

“I d-d-didn’t know there was a church out there,” Newt said, staring at the sight in surprise.

“There shouldn’t be,” Gliph said.

He glanced at Morgan.

“Should we attend to this? I don’t believe in miracles, but this is truly nothing short of miraculous. Perhaps the locals all contributed overnight to restore the building to its former glory.”

“Y-y-you want to d-d-destroy it?”

“We thought we did yesterday,” Morgan said quietly. “Obviously, we were mistaken.”

Gliph urged his horse off the road and onto the grass.

A thick black tendril made of thousands of MicaBots seemed to sprout from the ground like a living whip. It reared back and snapped in the air, spooking the horse.

The animal decided prudence was the better part of valor, and quickly returned to the road where the other two waited.

“Did you forget about that . . . stuff? Those things, whatever they were?” Morgan said.

“Yes. Momentarily, I did indeed forget. We lost too many. You are right. This too can wait. We have far more pressing issues in town.”

He squeezed his horse’s sides with his heels and guided it down the South Road toward Little York.

“Come along, you two! Follow me as we seek to establish the anarchist’s ideal municipality on this planet!”

Morgan smiled at Newt, their horses close enough to touch.

She reached across the saddle and laid a hand on his thigh.

“You were very brave.”

His mouth opened for a moment in astonishment.

“I d-d-didn’t do anything.”

“That’s right. A lesser man would have bolted. But you stood firm.”

She glanced over at the receding figure of Gliph, now out of earshot.

“I think you’ll make a wonderful leader in the days ahead. Can I count on you to help me out when I need you? I’ll definitely make it worth your while.”

She squeezed his thigh, lightly.

“Y-y-y-y- . . . Uh-huh!”

She smiled warmly and urged her horse to follow Gliph’s.

Then she pulled gently on the reins, stopping so Newt could catch up.

When he drew even with her again, she said, “I knew I could count on you, Newt. A girl gets lonely out here. A girl has needs, you know.”

“Aren’t you . . . D-d-don’t you belong to Mr. G-g-glyph?”

Her head jerked in his direction, and her eyes narrowed.

“I don’t belong to *anyone*, Newt. Do you understand?”

He nodded, terrified that he might have offended her.

Her expression softened and she smiled again.

“But I could be taken by someone, if he was the right man for the job. If he knew how to handle me, and would do the things I asked of him.”

They rode in silence for a while, with Glyph now far ahead.

Rounding a bend, the first buildings of Little York came into sight.

“Do you think you could be that man for me, Newt?”

He looked at her, and newfound confidence seemed to fill his chest. Like a flower blooming under rain, then sunlight, he seemed to blossom under the affection of a woman.

This time when he answered, he did not stutter.

He looked at her, eyes dilated wide and filled with expectation for the days ahead.

“Yes!”

She smiled then, with genuine warmth.

“Come along then. Let’s go help him turn this town into Allegory.”

Together they rode after the older man, heading into town.

End of Book 6

BAD ALLEGORY

7.1

“As you can see, Mr. Thallus, the apartment has undergone extensive renovation.”

Ashley Thallus stood in the middle of a rental unit on Commerce Street, admiring the wide open spaces.

“Yes, it looks very nice.”

“Indeed. The former occupant was something of a neat freak, if I may say so. She kept it well-organized. And honestly, other than the broken shards of glass, there was not a whole lot to clean up when she moved out.”

“What was all that about? We’re three floors up. How did her window get broken?”

“It was during the Southside Riots.”

“Ah.”

“Yes. Evidently, some young hooligan had a pair of wall crawler boots. I got the story straight from the previous tenant. He evidently saw her look out the window when she looked to see what all the hubbub was about. He traipsed right up the side of the building, coming after her. She screamed and grabbed her gun from the dresser drawer near her bed.”

The real estate man stopped, apparently worried this might be an inappropriate topic when trying to sell a potential renter on an apartment.

He stood skinny and tall, with a baldpate that could be fixed with modern medicine. But male pattern baldness was actually considered chic on certain planets, and this man had evidently migrated to Phaethon from one such world where bald was considered beautiful.

At least by some, Ash thought.

“Go on,” he urged the agent.

“Yes, well . . . She shot him. He flew out the window and back down to the street the fast way, heh. But I assure you, Mr. Thallus, he did not die in this room. She shot him here, yes. Or rather, right outside the window. But he died in the street, you see.”

“That sort of thing doesn’t bother me.”

“Good, good. You’re a rational man, I see. You would not believe how many clients I’ve had who absolutely refuse to move in somewhere a person has died.”

“I would imagine there are not that many such places on Phaethon, yet.”

“Oh, no. Not yet, heh. No, I’m thinking more of my former life as a real estate agent on Aegea. There it was a problem, you see.”

“Well, I like the place. The rent is a little steep, though.”

“Anywhere on Commerce Boulevard is going to carry a premium, Mr. Thallus. And it does get even more expensive the closer one approaches the bazaar and other shopping areas. But I would think with your position, you might be interested in proximity to Courthouse Square. This unit gives you the best of both worlds, heh. You are right next to the seat of power on this planet. And at the same time, you are a short rickshaw ride away from all the shops and restaurants that I know you like to write about for the Zeitung.”

“You really do know your customers, Mr. Bean.”

“Oh, please. Just call me Clifford.”

“Call me Ash, then.”

“I will! Well, what do you think? The rate is quite reasonable for the location.”

“Is this the best you can do on rent? Surely you have other places that are less expensive.”

“Oh, certainly. But not as nice. You do get what you pay for in real estate, that more than anything.”

“Well, I’d like to see something cheaper, if you don’t mind. If only for comparison purposes.”

“I do have one unit open on the other side of Courthouse Square. But it’s on the south side, I’m afraid.”

Ash shrugged.

“Let’s see it,” he said. “Maybe I’ll get some stories over there.”

“Alrighty . . .”

Clifford Bean chatted with him as they walked down the stairs. All the buildings on Commerce, at least along this stretch of the boulevard, had retail on the street level. A few units on the upper floors served as offices. No elevators graced the buildings, so residents and customers climbed the stairs.

The third floor is actually not too bad, Ash thought.

But, he did want to investigate all the possibilities.

“I’m so glad you’re going to be with us a while longer, Ash. You know, I’ve always been a fan of the Zeitung. And we’re getting our own local bureau! That’s big news, if you’ll pardon the pun.”

“Is it a pun? Seems more ironic.”

Clifford chuckled lightly as they walked out onto the street. He led Ash over to a rickshaw parked on the curb and murmured an address to the man pulling it, slipping him a small token.

Moments later they crossed Courthouse Square and entered the periphery of Southside.

“This building has a view of the Courthouse, at least if you look out the window and lean to your right. It is more working class than the business district, and the rent is cheaper. These apartments are not nearly as nice as the other ones, but I’ll be glad to show you what I have over here.”

They walked up to a wooden door with an antique-style button pad.

“If you rent the place, I’ll give you the code,” Clifford said over his shoulder. He blocked the view of the keypad from Ash as he tapped on the buttons.

The bolt slid back, and Clifford shoved the door inward. With a wave to follow, he disappeared inside a dark hallway.

Ash glanced down the street toward the Southside Projects. He watched as a candy wrapper fluttered by in the wind.

Sighing, he headed in after the real estate agent.

“This one is on the second floor,” Clifford said. “Hope you like stairs, heh. But it is less climbing than the other one.”

“Don’t you have any on the ground floor?”

“You don’t want the ground floor in this neighborhood. You’re too close to the Southsiders. Break-ins and other bad things happen on the ground floor around here.”

“You really know how to sell a place, Clifford.”

“I’m just telling you like it is. I do think you’ll want that other place after seeing this one.”

Clifford guided him to the stairs and they climbed up to the second floor.

“It’s a little dingy,” Ash commented going up. Their feet made the boards squeak on the wooden stairs. “And it sounds like a colony of mice live under the steps.”

“Ha! Yeah, these buildings were thrown up a lot faster than the others. A little less attention to detail was given during construction. There was a sudden need to house many more immigrants than expected. Here we are.”

They walked out through a doorless opening and into the second floor hallway. Clifford led the way down to an apartment entrance marked “24” in white paint on the door. He fished in his pocket for a key and unlocked it.

The wooden door swung inward, hinges groaning. Five people were already inside.

In the middle of the room, a topless young woman cried out on her knees, hands bound behind her back.

Four bare-chested men surrounded her, looking down at her face. They all glanced up when the door swung open.

Clifford and Ash stopped and stared in surprise.

“What in Sam Hill is going on here?” the real estate agent shouted. “Who are you people and what are you doing?”

Ash put a hand on the taller man’s shoulder, keeping him from walking further into the room.

“Cliff . . . look at their eyes.”

Clifford stopped yelling and examined the face of the closest thug.

The man’s irises jumped up and down, practically vibrating.

The whites of his eyes looked entirely bloodshot, almost solid red.

Most disturbing of all, small particles seemed to hover and flutter around his eyes, like a fine red mist of ghostly goggles.

Clifford stared at the other three. Each man had a mist over his eyes, crimson particles constantly shifting.

“They’re . . . glowing?”

Four pairs of red eyes narrowed.

The thugs growled and rushed for the two men at the door.

7.2

“Haley? Your significant other is in a spot of trouble. And he is not in a position I can do much about.”

Haley Stonecipher looked up from the empty table she sat behind at the vast outdoor bazaar on the edge of League City.

Nearby, Henry the load bot stood passively, his faded yellow paint blending in with the farm equipment nearby in other stalls.

She frowned, then glanced around to make sure no one was in earshot. Haley replied to the AI entity known as Lisa communicating through her implant.

“My significant . . . You mean Ash? What’s going on?”

She spoke softly, continuously glancing around to make sure no one at any of the nearby tables could overhear and that no customers drew near while she spoke. It would not do for anyone to think she talked to herself.

Once again, she had run out of inventory with only a handful of spent power packs left on the table that others had traded her. Deciding it might look better mumbling under her breath if she were on the move, Haley picked up the box and made her way toward the truck.

This morning she had taken a table rather close to the parking lot, so she did not have far to go.

“Grab those and come with me, Henry.”

The load bot moved for the first time in hours. It picked up four large metal rectangles stacked on the ground nearby and followed Haley.

Lisa said, “He is being assaulted.”

Haley picked up the pace. The robot behind her did, too.

“Is he okay?”

“I’m sensing bruises . . . some light contusions . . . now some heavy ones . . . more contusions . . .”

Haley broke into a jog and quickly covered the pace to her truck, paying no attention to the looks she received.

Henry picked up speed too, keeping up with her.

At the ground vehicle in the parking lot, she opened the door and climbed inside, leaving the box on the seat.

“Put those in the back, Henry. Climb up there and wait for me.”

The bot moved to the rear of the truck.

Pulling the door shut behind her, Haley dropped to the floorboard.

“Get me over there, Lisa!”

A loud *pop!* sounded in the enclosed space of the cab, and Haley vanished.

She popped back into existence on a rooftop, unseen by anyone. Another *pop!* sounded and her Night Shadow outfit appeared. She now stood dressed in a skintight black leotard and leggings, with wall crawler boots and force bracers on, along with a black mask over her face.

She braced herself, bending her knees and assuming a fighting stance.

“I’m ready, Lisa.”

A final *pop!* sounded and she disappeared once more.

This time she appeared in an apartment with the sounds of a massive struggle at the door to the hall.

In front of her, a topless teenage girl stayed on her knees, arms crossed over her chest, looking scared.

The girl turned at the sound of displaced air and stifled a scream at the unexpected sight of a woman dressed all in black.

Haley put a finger to her lips, trying silently to calm the girl. Then she turned and assessed the thugs at the door.

Four men stood at the doorway. Two stood side by side and assaulted two other men out in the hall. The two in back could not fit through the opening and join the fight. They squeezed between the two in front, occasionally lashing out with a fist between gaps in the flesh.

Lisa spoke through Haley's implant once more.

"Ash is in the hall. I'm sensing more contusions."

Haley took quick steps to the door, activating her bracers. She grabbed one of the men with both hands under his armpits and lifted him off the floor.

She pivoted and flung him at the window.

The topless girl screamed as 90 kilograms of male flesh sailed over her head in slow motion.

He crashed through the window and gravity took over, pulling him down to the street below.

Haley grabbed the second man's arm as he pulled back to lash out with a vicious punch. She pivoted again with the bracers activated, leveraging his weight. He stumbled past the girl, legs and feet unable to stop his motion. The momentum carried him all the way to the broken window.

For a moment he seemed poised on the precipice, both arms windmilling as he struggled to retain his balance.

The girl screamed again, this time in rage. She jumped up and shoved his chest, throwing her body weight into the effort.

He fell out the window backwards, plummeting down and joining his comrade already splattered on the street.

Haley turned back to the door. She now had a clear view of the fight in the hallway. A man she did not know lay on the floor out there in a pool of blood. Two shirtless men fought Ash, fists flying.

Ash held his own. His face looked puffy. Several hits had obviously landed. But he still stood on his feet, stubbornly fighting back.

The thugs assaulting him had taken some blows, too. He had bloodied a nose. The other guy would wake up with a black eye.

But Ash fought back slower now, fatigued. His fists were knocked down when they reached out for a strike.

Haley watched for a second, trying to figure out the best approach. Ash held his fists up in front of his face. He blocked a blow from the man on his right. But the one on the left lashed out at his middle, landing a solid thump. Ash twisted, absorbing some of the blow and trying to deflect the rest. The other one kicked him, striking Ash's shin before he could jump out of the way.

Haley had seen enough. She walked up to the door and tapped the kicker on the shoulder with one hand while pulling Tom Savage's brass knuckles onto the other.

He turned and she saw his face up close for the first time, with red bouncing eyes and the misty goggles with tiny particles floating over his face.

Her bracers charged up, whining. She struck him with the brass knuckles in the jaw, snapping it and spinning his head around.

He fell to the floor like a sack of sand.

Ash and the last thug stopped whaling on one another. They turned and looked at her.

Her bracers fired up and she grabbed the last one with both hands, one on his neck, and the other by the belt around his pants. She lifted him off the floor, turned and marched to the window.

She threw him out. His eyes never left hers as he plunged to the street, landing on his back beside the others.

Haley turned to the room again. The girl stared back at her, open-mouthed. She had her arms crossed again, a hand on either shoulder.

Haley glanced beyond her to the hall. Ash stared back at her, woozily. Then he collapsed, slumping down next to the real estate agent.

7.3

Haley rushed back to the doorway. She kneeled and placed a hand on Ash's bruised face.

Quietly, and with her back to the girl, Haley held out her fingers and said, "Lisa? First aid, please."

A pneumatic syringe popped into place, resting in the palm of her hand. Haley gripped it and pushed it against Ash's neck, injecting medical nanobots into his system.

Ash's face seemed to relax. As she watched, his bruises faded and the puffiness around his eyes cleared.

Convinced he was okay, she moved over to the other man in the hall. She did not know him, but it appeared he had been battered into unconsciousness. She did not bother to look for a pulse, she could see his chest moving up and down.

Again, she crouched and cupped her hand. Again, Lisa ported a pneumatic syringe in with a little pop, and she administered it to the other fellow.

She stood and tucked the empty syringes into a pocket, then walked back inside the apartment.

The girl stared up at Haley from her position on the floor, arms still covering her chest.

Haley reached down and grabbed a t-shirt off the floor. Whether it had belonged to one of the thugs or the girl, she did not know. But she draped it gently over the girl's shoulders.

Without another word, she approached the broken window. Behind her she heard a groan from the older man, and some stirring from Ash as they both started to wake up.

Haley stepped up on the windowsill, crunching glass. She swung a foot to the left, letting her boots gain purchase, then she carefully brought her other foot out.

Now adhering to the wall, she carefully straightened and walked up the side of the apartment building, heading back to the roof.

“Wha . . . what’s going on?”

Ash woke up. He stood, holding his head with one hand and his midsection with the other, nursing his tender spots.

He saw a flash of black go out the window, and jogged past the girl now pulling a t-shirt on.

“Is that Night Shadow?”

He stopped at the window and looked down, taking in the three bloody bodies on the street. Then he looked up in time to see a bit of black disappearing over the ledge of the roof.

“She went up.”

Pulling back inside, he took in the sight of the girl, now clothed, and the unconscious thug, still shirtless.

“What happened here?”

Before the girl could say anything, a loud groan came from the hall and Clifford Bean sat up.

“What in tarnation? Oh, my head.”

Ash pulled the girl's attention back to him.

"What happened? Who are you? What were you doing here?"

"The Overlord said it was an experiment."

Ash blinked. His head was still spinning, but his body seemed to be rapidly improving.

"The Overlord? Who is that?"

"He . . . he's the Overlord. He's in charge of the Projects. He was tasked with taking care of us while Mr. Gliph is absent."

"Ah."

Mentally, Ash filed this information away. It seemed important.

"And what kind of experiment was he trying to run? Did he say?"

"I don't know. He paid me ten credits to go with these men. The men had something . . . a spray? I don't know. They all took it, and then . . . and then . . . you came in."

Ash nodded. He thought the girl left a lot out. Like how everybody wound up in a circle and not wearing a top.

"Those guys were certifiably insane. They came after us with a vengeance. You don't know anything about that?"

The girl shook her head. She stood up and the shock seemed to wear off her, like a puddle drying up after a summer shower.

"I need to go."

She walked around Ash and headed for the door. Clifford stood up now, one hand on the doorframe to brace himself.

"Young lady! What were you doing in this apartment? None of you were supposed to be in here!"

"Excuse me. I've got to go."

Her small frame squeezed past him and she rapidly headed for the stairs without looking back.

Both men looked down at the last remaining person from the fight, lying unconscious on the floor.

“Looks like we’ll have to get our answers out of this poor SOB,” Clifford said, nudging the fellow with his foot.

The man’s head lolled, and Ash noted his jaw opened at a weird angle.

“Might be a while before he can talk easily, though. That looks like a broken jaw. I’m pretty sure Night Shadow came in here and took care of things for us.”

“Night Shadow? The super-heroine? Are you sure?”

“Pretty sure. I saw flashes of black go out the window.”

“I thought she only worked at night.”

Ash nodded in agreement.

“Something is really odd about this whole thing. It’s all off-kilter. Have you ever heard of someone called the Overlord? That girl said he was in charge of the Projects while Gliph is gone.”

Clifford shook his head.

“Can’t say that I have. Then again, this building here is as close to the Southside Projects as I get, normally.”

Ash nodded and crossed his arms.

“I think there’s a story here. Something big, maybe. We should get this guy some medical attention, and I imagine the Sheriff will want to talk with us. And him. And somebody will need to take care of the bodies out on the street.”

“Bodies?”

“Yes. Night Shadow’s work. She’s . . . kinda ruthless.”

Clifford walked around the clothing on the floor of the room and headed to the broken window. He leaned out and saw people on the street gathered around the three shirtless corpses. People looked up and pointed at him. He pulled back in, quickly.

“Heh, you’re right. We’re going to have to talk to the sheriff. I’m sorry about all this, Mr. Thallus. Those people were not supposed to be in here. This is officially a vacant unit.”

“I understand, no worries. I’ll tell you what I’d like to do, though. I’d like to rent both places, this one and the last one you showed me on Commerce.”

“Really? Great! I mean, are you sure? That’s double the rent, almost. Well, this place is cheaper, I guess. But still . . .”

“One will be the official office for the Zeitung’s new local bureau here on Phaethon, and I’ll be billing the accountants for it back in Diego. If I ever hire anyone, they’ll work out of that apartment. Truth to tell, right now I’ll probably stay there. As for this one, I want a foothold in this neighborhood. I want to see what’s going on over in the Projects. I want to find out more about this Overlord fellow, and figure out what was involved in that experiment he was talking about.”

“I’m with you. Okay, I’ll get a lease out for both places you can sign. I’ll have this one cleaned up with a new window before you know it. Fortunately, there’s a warehouse stocked full of replacement windows for these apartments. They were imported a long time ago, well before the embargo. It’s handy that they’re all the same size.”

He stuck out a hand to shake. Ash took it.

While they were shaking, a deputy stuck his head in, wearing a cowboy hat and a big silver star on his shirt.

“What’s going on in here? Did you boys just push those men out the window?”

7.4

The girl walked out the front door of the building before the deputy walked in, thereby avoiding the notice of law enforcement. She made her way quickly down the sidewalk, ignoring the crowd in the street gathering around the bodies.

She did look up, once, at the rooftops. From this angle she could not see much, and she certainly did not see Night Shadow up there.

She kept walking, hurrying back toward the Southside Projects.

No rickshaws lingered out here in this neighborhood. Even if one did, she would not have wasted the money to use the driver's services. She walked.

Her arms remained crossed, but this time below her breasts. She felt vulnerable. At the same time, she could not deny that the extra money in her pockets felt good.

She soon entered the projects. Here, she was noticed more. People stared out the windows. Men in doorways, similar to those shirtless fellows back in the apartment, stared at her with lascivious eyes.

And yet, she walked unmolested. She belonged here. Anyone attacking her would face retribution from the Overlord. Southsiders could pass in peace, day or night. Even someone in her profession.

At least in theory.

She had little doubt that someone might take advantage of her if they thought they could get away with it.

At last she came to the Overlord's building. She headed for the basement entrance rather than the one on the street.

Going down the steps, she stared into the inky depths of the hallway.

Her mother named her Jada after the last great ruler of the League, Jade Thrall.

Never mind that Jade Thrall was a bot.

According to her mother, Jade Thrall was the greatest ruler the League ever had, greater even than her "father," Julius Thrall.

"She was going to bring the League back together, and make us a force to be reckoned with again," her mother told her daughter in a tale often repeated while Jada was growing up. "It was like Putin and the old Soviet Union. She would have succeeded, too, if the Republic hadn't put a stop to her."

This tale grew as Jada grew. Before she left home to join the X's and O's and then migrate to Phaethon with Gliph and Berris, her mother had latched onto a complex conspiracy theory.

"The Republicans swapped out the real Jade Thrall with an identical robot," she whispered in her daughter's ear, as if afraid somebody might overhear the truth.

"I don't think that's what happened, Mom."

"It's true. Everybody knows that bot came from a factory on Diego. They had pirates kidnapping people all the time in the war. It's a known fact pirates kidnapped Jillian Thrall and forced her to marry the pirate lord, Christopher Raleigh."

"It wasn't forced, Mom."

“It was too! She had no choice. Anyways, I think the pirates kidnapped Jade as well. Then the Republican Navy sneaked in that bot in her place.”

She hugged her mother and said goodbye shortly after that. Jada had found meaning in her life with the X's and O's, and that meant leaving Clarion. The core contingent was set on moving to the newest open planet and helping to colonize it. Jada joined them.

That was about two years ago, she thought, walking down the dimly lit hall to the building's center.

What nobody told us, she thought, was that we would be dumped here with little money or food.

At a solid wood door in the center of the building, she turned the latch and pushed, not even bothering to knock. The door swung open into a darkened bar, only marginally brighter than the hallway.

The drunks sprawled out on dirty tables did not stir when the door opened. Three of them were evidently sleeping off their booze.

A couple men glanced in her direction, eyes flashing with lust despite the dim light.

Jada ignored them all and headed for the bar where Casper Slodovich stood, observing his domain.

He looked Jada over as she approached, a split-second widening of the eyes betraying his surprise at seeing her.

She knew she was not the most attractive woman in his inventory. She realized now that was likely the reason he had chosen her for this assignment.

She did not like the feeling of being expendable.

Jada stopped at the bar, locking eyes with Casper in the gloomy room.

He recovered from the surprise of seeing her.

He said, “Well? What happened?”

“I don’t know. They took the spray and went nuts. It’s like all their passions got out of control. They ripped my shirt off, they ripped their own shirts off. But before they could do anything, somebody knocked on the door.”

“What? Who?”

“I don’t know. Some guys. A landlord or somebody started yelling, wanting to know what we were doing in there. He was with some other guy. Your men attacked them.”

The corner of Casper’s mouth twisted up.

“Is that right? Then what happened?”

“Then Night Shadow happened.”

“Night what? What are you talking about?”

“That superhero? The one in the news.”

“I don’t pay attention to news.”

“Well, maybe you should. She swooped in and killed everybody. Well, maybe one of them is alive. She threw the others out the window.”

“What? Who is this gal?”

“I don’t know. Anyway, I left before the pigs got there.”

“Good, good.”

Casper looked down at the bar, lost in thought.

Jada cleared her throat.

He looked up to see her palm out.

“You said you’d give me more when I came back.”

“Oh, yeah. Good job. Here, take a twenty.”

He handed her a slightly larger token than she expected. She smiled and made it disappear.

“Stick around, Jada. Stay where I can find you. I might have some more experiments for you.”

“I don’t know if I want to go on anymore experiments, Overlord. Those guys looked ready to hurt me. Honestly, that whole experience was not worth the credits to me.”

“Well, we don’t know if they would have hurt you, since they got interrupted. So, stick around. I’ll make it worth your while if I ask you to go do something else.”

She nodded, looking down at the floor.

“Yes, sir.”

“That’s my girl. Now get in the back. We’ll have a lot of customers tonight. The weekend’s coming and those who actually work around here will have gotten paid. They’re gonna want a girl or two.”

Jada nodded and dutifully headed toward the back. She passed the gambling tables and went to the rooms set aside for prostitutes, disappearing through another door.

Casper remained at the bar, absently rubbing it down with a cleaning rag.

“I shoulda done the experiment here,” he murmured to himself. “But there’s no empty space in the Projects.”

7.5

“**S**tuff’s looking good,” Tom said as he walked along the edge of the garden with Silas and Lola Vick following him.

“You got some stuff coming up over there . . .”

“Corn,” Silas said. “Well, a variant of corn bioengineered for Phaethon. It’s supposed to taste just like the stuff from Old Earth.”

“And some other stuff over there . . .”

“Carrots,” Lola said. “They’re leafier than regular carrots on account of the lack of sunlight.”

Tom stopped and nodded, looking out over the garden with all the green shoots coming up.

His farm hands stopped beside him, taking in the beautiful sight of the hectare-sized plot of planted food.

Out in the middle of the rows, Timmy stood bent over with a hoe, tilling up weeds. A large sack of horse manure hung from a strap over his shoulder.

“Well, I for one am looking forward to some home-cooked meals made out of all this.”

“Yes, sir. You and me both,” Silas said. “And Timmy has done an excellent job keeping it weeded. Honestly, it all would have been about ten times more difficult without him. Who knew a Marine battle bot could be such a good gardener?”

The three watched the old bot as he moved down the row. The hoe looked like a toy in his giant metal hands.

“Timmy’s good at pretty much whatever you ask him to do. Even Hide and Seek. When he has a mind to it, he can really hide himself well.”

“That sounds like a story,” Lola said, smiling.

“Yeah. I was eight years old, and the rules were you had to stay on the 20th floor of Mule Tower. And I never could find him. And finally Mom got involved because I was crying that I had lost my play buddy and could not find him anywhere. Two days later, he shows up again. And that’s when we figured out that battle bots are willing to cheat in order to win. He hid himself in the ceiling.”

Silas chuckled.

Lola said, “How is that cheating? It was still on that level, wasn’t it?”

“Don’t take his side on this,” Tom said, holding up a finger. “Technically, he was between floors. And his feet were not even on the floor! Who does that to an eight year old? A freakin’ Republican battle bot, that’s who. The LEAF never stood a chance against those guys.”

The trio watched Timmy continue working to the end of the row.

“They are very well programmed,” Silas said quietly as they watched. “Almost sentient, those thing are.”

At the end of the row, Timmy stopped hoeing and bent down to the top of some green shoots sprouting up.

He reached down gently, then stood with one finger outstretched. A yellow butterfly stood perched on the tip, gently flapping its wings.

Timmy lifted his hand up and the butterfly fluttered away. He tilted his “head,” a vertical rectangular sensor with rounded corners, seemingly

watching it catch a gust of wind and drift off.

“Well, I wouldn’t doubt that a lot of the same programming was used across a number of things in the Verberger lineup back in those days. Jean Ngo was brilliant. A titan of industry. In many ways, he shaped history. You know, the bot he named Miriam was so lifelike, even she didn’t know she wasn’t human. Then Thrall kidnapped her and she ultimately became Lead Tetrarch of the League. I would not doubt it if Jade Thrall shared some of the same programming as a Republican battle bot.”

All three watched as Timmy started on the next row, coming back toward them.

“You know, I never thought about it, Mr. Savage,” Silas said as they watched. “But you’re right. I’m bettin’ one of the reasons Jade Thrall was as vicious as she was . . . she shared some Marine battle bot programming. It makes sense. I’ve seen those things in battle. They are a force to be reckoned with.”

Lola said, “It probably made her aggressive enough to kill her ‘father’ and wrest power away from him.”

“That’s just a rumor, sweetheart. Nobody knows how the old man died.”

“Of course that’s how he died. Occam’s Razor, Silas dear.”

“That’s probably the biggest difference between the two,” Tom said. “Timmy will cheat to win a game of Hide and Seek, if he can. But Jade would more than likely have killed somebody just so they couldn’t find her.”

A loud *pop!* sounded nearby. Tom, Silas and Lola turned to see Haley appear, along with their yellow load bot with his cubic torso and head, as well as four metallic rectangular boxes.

“Hey everyone. Did I miss anything?”

“Hi Haley!” Lola said. “We were just watching the plants grow.”

“Oh. So, nothing major. Well, I got into a scrap with some Southsiders just now.”

“Really?” Tom said. “It’s been a while since you’ve had to deal with them, hasn’t it?”

“Yeah.”

Haley turned to the load bot and said, “Henry, move the ThermoHaven units to the four corners of the garden, please.”

The load bot picked up one of the metal rectangles and lumbered over to the far corner of the garden with it.

“Oh good,” Tom said. “You found some. I was worried we were too close to winter. This should protect us from any freezes.”

Silas nodded and said, “It’s supposed to activate a dome when temperatures fall below five degrees, and keep it warm inside so nothing gets harmed by the cold. I’ll check the settings when Henry is done.”

Haley said, “I got a deal. Their power packs are all depleted, so you’ll need to swap them out after recharging them. Anyway, yeah. Back to my story. I probably wouldn’t have had to mess with any Southsiders this time either, but Ash got attacked by some after he wandered close to their territory.”

“He did? Why’d he do that?”

“Dunno. I haven’t talked to him about it yet. He was still knocked out when I left. Anyway, four of them had ganged up on him and some other guy. It appears they interrupted a gang bang. Some poor girl was in a room with these four hopped-up hooligans. Nobody had much in the way of clothes on. Looked like it was *interruptus* right before the *coitus*, if you know what I mean.”

“Ah,” Tom said with a grimace. “That’s not a pretty picture.”

“Yeah. I threw three of them out the window and left one to tell the tale. Here, I’ll show you what was odd about the whole thing.”

She touched the implant under her right ear and brought up her personal holo. It showed the bloody face of an unconscious man lying on the floor.

“I’m pretty sure I broke his jaw. But look at the stuff around his eyes.”

The other three gathered in close to the holo.

Tom said, “What is that? Mist?”

“I was hoping you could tell me. Lisa is not much help.”

“It is outside of my data parameters,” the AI said in all their implants. “If I could communicate with PLAIR, LuteNet or StarCen, I might have more data to share with you. Since I cannot . . .”

“I know what that is.”

Everyone turned to Silas. His face looked white, almost completely drained of blood.

“I’ve seen it before.”

They waited. But Silas continued staring at the picture, eyes wide and full of fear.

Finally Tom said, “Well? What is it?”

Silas turned to the others with an expression of dread.

“It’s a living nightmare.”

7.6

The four walked back to Tom's house in a somber mood. Nobody said anything.

Gwen met them at the door with Mr. Biddles wrapped around the back of her neck. The kitten seemed content from his perch, watching over everything from a human's height for a change.

Gwen was barefoot, wearing a t-shirt and cutoff jeans despite the dropping temperature. She had a plain white apron on as she opened the door and smiled at the small crowd on her back porch.

"Lunch is ready!"

Then she saw the expressions on everybody's faces.

"What happened?"

Tom said, "Looks like something bad is coming down the pike. Haley saw something odd in the Southside Projects, and Silas knows more about it."

He turned to the others on the porch.

"Come on, let's all have something to eat. We may as well deal with this on a full stomach."

Everyone went inside and made their way over to the kitchen table. Gwen had set out four trays of food. She pulled another one out for Haley.

“This is the last of our poshbird, for now anyway,” she said, sitting down with them.

Everyone ripped the top off their trays and the food heated instantly. They turned to Silas, ready to listen as he shared his story.

“Have any of you ever heard of Gemini Exponentials?”

Tom and Gwen both nodded, the expressions on their faces changing for the worse.

Haley and Lola shared a befuddled glance.

“I guess we’re the odd ones out,” Haley said. “Who or what is Gemini Exponentials?”

Silas turned to Tom, and everyone else looked at him, too.

“I don’t know all of it.”

“That’s okay. None of us do,” Silas said.

“Right. From what I understand, Gemini Exponentials predates the war by at least a couple years.”

Silas nodded and turned back to Haley and Lola.

“Gemini Exponentials . . . they were set up to do things that people probably shouldn’t be able to do. They ran experiments that should not be done. Stuff that was outlawed in both systems, even in the League where stuff like that was sometimes allowed.”

Gwen nodded.

“Mom said she had to clean up some warehouses with leftover junk from their experiments when she was still a Marine on Juventas. What kind of outlawed stuff are you talking about?”

Silas looked at Tom again.

Tom said, “Well, the big thing in those days was trying to figure how to set it up so a person could teleport on their own, without an AI doing it for them. That was considered to be a major weapon for the League’s State Security and Intelligence, from what I’ve read. If they could ever figure out how to do it. From what I understand, they always had difficulties with that particular goal. But it was their primary focus before the war. Or at least a big one.”

“Yup. That was the big one, Mr. Savage. They did lots of experiments on a barely habitable outpost called Raton Five for that. And their subjects suffered a very high mortality rate. In the end, they resorted to using indents for ‘volunteers.’ Some of those managed to live and gained extraordinary powers. But not very many made it.”

“That’s right, I remember. The survivors were called Intangibles because of the weird powers they had gained. Dad hired at least one I know about as crew during the war. He said she was a huge asset to the Ultima Mule. It made boarding enemy ships a lot easier. She could just port over there. The defenses against teleportation were not aligned for what she could do, or something.”

“SSI rounded up most of the others. Thrall’s old flame, Raquel Kirkland, became known as the Digital Assassin. She could move through wires, strike and kill and disappear again before anyone knew she was there. And her powers were all thanks to experiments on her by Gemini Exponentials.”

Lola shivered and said, “Thrall was one messed up son of a bitch.”

Tom glanced at Gwen, who took another bite from her plate. Neither one bothered to mention that Thrall was Tom’s maternal grandfather. The insults did not seem to bother him, though.

“Anyways,” Silas continued after swallowing a bite of poshbird, “unfortunately that was not the only thing that Gemini Exponentials was involved in. They had several other projects goin’ on before and during the war. One of them, the thing that’s important right now, involved soldier enhancements through advanced bio-enhancements.”

“Bio-enhancements?” Lola said. “You mean, like a super soldier or something?”

“Well, yes and no. The idea of a super soldier has long been supplanted by the even better idea of using battle bots like Timmy out there. The Republican Space Marine battle bot outperforms his human battle buddy in almost every metric. But there is a long history of performance enhancers used in the armed services. And Gemini Exponentials was all in on it.”

“I read a little something about this back in history class,” Tom said. “During World War Two, German planes that were shot down and crashed without blowing up were inspected by the Brits. Much to their surprise, they found these little pills included in survival packs for the airmen. They turned out to be something called Pervin, a brand name for methamphetamines. Nazi soldiers would use these drugs to fight fatigue during battle.”

Silas swallowed another bite.

He said, “Right. Performance enhancers. At least, an early version of them. So, Gemini Exponentials had to shut down their human experiments on teleportation before the war. But during the war they tried other things. But not a whole lot got out before the end. With the help of Lute, the tide turned, and the League never got its footin’ back. I’d say your father had a large part to do with that, Mr. Savage.”

“Shouldn’t it be ‘Mr. Raleigh?’” Lola said, smiling.

“He was introduced to me as ‘Mr. Savage.’”

“Actually, it should be just ‘Tom.’ But go on with what you know about the rest of it, Silas. You’re starting to go beyond the stuff I’ve read about.”

“Well, that’s because it ain’t exactly recorded in the history books, Mr. Savage. What happened next was . . . Gemini Exponentials continued in existence even after the war. And they kept workin’ on bio-enhancements.”

“What kind of bio-enhancements?” Gwen said quietly.

Silas turned to her and raised his eyebrows, his face and mind wandering off to a different time and place.

Just as quietly, he said, “The kind that makes a man bad, Ms. Gwendolyn. Real bad. Downright ornery.”

7.7

Two men followed Casper down a decrepit hall in the Southside Projects, footsteps tromping on dusty wooden floorboards. They remained silent as the big man spoke to them over his shoulder.

“The problem, of course, is there are precious few empty apartments in the Projects, even accounting for the absence of the dozen people or so Gliph took with him.”

The two young men following him said nothing.

“Gliph and Berris recruited well, though. All of you are of a certain age. Mostly men. We have a few willing women to meet your needs. It was well thought out, I have to admit. Our only problem is housing everyone while Gliph goes out looking for elbow room. I gotta say, though. It was brilliant putting everyone here in one place and subverting the local politics. There’s power in numbers, especially in a young place like this. Hizzoner is more powerful than anyone thought, though. Berris made some kind of deal with him and now he seems locked in place over in that Courthouse. But I’m just rambling now.”

The men said nothing as he stopped at a door in the basement hallway and turned to look at them.

“Well, here we are. We’ll have the space to ourselves. That’s what we need, some privacy to carry out this little experiment. It helps no one can hear us,

too.”

He produced a master key and unlocked the door. It swung inward on squeaky hinges.

“Well, come on in.”

Casper waved the two thugs inside. He followed and closed the door behind them, turning to lock it.

“Stand there in the middle, just like that. Very good.”

Positioning the two so they faced one another at arm’s length, Casper stepped back and rubbed his chin.

“Yes, I think this will do quite nicely. Now, are you both ready for an experiment?”

One of them said, “Yes, Overlord.”

The other simply nodded.

“Good, good. Very well, then.”

Casper reached into a front pocket and pulled out a flat box about the size of a deck of cards. It had a nipple on one end and a round button in the middle.

“This is an electronic mister. It’s completely safe, but it might surprise you the first time. Just relax and breathe in, okay gentlemen?”

Both nodded this time.

He held the unit up to the first man’s nose and lightly pressed the round button. A red mist of fine particles spritzed out the nipple, covering the man’s face.

Startled, he inhaled sharply, sucking in thousands of tiny red sprites.

“There we go. And that’s all there is to it. You’re next.”

Casper turned to the second man and repeated the procedure, spraying his face with a fine mist.

He put the dispenser back in his pocket and took a step back, watching the two closely.

“Any minute now . . .”

Both men bent over, holding their heads and keeping their eyes shut.

Slowly, the first one straightened. Casper leaned in and inspected his face. He no longer had much white in his eyes. They looked completely red. The irises vibrated, seeming to jump up and down as if they were bouncing.

The particles not inhaled remained outside his face. They coalesced around his eyes, forming a sort of misty red mask of constantly moving specks.

“Nice. It’s working as described, so far. I should have been at that first experiment instead of trusting the whore. But honestly, I didn’t expect to see her again. I thought I’d show up and find everyone dead. That’s how I would know it worked.”

He turned to watch the other man straighten and saw the same results, a mask of red floating particles covering his eyes.

“Let’s try this out, shall we? He just called you a pantywaist! Are you gonna stand for that?”

The second man’s eyes locked on the first, following the accusatory finger Casper pointed.

The thug snarled and took a step forward, slugging the other fellow hard in the face.

With a howl, the other man struck back with hands and feet.

The two went down on the floor kicking, punching and biting.

-+-

“It’s based on medical nano-technology. But instead of insertin’ nanobots into the body for medical reconstruction, these nanobots concentrated only on neural pathways. They corrupted things. Made a man more susceptible

to fits of anger, lust and jealousy. It's like all their bad emotions are amplified."

"But why?" Lola said, interrupting her husband. "Wouldn't they want to make the soldiers stronger or something? Why focus on exacerbating negative emotions?"

"You can only do so much to enhance the body biologically, sweetie. And it was expected LEAF soldiers were already in good shape. So these nanobots amplified certain neural processes in the brain. The thinkin' was, by ampin' up the emotions, they could stir up a blood rage and wring out higher performance on the battlefield that way."

Silas paused and glanced at the three women and one man sitting at the table with him. Their uneaten food started cooling off, but nobody seemed to notice.

"They called the tech 'Emotes.' Short for 'Electronic Micro Thought Enhancement System.' There was some concern that if they offered Emotes in pneumatic syringes, they might get accidentally injected into a wounded soldier in place of first aid. So, an aerosol delivery system was developed for it. Once a soldier breathes it in, the bots enter the bloodstream through the lungs, then head for the brain. A handful, several hundred or so, remain outside the body to relay data and instructions to those inside the subject's neural system."

"Hold up," Haley said. "Is that what I saw with the red mist around their eyes?"

"Yes. Those are receptor motes. They remain outside the head. A few more invade the eyes. Since these are nanobots, their com capabilities are severely limited. The system will use several out in the open to receive instructions and then relay the data to those inside the host. First to the ones in the eyes, then to the ones deeper inside his head."

Tom said, "So . . . you're saying the men could be controlled?"

"Yes, theoretically. A large squad of men could charge in with a battle rage, all bloodthirsty and lookin' to kill, and StarCen could supposedly guide and direct them. But a problem became apparent that the engineers did not think

about when designin' the system. One that manifested itself right away. The Emotes were made to communicate with StarCen, giving her an army of amped up men she could direct at will. That all sounds good in theory, but the only places you need an army like that . . ."

"Is on planets that don't have StarCen already in place," Gwen said. "In other words, enemy territory."

"Exactly. People could be directed by suggestions spoken to them if there was no AI. But it was never as effective as it was designed to be with StarCen controllin' things."

Tom said, "So . . . nobody at this table has ever heard of this tech before, besides you. I don't think it was used much in the Gold War, if at all. It sounds like there were some serious shortcomings to the technology."

"Emotes were developed late in the war and the ground fighting stopped before they could be put into use. By then, the problems with the system were fully understood and they weren't gonna be deployed anyway. Thespar had most of the military contracts in those days, for the League. Smaller companies workin' on more esoteric stuff like Gemini Exponentials didn't have the same clout, especially with the tetrarchy collapsin' and power coalescin' and the loss of Epsilon and everything else that was goin' on."

Gwen said, "How is it you know so much about this technology, Silas?"

Silas paused and took a bite from his neglected plate of food. Everyone looked down at his hand as it trembled while holding the fork.

He said nothing as he chewed.

Softly, Gwen said, "Let me guess. The tech was stolen after the war by SSI or somebody and used in certain places. And somebody used it on you. That's how you know about it."

Silas looked up at her with haunted eyes and nodded.

7.8

To Casper's surprise, the slightly smaller man came out the winner.

In a pool of blood on the cement floor, he stood up, finally letting go of the bigger man's neck.

The other guy gave almost as good as he got, Casper thought. The winner had a busted nose, bruised jaw, and gashes on his cheeks. Blood flowed from scratches on his chest, and the other thug had bitten off part of one ear.

His knuckles were bloody and his t-shirt looked shredded. But the smaller man emerged victorious. He put one knee underneath and pushed up. He stood for a moment, swaying.

"Amazing," Casper whispered. "You both beat each other to a pulp, over the slightest of insults. No wonder even SSI had a problem with using this stuff. And look at that. The red mist is still floating around your eyes. It's still active in you, isn't it?"

The man looked dazed. For a moment, he leaned too far over, almost falling before his equilibrium returned.

"I said isn't it, *scum bucket*?"

The man stopped swaying, his eyes locking with Casper's. Lips pulled back, revealing teeth. He screamed, lunging for the larger man.

Thoop!

Casper pulled the pistol out of his belt fast, and shot the man in the knee.

He tumbled down to the floor, not far from the corpse, screaming.

Casper looked down at the thin red mist floating around the dead man's head, ignoring the other man and his wailing for a moment.

"I suppose they just last a while. I wonder how long? Hm. Well, I don't have time to observe. It's enough to know the system works."

Casper looked at the screaming man holding his knee.

"Thank you for your service. I'll see to it that you get something to eat. I'll send Jada by later."

He turned and walked out the door, leaving both men behind.

In the hall, he locked the door behind him, then headed back to the street.

Tiny puffs of dust fluttered up around his feet as he tromped down the hallway's floor.

-+-

"So, I was a young gun. Basically lookin' for money and fun and sun. And I didn't really care what it took to get all that. Nor in what order, if you know what I mean."

Silas gave a sheepish glance at the people sitting at the table with him, most of the food long gone.

Gwen made a pitcher of coffee. She, Tom and Silas sipped from cups. Lola declined. She remained riveted to her seat, listening to her husband's tale.

"It was long before I met you, darlin', and long before I even thought about comin' out here to the frontier."

"Nobody thinks any worse of you because of your past, Silas," Tom said. "You've proven yourself time and again since coming to work for me."

“Well, thank you kindly, Mr. Savage. But I ain’t exactly forgiven myself yet for all the things I’ve done.”

He shuddered and glanced around at his small audience again.

“Anyways . . . I ended up on Seneca. It’s the League’s equivalent to Pearl. Lots of good stuff grown there. Some of the best coffee you ever tasted, no offense to this stuff, Ms. Wilder.”

“My real name was never Wilder, Silas,” Gwen said smiling. “And it’s Raleigh, now.”

Silas nodded, but his eyes were unfocused as he stared at the middle of the table, going back to a different time and place.

“Seneca had a lot of isolated spots. Different agricultural experiment stations and such. We was at one . . . well, it turned out to be a front for SSI. They got ahold of the Emote delivery system and they wanted to see if it could be put to use. This was after the war, and before Old Man Thrall bought the farm. He had been involved in the effort to corrupt the biocollars that indents wear, and the Emotes were kinda along the same line.”

“He did like to subvert good tech for nefarious purposes,” Gwen murmured. Lola said, “Filthy bastard!”

Tom and Gwen shared a glance. She smiled at him.

He raised an eyebrow, silently acknowledging that Lola badmouthing her grandfather did not seem to bother Gwen much.

“Well, I wouldn’t say it was *good* tech, Ms. Gwen. It was pretty bad stuff.”

The others at the table waited for Silas to continue. His eyes drifted back to a far away place.

“They sprayed our faces with a fine red mist. Soon, all I could see was red. My emotions were inflamed . . . all the bad ones. I don’t remember any happiness or joy. Just . . . rage . . . and lust. Sorry, Lola.”

Lola reached across the table and took his hand, gripping it tight.

“It’s hard to describe because it was all internal. Just try and imagine all the worst emotions you ever felt in your life all mixed together, with rage topping it all off. Then they pissed us off. Somebody let loose with a water hose and then an electric current ran through it. We was twenty guys all clustered together in a concrete pillbox. I woke up three days later.”

Silas shivered, and his eyes returned to the present.

“Two out of twenty lived through that. So, ten percent. I’m told I was a particularly vicious fighter. I don’t remember much about it, to be honest.”

“How did you get over it?” Tom said. “Obviously, those things aren’t still active inside you.”

“I’m not sure, Mr. Savage. When I came to in a hospital bed, I was all better. But I still have nightmares of some of the things I think I did in that pillbox to stay alive. And . . . and afterwards.”

The others stared at Silas, waiting for him to continue.

His ears turned a deep shade of red.

“I’m ashamed to admit it, but it turns out I was pretty good at killin’. I thought gettin’ away and comin’ out to Phaethon could help put my past behind me, but I got caught up with the Ever Riders and . . . you know how it is. A leopard never really changes his spots, I suppose.”

“That’s bogus,” Tom said.

Everyone turned to look at him.

“You were changing before I hired you. The good in you was there all along, no matter what you’ve done in the past, Silas. You kept those men off Prisha Asa, after all.”

“Granted,” Gwen said with a teasing smile, “you tried to use her as leverage when approaching us.”

Silas smiled, relief flooding his face.

“That was on account of you had done killed everybody else with that big ol’ gun of yours, Ms. Gwen.”

7.9

Morgan nuzzled Newt's neck, making him breathe faster. He kept his eyes squeezed shut.

She hugged him tight, pressing her entire body against his. She pulled his head down with the flat of her hand and drew him into a long, luscious kiss.

When she finally let go with her lips and tongue, she reached up and nibbled his earlobe.

He shuddered in pleasure.

She pulled back from him and smiled.

"I need you to go in there and tell that old serving wench to let me back in."

He sighed, opening his eyes.

"I c-c-can't, Morgan. Oma Ferguson said all y'all gots to stay away. P-p-particularly that fella that threw her up against the w-w-wall."

"I know what happened, Newt."

She pressed in closer to the youngest Dalmont brother, letting him feel every square centimeter of her front pressing tightly against him.

"But I want to get in there. I need to get back in there. You can do it, Newt. Go inside and be a man, and get her to let me back in the pub. I want this,

Newt. I *need* it. Now go get it for me.”

The last bit she breathed in his ear, making the hair on the back of his neck rise up.

“I’ll t-t-try.”

“Do more than try, Newt. Do it! For me?”

She pouted, looking up at him now with pursed lips.

Morgan gave him a quick peck on the cheek and stepped away. A brace of cool winter air rushed between them. The warmth from her body on his quickly evaporated.

He watched her, eyes wide, as she walked away.

Then she turned and put one hand on a hip, striking a stunning pose that promised a lot . . . if only he returned from this quest successfully.

She turned again and walked away.

Newt stood mesmerized, watching the way her legs and hips moved as she wandered off.

He shook himself and turned toward the front door of Ferguson’s Freehold. Steeling himself, he headed for the entrance again.

A shaft of diffused light brightened the pub’s interior as he opened the door.

Far fewer regulars were in attendance this time of day. Only two men sat at the bar nursing beers, with no one at the tables.

Eddie glanced at him from behind the bar without emotion.

The kitchen door squeaked open as Oma came out to see who had walked in. She glared at Newt and marched forward as if preparing for battle.

“The answer’s no, Newt Dalmont. That harlot is one of them that done messed up my place. She ain’t comin’ back inside here, and that’s final.”

“Well n-n-now, wait a m-m-minute, Mrs. Ferguson. She’s got to have access to the c-c-commmlink.”

“Iffen they needs to talk to League City, I’ll relay the messages. But I’m gonna relay it while they stay on the outside!”

“Just l-l-let her b-back in, Mrs. Ferguson. I’ll m-m-make it worth your while!”

Oma’s eyes narrowed as she stared at Newt.

“What do you mean, ‘worth my while?’ Just how much are you prepared to pay me to let that little floozie back in my place?”

Newt stared at her wide-eyed.

“T-t-twenty credits?”

The old woman snorted.

“Ha! Give me two hundred credits and I’ll think about it.”

Moments later Newt walked out of the pub with his head hanging low. Morgan watched him cross the street to where she stood under the shade of the covered boardwalk. The town’s two long commercial buildings ended at the pub on one end, and the corral at the other end.

“What’d she say?”

“She s-s-said for t-two hundred credits, she’d l-l-l-let you back in.”

He braced himself, as if to prepare for a verbal onslaught. But Morgan pursed her lips instead.

“Two hundred? That’s not bad. Wait here.”

She turned and walked down the boardwalk, boots rapping out a dainty rhythm on the wood. She turned into a vacant storefront, pushing the door open.

Inside, a group of townspeople sat on rickety wooden chairs listening to Glyph.

“You see, government is evil. The whole idea of government is evil. Government tells you what you can or cannot do. Government prints out a certificate when you are born to prove you exist, and government prints out

another one when you die to prove you have moved on to the afterlife. Why do we give so much control over our lives to this evil, faceless, emotionless bureaucracy? Even out here on this desolate continent, hundreds of kilometers from the nearest town, you needlessly bow down and kowtow to the Courthouse back in League City. You even keep it capitalized. I've seen your writing."

He stopped and locked eyes with Morgan standing behind the back row.

She said, "I need to pay off somebody. It's important."

He nodded to a moneybag propped up in the corner nearby. It stood where he could see it even while he lectured.

She walked over and grabbed a fistful of tokens from it, then went back out the door.

On the boardwalk, she fished out two large hundred-credit pieces from the handful of tokens as she walked back over to Newt.

"Here. Hand these to that old hedge witch. Then come back out here and get me."

Newt nodded wordlessly. He took the two large tokens and walked back inside Ferguson's Freehold.

This time Oma was in the great room, wiping down tables. She looked up with a frown as the door opened.

Newt walked over to her and held out the two tokens.

A rare smile crossed Oma's face, although it looked more like a smirk from what Newt could tell. She plucked the money out of Newt's grasp, crossed the floor to the bar and handed them to her husband. He dropped the tokens into a lockbox under the counter.

"Well how 'bout that, Eddie? I guess someone *really* wants to come back in here."

Eddie nodded and smiled along with her.

Oma turned back to Newt who had followed her over to the bar.

“Tell your girlfriend she can come back. But if she so much as touches me again, or starts a fight in here with anybody, ain’t no amount of money gonna convince me to let her cross my threshold again. You hear?”

Newt’s ears reddened when Oma said “girlfriend,” but he nodded rapidly. He turned and hurried out the door.

“Like a lovesick puppy,” Oma said, snorting as the door slammed shut. “How much money do you reckon he’ll end up spendin’ on her, Eddie?”

Eddie picked up a rag and wiped down the bar, thoughtfully.

He said, “How do we know it was his money?”

“Whose else would it be?”

“Could be the old man wants somebody in here. A pretty girl is as good as any.”

“Bah. She ain’t gonna learn much. This town is Sleepy-ville.”

Newt opened the door again. This time he held it open, and Morgan strolled inside, following the lance of light flooding in before her.

She smiled brightly at the men inside, and the one frowning old woman.

“My, what a delightful place. Thank you, Mrs. Ferguson, for letting me come back in.”

“Hmph. Don’t start none, don’t break none, and you can stay. Otherwise, you get out and stay out.”

Morgan smiled at Oma sweetly as she moved deeper inside, a picture of slim feminine beauty, moving with style and liquid grace.

All male eyes in the bar fixed on her form as she approached.

Newt closed the door and followed her inside.

He smiled, too.

7.10

The bar had very few customers this time of day. But three men stared at the slim young woman with unabashed interest. No one met her eyes. Not even Eddie, who stared despite his age and his wife nearby.

Morgan sat down at one of the stools and glanced over the admittedly pitiful selection of male specimens.

Newt awkwardly sat down next to her, nodding a greeting to Eddie.

Oma scowled at the attractive figure invading her establishment, but she held her tongue. Money had bought her acquiescence, if not her approval.

Silence reigned for a moment.

Finally, Morgan broke it.

“Well . . . Isn’t anybody going to buy me a drink?”

“Aw, go on an’ get ’er somethin’, Eddie,” one of the regulars said. “Put it on my tab.”

Eddie nodded and approached Morgan, ignoring Newt.

“What’ll it be, young lady?”

“What do you have? I’d love a bourbon if you have any. On the rocks.”

Eddie nodded and turned to his sparse shelf of glass bottles along the wall. He grabbed one by the neck and returned to the bar.

“Most of our folks prefer beer, but we do carry a small selection of the hard stuff.”

He put some ice in a little glass and poured the liquid over it, then placed the drink in front of her.

Morgan took a dainty sip, every eye in the place glued to her.

“Ahh! That’s really good.”

She turned and smiled at the lovestruck young man by her side.

“Do you want anything, Newt?”

He shook his head, not trusting his tongue.

Morgan stretched, arching her back and making her chest pop out. All eyes went down again.

“So . . . who wants to tell me all about this lovely little town of yours?”

-+-

Casper turned to one of his subordinates, an older man he trusted.

“You’ve got the place.”

The old fellow nodded and Casper walked out. He headed for the outdoor stairs, leading up to the street, and passed a few people going to his bar.

“Overlord. How are you, sir?”

“Good to see you, Overlord. It’s payday!”

He nodded, but did not smile at each person greeting him.

Out on the street he turned toward the steps leading up and into the apartments. A man guarding the stoop scrambled to his feet, almost knocking his chair over.

“Overlord!”

At this sudden display of obsequy, Casper smirked. He walked past the man and entered the ground floor hallway.

He walked down to the middle door on the right and opened it.

In stark contrast to the dreariness and dust in the hall, the interior of Casper’s apartment looked bright and clean and well apportioned with leather sofas and chairs in the drawing room.

He walked past two prostitutes he allowed to stay here, both napping on different couches and in various states of undress, and headed for his bedroom.

There he turned and locked the door, then approached a massive four corner bed. Lace filigree decorated the top and sheer white curtains draped along the sides.

With a grunt, he reached down and pushed the bed over half a meter. He placed the flat of his palm on a wooden plank and waited a moment as a hidden scanner in the floor read his print.

A click sounded and several planks swung up, revealing an artfully concealed trap door.

He pulled a rectangular box out, slightly larger than three shoeboxes combined. He ignored the money bags filled with large credit tokens stolen from First Galactic Bank.

The box had a simple latch. He opened it, revealing row after row of aerosol dispensers.

He smiled, and reached in, taking out the top row and placing them back in his hiding place.

Satisfied, he closed the box, then swung the lid of the hidden door closed again, making sure it locked. He stood up and walked to the other side of the bed, shoving it back into its former position.

Satisfied, he picked up the large box and headed for the door.

In the drawing room, as he headed for the hall, one of the women stirred.

“Overlord? Are you coming home early tonight? Will you stay for a while right now?”

“No. Not right now. I’ve got to send a package somewhere.”

She repositioned herself to look more inviting on the couch in an effort to dissuade him from leaving. He ignored her and walked out.

The guard scrambled to his feet again, but Casper ignored him, too. On the sidewalk, he turned and headed for the fairgrounds as the shrouded sun sank lower in the sky.

One of the sky trains would be there, he knew. Almost always, at least one of them was there, having just arrived or getting ready to leave again.

League City served as the central settlement on the entire planet. People came and left from here, although far fewer now that migration was halted. Supplies were sent out to the outer settlements. On occasion, goods made their way back here, especially if an agent waited to receive the products and bring them for sale to the giant bazaar on the other side of town.

Casper cared little about all that. He headed for the fairgrounds with a blank face, but his steps remained determined.

As he left the buildings behind and entered the vast green space, he ignored the booths and the barkers hawking souvenirs and other goods. Instead, he focused on the two sky train cars parked out on the grass several meters away.

He approached the men standing there, an older fellow and three bodyguards. They all watched him approach.

“Hello, my good man. Have we met before? I am Captain Isidore Montaigne, at your service. Is that a package I see in your hands? Where would you like it delivered? The distance required to safely deliver it will determine the rate, as you might imagine. You can also pay for express delivery if it is truly important.”

Casper handed it over and reached into his pocket for tokens. One of the bodyguards took the box and headed toward the luggage car with it.

“That’s going to Little York, to be delivered to Mr. Reynard Gliph, right away.”

“Ah, yes! I just dropped off Mr. Gliph and his party there not long ago. Have no worries, my good man. Your package will be in Little York before you know it!”

He looked at the large credit tokens Casper handed over with a smile on his face.

“I shall return to Little York and deliver this post haste!”

7.11

Silas stood outside the Savage's place watching the sky as the sun rose ever higher behind the thick brown haze in the upper atmosphere.

A pop! sounded. Tom appeared to one side and slightly behind Silas. He smiled and approached his farmhand.

Silas smiled back.

"How's the honeymoon goin', Mr. Savage?"

"So far so good. It's more like a working holiday. But as far as the hotel staff knows, we've been holed up in our suite the whole time, only occasionally ordering room service. They never notice when we're gone."

"That must be nice. Maybe I'll take the missus there sometime and try it out myself."

"You should, Silas. After we leave, though. I'm pretty sure we've got the whole place to ourselves at the moment. We like the solitude."

"You gonna buy that property?"

"Yeah, I've been thinking about it. Right now it's a money loser, though. I hate to throw good money after bad, you know? But we'll see how things play out. I may be able to use it, even if it's not profitable."

They heard a distant roar in the air and looked up in time to see Pulsar slowing down as the space ship approached the farm in its long descent.

“What’s on tap for this delivery?” Silas said.

“I’m not entirely sure. I think I heard something about a new solar containment unit. The engineers back on Lute keep refining things.”

The ship slowed dramatically as it approached the farmhouse, finally coming to a complete standstill up in the air. Then it lowered vertically, giant landing legs plopping into the soft soil of the pasture.

Tom and Silas walked toward it as the rear cargo door lowered. They watched as the pilot bot walked down the ramp and turned toward them.

Two more pops came in behind them as Wink and Jinxie appeared. Tom and Silas turned and waved at them, then waited for them to catch up.

“Lisa said the Pulsar came in,” Wink said. “We thought we’d come over and check things out before she leaves again.”

“We really hate she’s going off without us,” Jinxie said.

“Well, I can understand that,” Tom said. “On the other hand, that’s almost four months of your life that you’d never get back.”

Wink nodded. It was an issue the couple had discussed several times.

“It’s funny, you know,” Jinxie said. “There’s no faster than light travel. We only have ships teleporting one astronomical unit per second. And even that’s slow. It takes almost two months to get to Diego doing that. With hypertime you can speed that up to a few hours in real time. But for those actually in hypertime on the ship . . . it still takes two months.”

“We talked with Gwen’s mom about it when she was here,” Wink said.

“Turns out, she was involved at the very beginning of the invention of hypertime over at Republican Shipworks.”

Jinxie nodded enthusiastically.

“She told us they developed small prototypes at first that would work on only one person. Of course, somebody stole one and started using it to rob

people. The press called him the ‘Thief of Time,’ and he caused a lot of mischief. Mrs. Del Rio actually had a chance to use one of the early units.”

“She said it was like everybody froze, as if they were in a paused holo. She could walk around and they’d never see her because she was moving so fast. But if she looked real close, she could see they actually were moving, just at a glacial pace compared to her.”

“So, we’re doing the same thing, only in a ship. If there are any personal prototypes still lying around, the company and probably the Republican government guard them closely.”

“And now our ship is going off in hypertime without us,” Wink said.
“We’ve got mixed feelings about that. But at least we’re getting paid.”

“Well, now, that’s one way to look at it, Captain,” Silas said, grinning at the younger man.

“How’s that?”

“You’re gettin’ paid a princely sum for the company to use your ship, and you’re gettin’ all the income in one day. If you was ridin’ your ship all that ways, to you it would feel like four months. So, in a way, by stayin’ behind, you’re gettin’ paid for four months of work in just a few hours.”

The young couple stared at Silas for a moment, speechless.

Tom smiled.

“He’s right.”

“That’s a really good way of looking at it, Silas,” Wink said.

Jinxie nodded, her blue hair bobbing up and down.

“Yeah. You’ve got a lot of wisdom stored up.”

“Ah, shucks. I just see things a little different, that’s all.”

By this time, they had approached the ramp and the waiting pilot. A second bot exited the ship as they approached.

Tom looked up at the automaton coming down the ramp. He stood the same height and had the same build as the pilot, but with a different face.

“Who are you?”

“I am to serve as your bookkeeper, Mr. Raleigh.”

Tom scratched his head.

“Dad thinks I need a bookkeeper?”

“Yes. Captain Raleigh is convinced your finances are growing increasingly complex. I am programmed to accept input from your local AI and other entities. I will assist in compiling lists of assets and tracking planetary progress as well as take care of all the many facets involved in properly running your growing organization. I have the entire law datasets for Lute, StarCen and PLAIR so I can also serve as a lawbot if need be, regardless of which governmental system this planet eventually joins.”

“Ah. Okay, that is handy. Where would you like to set up?”

“Anywhere convenient. I will only need a data terminal and holo.”

“Alright. We don’t have any offices to speak of, at the moment. But I think I know of a good place you can start.”

Tom turned to the droid pilot.

“And what did you bring us, besides a bookkeeper?”

“A new SCU, a hundred thousand more MicaBots, and a lot more food. Also four new Class Eight power packs.”

“Okay.”

Tom touched the implant under his ear.

“Lisa? Please send Henry over here so he can unload everything for us.”

An hour later, Tom and Silas stared at a huge cube out in the desert, three times larger than the previous solar containment units.

“So . . . it can hold a bigger star chunk?” Silas said in awe. Henry reached down and connected a line to an equally large charging platform next to the giant SCU.

“Yeah, from what I understand it can hold a bigger chunk, charge things faster, and we can now do three Class Eights simultaneously on this one.”

Silas stared at the cubic monstrosity mounted on a solid rock platform the MicaBots had built for it, thirty meters from the nearest previous SCU.

“How much did that thing cost, Mr. Savage?”

“I don’t know. I bet our new accountant bot knows. Ask him next time you see him.”

“Where did you end up puttin’ him?”

“For right now, he’s in one of the space capsules we’re using for storage. It was either that or put him in my old bedroom in the house. I kinda figured Gwen wouldn’t want that, when we come back home. I don’t think he sleeps, to be honest. It would kinda wig her out with a droid doing paperwork all night in the room next door. So, out in the storage shed he goes. I guess we need to get an office at some point.”

“I believe there’s some retail space available in Little York, Mr. Savage.”

“That’s an idea. Maybe we could sneak him into a vacant storefront somewhere. I don’t think the townsfolk are ready for a bot to be living with them, either. At least, not one that they know about.”

“Either that, or maybe you could buy that hotel sooner than you’re thinkin’.”

“Now you’re talking like an entrepreneur, Silas.”

7.12

A round lunchtime, Gliph rode into town with Morgan and Newt following him.

As usual, they left their horses at Cajun Cal's then took the wooden sidewalk along the lengthy retail building on the right.

Already, their presence in the frontier town had normalized. Everybody knew who Reynard Gliph was, and they greeted him politely.

Everyone certainly knew who Morgan was. Men and women alike openly stared at her.

Today she wore black shorts, despite the brisk cold wind blowing from the north, and a midriff-baring cotton top split down the middle.

It looked like a style more at home on a model than for someone out here in the middle of nowhere. So said one little old lady after passing her on the boardwalk.

The next woman informed her she was dressed all wrong to her face.

“Girl, you’re gonna freeze to death out here! Put some clothes on!”

The motherly figure chiding Morgan looked to be in her mid-40s. She wore a solid brown dress down to her ankles made entirely from wool, and had chosen a bonnet to match.

Morgan smiled politely at her. Several others stood nearby the entrance to the town's general store.

“Oh, don't worry. I'm very warm-natured. In fact, I feel a little hot right now. I'm going to the bar to cool down, if anyone wants to join me there.”

This last breathless sentence she directed at the men nearby who were all staring at her chest.

Newt, standing behind her, said nothing. But he looked miserable.

The matronly scold glanced at him, as if appealing to male authority. But he had none. He did not make eye contact with her.

With a loud, “Hmph!” the woman stepped off the boardwalk and into the dusty street so she did not have to brush up against Morgan. They walked off in opposite directions.

At his favorite vacant storefront, Gliph turned and smiled at Morgan, now further behind. He did not wait for her and Newt, but stepped inside. Already, a handful of people waiting to hear him speak had gathered. More old wooden chairs had been procured for the two dozen people assembled.

“Good morning everyone! Or is it afternoon? Either way, lunch will be here shortly! Have a seat, have a seat. How are you today?”

Out on the sidewalk, Morgan and Newt came up. The door shut, blocking off his voice.

Morgan traded a glance with Newt.

“I guess we've got to get everyone food, first.”

He nodded, not trusting his tongue.

She grabbed his hand and led him out into the street. They walked over to the end of town where Ferguson's Freehold stood.

Newt's expression changed instantly when she held his hand, to one of pure bliss. He walked taller, and with a spring in his step as they approached the entrance to the public house.

Inside, several more men waited than usual this time of day. They all turned and gave Morgan the male gaze. She smiled, absorbing their attention.

“I am so thirsty!” she said, approaching the bar.

Six men turned to Eddie, offering to put whatever the little lady wanted on their tab.

The door to the kitchen swung open and Oma came out, carrying a cardboard box filled with food trays.

She turned to Newt who stood waiting for the meals.

“Thirty lunches. Is that old coot payin’ for it or are you?”

“He g-g-gave me the money, Mrs. Ferguson.”

“Good. Hand it over.”

He pulled the tokens Gliph had given him out of his pocket. Oma put the box of food trays down and took the tokens, making them disappear in an apron pocket.

She glared at Morgan, now the center of all attention at the bar. But the extra lunch sales for Gliph, and the additional bar traffic the scantily clad woman brought, seemed to override her obvious distaste.

Oma turned back to Newt who stared at the scene with a distraught look on his face.

The old woman sighed.

“Well, go on and bring those over to his little conference, before everything gets cold. I’ll make sure no one runs off with her.”

The tips of Newt’s ears turned pink. But he nodded and picked up the box. Then he headed for the door.

Out on the street, the few passersby nodded at him in recognition. He ignored them all, heading quickly back to the vacant storefront.

He held the box awkwardly with one arm while opening the door. Everyone inside turned to look and smiled.

“Ah, lunch is served! Set it down on the table over there, Newt. There’s a good man.”

Everyone stood up and made their way to the table where Newt placed the box, grabbing trays of food, napkins and polystyrene forks.

Several trays were left over after everyone returned to their chairs. Newt grabbed one with the look of a man taking a tip for his work.

He stood in the back near the table while Gliph resumed his position up front.

“I know some of you are worried about taxes. But you needn’t be. At present you send money to the Courthouse. And what do you get for that, exactly?”

A woman up front, listening in rapt attention, raised her hand. She had not yet ripped the top off her food tray, choosing instead to focus on every word Gliph said since he was speaking again.

“A subsidized sky train network?”

Gliph snorted.

“They don’t subsidize it for passengers. At least not much. I won’t bore you with how much I spent getting myself and my colleagues out this far. I suppose you spent the same. The entire Southside Projects are filled with people who cannot afford the fare to actually leave League City. What else?”

Silence filled the room as the audience racked their collective brains, trying to come up with something.

“The commlink?” a man threw out, hesitantly.

“Yes, I’m sure that expensive commlink back to League City is worth all the money you send their way.”

“Well, we don’t send that much, to be honest.”

“You shouldn’t be sending *any* money is my point. You are not getting anything for it. Nothing of substance, anyway. Look, this planet is

unaligned. We can decide to do what we want. We have a golden opportunity here. Let's not waste it."

Among the crowd, several people nodded their heads while eating.

Newt downed the food on his tray quickly and headed for the door, electing to return to the public house rather than wallow in more political rhetoric.

Inside Ferguson's Freehold, he found the men at the bar squeezed in tight around Morgan. She was nursing her third drink, now.

"No, I got a buzz. I just need to keep it going now, y'all. No more drinks for now. Newt!"

She had seen the morose young man walk in.

"Come over here, Newt! Do y'all know Newt Dalmont? He's so nice."

Yes, everybody in the place knew Newt. Some of the men pressing in close to Morgan glared at him as she brought him back to the bar, displacing them in proximity to this extremely attractive young woman.

"He has the *best* place out in the country near here. We're all staying in one of his brother's houses!"

Oma came through the door of the kitchen wearing her usual dour expression. She moved behind the bar to avoid the press of male flesh, and approached Morgan.

"There's a package delivery comin' this afternoon from League City for Mr. Gliph. Express delivery on the Jet Stream. I guess ol' Montaigne didn't have nothin' better to do."

Morgan's face lit up in a sinister smile.

"Oh, good. This is what we've been waiting for."

7.13

After lunch, Tom and Silas met up again. Both appeared within seconds of each other behind Tom's farmhouse.

"We've got to do some work this afternoon. Ready for it?"

Silas nodded and said, "Where's your lady?"

"Taking a nap back at the hotel. She said she wasn't going to pass up an opportunity for vacation sleep. Where's yours?"

"She said somebody needs to check on the trees. They're makin' more sap. We still got a ways to go before we get another round of syrup, though."

Tom nodded and the two men braced for teleportation.

This time they appeared in Warehouse 14 in League City, the flatbed truck parked nearby and loaded up with three large power packs.

Henry, the big yellow bot with a cubic midsection and head, sat on the back of the bed with his legs dangling off the edge.

Silas looked around the warehouse space as Tom walked over to the large door to open it.

"Where's Ms. Stonecipher?"

"She's gone on ahead. We're replacing three units in the Projects today."

“Oh.”

Silas looked crestfallen. He checked the gun holstered at his side, making sure the weapon remained fully charged.

“No worries,” Tom said, smiling at him. “I think those Southsiders are more scared of Night Shadow than a couple repair guys carrying guns.”

They climbed up into the truck and Tom carefully pulled out of the warehouse.

Several minutes later, the truck left Courthouse Square and Tom headed toward the projects.

“Looky there,” Silas said, pointing. “Ain’t that Ms. Stonecipher’s boyfriend?”

“You’re right. It’s Ashley Thallus. I wonder what he’s doing on this side of town?”

As they floated slowly by Ash on the street, they watched him turn and walk up the steps of the first apartment building on their left.

“Maybe he’s after a story or some such.”

Tom nodded, then turned his attention back to driving.

“We’ll ask Haley when we see her if she knows anything about Ash wandering around on this side of town.”

Soon they pulled up to a building in the projects with darkened lights. Tom parked near the door and they both got out.

Meeting around back of the truck, Tom had Henry get down. The big load bot carefully put his feet on the ground and the back end of the vehicle lifted up as soon as he shifted his weight off.

“Look up there,” Tom said, pointing to the rooftop across the street.

Silas glanced up and saw Haley, dressed all in black, standing near the roof’s ledge and watching them.

“Well, alright. I guess we got some protection, huh Mr. Savage?”

“Yeah. Like I said, I bet people around here will be more concerned about her than the guns at our sides.”

He pointed to the stairs leading down into the basement.

“Come on, Henry. Let’s go get the first power pack.”

Slowly, ponderously, the heavy metal robot made his way down the stairs, his yellow bulk disappearing below the sidewalk. Tom and Silas followed.

In the basement of the darkened building, Silas fished out a flashlight from his pocket and squeezed past the robot. He walked down to the center of the building and turned to the left, at the locked door they expected to find just like in the other buildings.

Tom followed Henry patiently until the hulking bot came to a halt near the door, then he squeezed past. By that time, Silas had opened the door. He shined the light at a dusty Class Eight, a heavy rectangular unit roughly the size of a large bed, sitting in the middle of the room.

“Well, there she is. I’ll unplug it.”

A voice from the stairs outside drifted down into the power room.

“They went in here. I see a light.”

Silas shined his light in Tom’s face.

Tom sighed.

“I’ll go check it out.”

He stepped back into the hall and peered around Henry’s side. Two thugs moved through the dark hallway.

“There’s one!”

Thoop!

A red bolt splattered into Henry’s back, the energy fizzling out.

Tom took a step back, the force of the bolt pushing down on his flesh.

A loud *pop!* sounded behind the gunmen, the displaced air echoing in the enclosed space.

Haley Stonecipher appeared, clad all in black.

The gunmen turned, but her body blocked out light from the door. Before the closest one could shoot, her force bracers powered up and she punched him in the stomach, the power of her blow lifting him up off his feet.

The first man, the one who shot at Henry and Tom, squeezed his trigger reflexively.

Thoop!

A bolt flashed red in the hallway, slamming into the second man. Haley let his corpse slump to the floor. She took a step for the gunman.

Thoop! Pop!

Lisa ported her to the side, and the next bolt sailed past her.

The gunman shifted his aim to the left and fired again.

Thoop! Pop!

This time, Lisa ported Haley to the other side of the hall. She reached out and activated her tractor beam. The man's gun ripped out of his grip and sailed over to hers.

She rushed forward, closing the gap, and lashed out with a quick strike to his throat.

The man collapsed, gurgling. Haley tucked his gun in her back waistband.

She peered down at the fallen man using her night vision. He quit gurgling.

"I think I broke his neck. I guess I used too much force on that blow."

Tom peeked around the side of Henry, his eyes adjusting to the gloom.

"Thank you for saving us, Night Shadow!"

She pointed a finger at him in the dark.

“Don’t start.”

“What?”

“You know what. I’m going back up to the roof. Lisa and I will keep an eye out for anybody else.”

She disappeared with a final *pop!*

Tom sighed and looked down at the two dark shapes on the floor of the hall.

“Henry, pick up those bodies and take them upstairs. Just . . . put them on the sidewalk somewhere out of the way.”

The big robot pivoted in place and slowly tromped back toward the door. He paused and picked up the first dead man with one hand, then took another step and grabbed the second one. Slowly, he advanced to the outer door, then turned and climbed the stairs.

Silas stuck his head out from the power room.

“You know, Mr. Savage. I never realized bein’ in the electric business could be so dangerous.”

“It’ll get better. Once we finish swapping out units in these cheap project buildings, the other ones shouldn’t have many people looking to mean us harm every time we show up.”

“I’m lookin’ forward to that.”

7.14

More people had trickled into the vacant storefront to listen to Gliph, who now stood atop an overturned bucket, giving him a height advantage.

“So, listen. I aim to make this a better place. I intend to shape this community into a shining beacon of light, so we can show the rest of the planet, and eventually the entire galaxy, what a true paradise looks like.

“Now, some of you may think a paradise is ruled by the strict laws of socialism, where everyone’s earnings are in the grip of the State and redistributed. Others of you may think a paradise is more libertarian, where you’d prefer the local government to maintain basic law and order but otherwise leave you alone. But I’m here to tell you today, there’s something better.”

He paused dramatically as a few people stirred in their seats. The door opened and another handful of townsfolk walked in. The free lunches were gone, but they greeted their friends and neighbors and grabbed the last few empty chairs.

“No government is the best way to go for this community. No government at all. No one to tell you what to do. No one to demand you send your hard-earned money back to League City with nothing in return to show for it. This is what I’m talking about. True freedom! You’re right on the cusp of it

out here on the periphery of a frontier planet. I'm just here to encourage that you reach out and grab it for yourselves."

An older man wearing blue jean overalls and a cotton flannel shirt, sitting on the front row, raised his hand.

"Well now, just hold on a second, Mr. Glyph. What kind of anarchy are you proposing we establish out here in Little York?"

"I'm sorry. What kind of anarchy? There is only anarchy, Mr. . . .?"

"Schenck. Giuseppe Schenck. My wife and I have a place north of town. And no sir, there's all kinds of anarchy. It's kinda like ice cream. There's multiple flavors of it, don'tcha know."

A few in the crowd chuckled.

"You tell 'im, Gus. Edumacate us."

"Why, sure. There's all kinds. You've got anarcho-communism. That's your classic classless state, with no property and everything shared in kind. It inevitably leads to totalitarianism, because somebody has to lead from the top, and that somebody grabs all the power for themselves. Nature abhors a vacuum.

"Collectivist anarchists like Bakunin sought to fuse the notions of a communal collectivism with individual liberty. It didn't work out too well. Then you got your pure individual anarchists, where it's sort of every man for himself. Rights of the individual trump all else, including the collective's. That's your Emma Goldman brand of anarchy. She founded Mother Earth and was sort of a domestic terrorist back in the day. Well, I guess just about all them old anarchists were into violence and stuff. Always assassinatin' somebody or blowin' somethin' up."

Everyone stared at Gus.

He kept his eyes up front, ignoring the attention.

"So, which kind of anarchist are you, Mr. Glyph?"

"I . . . am just an anarchist, Mr. Schenck. I am here to guide you all to a better world. One in which you can do what you want and enjoy life

without having to pay anyone taxes or owe anything whatsoever to any outside governmental entity. That is what I want for this entire planet!”

“With you in charge?”

“Yes, Mr. Schenck! I will lead you all to a far greater tomorrow.”

“So, we’re talking anarcho-communism, then.”

Gus stood up, pushing his wooden seat back.

“Well, I’m out. That there is too close to the regular kind of communism, if you ask me.”

A few people muttered in the crowd as Gus headed for the door.

“No, no, no!” Gliph said. “This is not communism! This is anarchy! There is no ruling party, no central committee deciding things.”

Gus turned and locked eyes with him from the door.

“Well, now, you’re deciding things, are you not?”

“Yes, but . . . you need somebody to show you the way! I am that person. It is my life’s goal to establish anarchy . . . where are you going?”

“To borrow something from the Bard, Mr. Gliph, a dictatorship by any other name . . . smells the same.”

The farmer opened the door and walked outside, closing it softly behind him.

Others stood up as well, following Gus Schenck’s lead.

“I don’t like the sound of collectivism,” one woman in her late 40s said as she stood up to leave. “I came out here with my husband to start a farm and make it on our own. We don’t want to be forced into communal farming. I’ve heard too many horror stories!”

“But this isn’t . . .”

Gliph trailed off as more people stood up to leave.

One of the men said, “It’s a nice idea. I mean, it sounds good. Maybe if you pitched it more along the lines of individual anarchy, like Gus was talkin’ about . . . well, I don’t understand all the different flavors of it, like he was talkin’ about.”

“There are no different forms or types of anarchy . . .”

“Are you sure? That fella who shot that archduke back in the day . . . what type of anarchist was he?”

Someone else said, “And didn’t an anarchist shoot one of the American presidents somewhere around that time, too?”

Gliph watched in dismay as the crowd left, dissecting the whole notion of anarchy thanks to one farmer’s dismissal of it all.

Still sitting, though, were five men and one woman scattered among the empty chairs.

One of those fellows said, “It all sounds good to me. I like that ‘no economic inequality’ bit. Some people have too much stuff. I’d like to get some of the redistribution off of them, if I could. Folks that don’t need so much can just hand it over to me.”

The others nodded enthusiastically, a hint of greed flashing in their eyes.

The door opened again and everyone turned to look.

Morgan walked in with a big smile on her face. Newt followed her, as usual. This time, he carried a large polyresin box.

“Our shipment just came in from Casper,” Morgan said. “He says it works as expected!”

Relief washed over Gliph’s face.

“Bring it up here, then. Let’s put the formula to work.”

7.15

N ewt set the box down on a chair and stepped back, uncertain as to the significance of its content.

Gliph eagerly opened the top and looked inside.

“Ah, yes. Good, good. Did he say anything about dosage? How long does each dispersal unit last? Anything like that?”

“No. Here’s his note. He just says it works.”

Morgan handed over a slip of paper with a few words scrawled on it.

“Very good. Well, we shall find out, shall we?”

Gliph pulled out one of the rectangular aerosol dispensers. He turned and looked at the half dozen people still in the room.

“My vision for this planet is to have the first world in the known galaxy set up entirely as an anarchist society. Many have tried with colonies and there was a brief effort on a lonely space station or two, but all before now have failed. I believe they failed because the founders did not think big enough. A single settlement on a planet is not enough. Whatever system the planet aligns with will squash dissent from its primary governmental body. So an island somewhere practicing anarchy will not last forever. A city by itself

certainly will not last long. No, what we need is an entire planet devoted to anarchy!”

The men nodded. The woman smiled at him, her eyes never leaving his.

“But how does one convince an entire planet’s population to embrace this enlightened philosophy? That is where the X’s and O’s have struggled over the years. Indeed, that is where all anarchists have failed in the past, especially when the ruling system is already in place. So here we are, on a new planet, one as yet unaligned with a major system. And even here, where I have concentrated most of my followers, we cannot gain much of a foothold in power. The system was already firmly established. I’m speaking of the Courthouse, that always-capitalized entity in League City. My followers have managed to sway elections only. Elections! As if our human capital could only be spent in a democratic way. Is that anarchy? I think not.”

Gliph glanced over the room. The seated audience gave him their attention. These were the true believers who seemed attracted to his message and were willing to stick around for more.

Morgan stared daggers at the lone woman still seated, as if sizing up her competition and finding her better looking than expected. She stood off to the side with Newt, who seemed bored. Obviously, the stammering young man had little interest in politics or planetary revolutions or anything else of the sort.

“So how do we get to anarchy on a planetwide basis? We start with the outer settlements, like this one. We can try to use coercion and take over by force. But we tried that and failed. I only brought 10 people with me. Just as thousands in the largest city are not enough to effect the change I need back there, a mere handful will not result in the desired outcome here.

“We can try to use reason. We can try to convince you all with the soundness of my political notions. While I firmly believe I’m right, such an effort would take too much time. Look at today’s meeting. Only a small percentage of you remain after the mere hint of a counterpoint was offered. No, my friends. One can never win over a large population to one single point of view, not through reason alone. Especially not with anarchy.”

He glanced at each seated person, breathing more rapidly now during his speech.

“But I am not a man without resources. We brought tools with us when we migrated to this world. I shall endeavor to bring about change through a different method than reason or force.”

He held up the canister and smiled.

“I present to you a third option. Bioenhancements.”

The audience blinked in confusion.

Newt stifled a yawn. He glanced at the door as if deciding whether he should leave or not. Then he glanced back at Morgan and decided to stay.

“I want each of you, if you are truly intent on helping me bring about anarchy on this planet, to take a good whiff of this aerosol spray. It will empower you to do things you otherwise could not. This was a tincture devised for combat, to enhance the minds of soldiers. With it, with you my followers empowered by it, we shall take over this town together!”

Without waiting for their assent, Gliph stepped forward. He pressed the button on top and sprayed the face of the woman in the front row. A red mist surrounded the front of her head.

She leaned back in surprise, coughing. The mist followed, seeping into her mouth and nose.

He quickly sprayed the face of the man behind her, then the fellow sitting next to him.

For the final three, he pushed through the chairs to the back row. The first man leaned forward to get a good whiff of the red mist, eager to see what this was all about.

The second man leaned back. Gliph took a lunging step and reached out with the container before spraying his face.

The last man stood up quickly, knocking over his chair. He took several steps backward, bumping into the chair with the back of his leg.

“I don’t want that!”

Morgan drew her pistol and walked quickly toward him, aiming it at his head.

Newt suddenly grew alert, casting off his drowsiness.

“Take it or die,” Morgan said, her finger tight on the trigger.

The last man looked down the muzzle of her gun, his Adam’s apple bobbing up and down.

While he looked at the gun, Gliph took another step and sprayed his face, enveloping it in red mist. The man took two more steps back, making chairs scrape on the floor.

Then he stopped, hands covering his face, surrounded in a red mist.

Gliph turned to smile at Morgan.

He said, “We now know that one container holds at least six doses.”

The woman in front recovered first. She took a deep, shuddering breath and stood up.

Gliph made his way through the empty chairs back over to her. The men behind her followed suit soon after. He watched as even the last resistant fellow let his hands go down.

All six still had a red haze floating in front of their eyes.

The whites of their eyes were no longer white, but red. And their irises vibrated as they stared at Gliph.

“Very good,” Gliph said. “You alone heard what I had to say and you embraced it! You know that anarchy is the best way, that the ideal form of government is no government at all! But your friends . . . your fellow citizens do not agree. What is *wrong* with them?”

The man in back snarled. The woman curled her lips down in a frown.

“Why are they so stupid? They’re idiots!”

More snarls.

“We shall rename this town Allegory, for an allegory is what it will be, to the entire planet. A symbol, a moral . . . a *lesson* for others.”

He paused dramatically. The six stared at him, their anger building, their eyes vibrating.

“And you shall be the one delivering the lesson. Now go out there and wreak havoc on those who will not accept the truth!”

With a roar, half a dozen people raced for the door, knocking over chairs.

They poured through the door and out into the street, screaming.

Bloodthirsty.

7.16

“**W**h-wh-what just happened?”

Newt looked bewildered.

Gliph turned to him and smiled.

“Let us see if there is a seventh dosage,” he said, taking a step toward the youngest Dalmont.

He clicked the button in Newt’s face . . .

Nothing happened.

Disappointment crossed Gliph’s face.

“Ah. Six it is, then. Very well. I suppose one cannot be too fortunate in life. No matter.”

He tossed the empty dispenser aside, letting it fall on the floor, and pulled out another one.

Morgan said, “No. Stop.”

She moved to intercept him, stepping in between Gliph and Newt.

“Oh? Is he your favorite, then, Morgan?”

“He’s sweet. And innocent. As well, we need his brothers and their voluntary cooperation. That may not happen if you dose him up. Leave Newt with me. I’ll take care of him. I claim full responsibility for him.”

She turned and said the last part while smiling at Newt. He gave her a confused look back.

Gliph frowned, but he lowered his hand.

“Very well. However, my good Morgan, I imagine those six we just released will not last long among those gun-happy frontier types in this town. I am going out to recruit more to our side, whether they are willing or not.”

He walked over and grabbed several more dispensers out of the box and stuffed them in his pocket.

“It’s too bad that one farmer had to get all political on us, or I would have had more within easy reach. I could have had the whole room. Since when do farmers get political? They’re hayseeds out in the hinterlands. Who does he think he is, lecturing to us on the ‘flavors’ of anarchy? No matter.”

Gliph walked out the open door. Screams drifted in from further down the street.

“Oh, ho ho! My people are already at work! I’m coming, citizens of Allegory! You will cherish living in anarchy soon enough!”

He headed down the boardwalk in the direction of the screams and scattered gunfire.

“Wh-wh-what’s going on?”

Newt looked baffled, and alarmed. He watched Gliph go and turned back to Morgan with questioning eyes.

“Oh, Newt, don’t worry about it. This is all part of our plan.”

Morgan came over and gave him a full body hug. He physically relaxed somewhat, with the frontal contact. She felt him loosen up, the tension in his shoulders easing.

“Now, just relax and let’s stay in here for a while. Rey doesn’t need us right now, so we can just enjoy ourselves. ”

“S-s-stay in here?”

“Yes.”

She left him for a moment and walked over to the door, pulling it closed. The sounds of gunfire grew muffled.

Looking around the room, her eyes lighted on one of the old chairs. She walked over and picked it up, then returned to the door.

“This is an easily defensible area, Newt. Thankfully, there are no windows. Help me barricade this door.”

Stunned, Newt watched her grab another chair. Then he snapped out of it and hurried over to help.

-+ -

Gliph hurried down the boardwalk toward a fight. One of the men he sprayed slugged another man in the stomach, over and over again.

The victim weakly swung back, but his attacker kicked him in the knee. As the man went down to the planks, the red-faced assailant kicked him in the face, drawing blood this time.

Satisfied with the progress of the fight, Gliph smiled and stepped off the sidewalk to cross the street. Here, a hand-painted sign hanging from the awning covering the boardwalk read “Barber,” with red and white swirls painted on both sides.

Another misted man banged on the door.

Glass shattered as someone inside shoved a gun through the window.

Thoop! Thoop!

Green bolts slammed into the assailant. He keeled over, falling on his back.

“Oh my,” Gliph murmured. “We can’t afford to lose one so quickly, can we?”

He hurried over to the barbershop.

“Don’t shoot! Don’t shoot! Let me in!”

“It’s Mr. Gliph, boys! Open the door.”

He heard the sound of a lock releasing and the door swung wide. Gliph walked inside to find three barbers in smocks and two men, one with a half-finished haircut, the other with shaving cream slathered all over his face.

“What’s goin’ on out there, Mr. Gliph? We saw Clive Hoshikawa beat the snot out of someone right outside our door, then he headed inside toward us! I managed to lock the door but . . . What in the wide world is goin’ on out there?”

“I have the answer right here, my friends. Come closer, all of you.”

Gliph pulled out a dispenser and held it up.

“This is the source of everything. Past, present and future!”

The men gathered around, staring dubiously at the canister in Gliph’s hand.

He stretched out, holding it under the first man’s face. Gliph clicked the button repeatedly, spraying each man’s face in a blur. Red clouds of mist flew in all their faces.

Gliph stepped back, waiting for the artificial microbes to activate.

When the haze settled around them as their eyes grew red, he smiled in triumph.

“We will make this town over in a new image, and we will make it the way *we* want it to be. The way I want it to be. No longer shall this town be known as Little York. Henceforth, this . . . is . . . Allegory!”

The men grew visibly agitated. They looked at one another, irises vibrating.

“Those left out there who are not like us, those who are not red with anger . . . They want to take away your Allegory! They want to return to the old

ways, the old ways of oppression!”

The men screamed in rage, now with a target for their ire.

“Go out there and kill anyone not with us! If they don’t have red in their face, kill them! Go! Go! Go forth and kill!”

Screaming in rage, the men raced out the door and into the street. They scattered, looking for somebody . . . anybody . . .

Gliph followed them out the door at a much slower pace.

He smiled as more screams drifted up and down the street.

7.17

Tom appeared with a pop in the Phaethonian Hotel's honeymoon suite.

His bride Gwen lay belly down on the huge bed, legs bent at the knees and feet up in the air, chin on the top of her hands as she gazed at her personal holo.

She looked over her shoulder at him and smiled.

"How'd it go?"

"The usual. People wanting to kill us in the Projects. Haley took care of things, though. Also, Henry is pretty much blaster-proof. He makes for a good shield. He blocks practically the whole hallway."

"Maybe we can move on to other buildings soon. I don't think they used the best power packs on the Projects."

"Yeah, hopefully people won't be bent on killing us in other places."

"Lisa says this hotel's power is almost kaput."

"Oh really? They must be losing money hand over fist. I bet the power pack going out will put them over the top."

"Maybe we can pick it up cheap," Gwen said with a smile.

“Well, I don’t like to kick a guy when he’s down. I say we make a reasonable offer. I mean, it’s not like this is some historic property that’s been in the same family for decades. Everything’s still kinda new on this planet.”

“What would we do with a hotel, anyway? If it’s not making money now, it’s not going to be making money when we take it over. If anything, it’ll be a drain on our finances.”

“I’ve been thinking about that. This place is huge, and you’re right. It’s never gonna be filled with guests. Well, maybe in 10 years or so, if immigration picks back up and ocean commerce gets going through the port here in New Galveston. In the meantime, it’s too much wasted space. So, I think if we bought it, we should convert the upstairs to office space for us. At least partly.”

“Office space?”

“Yeah. The thought occurred to me when I was setting up the accounting bot Dad sent with this last shipment. I had to put him in the space capsule out behind the house.”

“Why’d you put him there?”

“Do you want him in our spare bedroom?”

“Oh. Yeah, we could use an office. Still, this would be one gigantic office space. If it’s too big of a hotel, it’s probably too big for that, too. Especially since we’re small fry. We’re not some giant global conglomerate. Not yet, anyway.”

“Yeah, but I was thinking it would allow the hotel staff to focus more on the lower floor. We’d keep the top floor off limits and they wouldn’t have to clean it or anything. Meanwhile, as we grow, we’d have more space for any new employees, should they come along.”

“New Galveston is not exactly the same big hub of commerce as League City, though. At least, not until all that commerce they think will happen actually does happen.”

“True. But if it’s just us, we can keep porting in and out. Maybe by the time we get a bunch of employees, we won’t have to keep Lisa a secret anymore. Then people can port all around the world as much as they like. For a small fee, of course, just like they do in the Republic and in the Alliance.”

“That’s going to wreak havoc with the sky trains if it ever happens.”

“Yeah, well . . . there’s no real hurry at the moment to go about crashing the local economy or anything. Besides, I’ve heard Captain Montaigne say himself that he expects that day to come sooner or later. Besides, from what I understand, older technologies never really die off right away when newer ones come along. They just get cheaper.”

“Okay, that’s true. I suppose it works for transportation methods as well. People still took slower modes even after airplanes were invented.”

“Right. Fares may fall, but the sky trains will probably stick around for a good long while.”

“Well, I’m glad we were able to solve all the world’s potential economic problems in one sitting. Or at least their transportation ones.”

Tom shrugged and smiled.

“It’s what we do, right?”

He moved in and hugged her, then kissed her.

Gwen pulled back and said, “I wouldn’t mind living here. Or even just visiting every day. The food’s great. That restaurant is divine, especially after so many box meals. Let’s have an early supper tonight.”

“Okay. I’m still on Little York time, I guess. It feels early, although it’s already evening here.”

“Come on. They’re serving beef tips again tonight.”

She hopped out of bed and pulled him by the hand toward the door. He smiled and followed, humoring her.

Out in the hall, a man dressed in the hotel’s uniform of a blue tunic with yellow collar and cuffs stood up from a chair placed discreetly in an alcove.

“Mr. and Mrs. Savage. Can I get you anything?”

“No thanks, we’re just headed down to the restaurant,” Gwen said.

“They’re serving beef tips tonight!”

The servant nodded and remained standing as the couple passed him by, heading for the stairs.

The minute they walked out of sight, he picked up a com and whispered an alert to others in the building, including those downstairs about the couple’s imminent arrival.

Moments later, Tom and Gwen entered the hotel’s luxurious restaurant on the ground floor. Duly alerted, everyone was ready for them. Two servants at the door greeted them with smiles as they walked in. Another led them to a private booth under chandeliers shining with just enough light to make the entire restaurant appear cozy, despite the fact they were the only customers here.

Soon their food came out, accompanied by the chef himself, who wanted to make sure it was presented just right. He spoke a few obsequious words with them and, assured himself they were quite happy with the food, and promptly returned to the kitchen.

“There’s just nobody here,” Gwen said when they were alone again. “It’s a shame if this place does close. How are they paying all these employees without losing money every day? And where are these folks going to get jobs? There isn’t anything else on this level anywhere near here.”

“Yeah, it’s a dilemma. I think one of the reasons Dad sent that accountant droid our way was to help figure things like this out.”

“You think?”

“Yeah, it’s a classic entrepreneur’s struggle. You got your idea guys and you got your detail-oriented guys. A good entrepreneur can handle both, but at some point running the business overrides everything else. So a good entrepreneur dreaming up ways to make money gets bogged down running the place and dealing with all the administivia. This number cruncher Dad sent can help us solve issues like keeping a bunch of hotel workers

employed while I focus on making Phaethon Solar Corp the best company it can be.”

Gwen smiled and leaned over to kiss him.

“While *we* make it the best it can be. You’re married now, Mr. Savage.”

“That I am.”

“Thomas?”

Tom looked up at the voice inside his ear, startled. He glanced around to make sure nobody could hear them.

“Yes, Lisa?”

“There are things going on at Little York you should know about.”

7.18

Four red-faced men charged Ferguson's Freehold, screaming bloody murder.

Guns blasted out from windows on either side of the door, knocking them down.

For a moment, silence filled the street.

Then reddened faces peered around porch columns and from behind horses tied at the rails, snarling at the door to the public house.

Morgan peeked out from the vacant storefront. She had moved enough furniture to get close and still jump out of the way if anybody saw her and ran for their door.

Behind her, Newt fidgeted nervously.

"Wh-wh-what's goin' on?"

He danced on both feet, trying to see over and around her head.

"Reynard has turned several more people, it looks like. But the remaining townies are barricaded like we are. Everyone who's not dead or red is holed up in the pub or another shop, looks like."

“T-t-terrible. This is all t-t-terrible. He’s a b-b-bad man, Morgan! I hate him, that M-M-Mr. Glyph.”

Morgan carefully shut the door and then stepped back so she could wedge some furniture back against it.

Satisfied with the blockage, she turned to face the youngest Dalmont brother once more.

“Don’t say that, Newt. He’s a wonderful man. And you’ll see. He’s going to make this town into the perfect place, just like he’s always wanted. It’s going to be paradise. He’ll make it so much better than anything anyone has ever seen before.”

“By d-d-destroyin’ it?”

Newt stared at her with an incredulous expression on his face.

“People are d-d-dyin’ out there, Morgan! And it’s all his fault! That sp-sp-spray is changin’ people, and not for th-th-the better!”

He shifted to anger easily, his emotions changing on the fly.

She reached over and hugged him again, holding on tight as if to physically lower his blood pressure just through physical contact alone.

Newt stayed mad for a moment, but the press of flesh did attract the attention of other parts of his body.

Slowly, he relaxed as her body seemed to soak up his anger like a sponge.

-+-

Hervé Alvarado ran around the corner of Ferguson’s Freehold, weaving between several dead bodies lying on the dirt street.

The thirteen-year-old’s long legs pumped hard, kicking up little clouds of dust behind him as he ran.

Close behind him in hot pursuit, two red-faced men ran after him, snarling and grasping with their hands. But Hervé had a head start with more

powerful and much younger legs. He sprinted at top speed straight down the middle of the street, kicking up a trail of dust behind him.

Too late, Hervé realized his mistake. The two long retail buildings had no way out, except on either end. He could only go forward toward the corral or turn around go back toward the pub.

The two men chasing him would cut off going back. There would be no way to weave around both of them.

Ahead, two more men and one woman with red mist in their eyes ran out to stop him. The woman stopped and pulled out a gun. She shot at him.

Hervé zigged left, a bolt puffing up dust near his feet.

He zagged right as another bolt screamed over his head. This one knocked down one of his pursuers by mistake. The other one slowed, seemingly confused at the fact someone from his own side shot at him.

Then Hervé turned straight toward the man closest to him, who rushed forward with his arms out as if trying to catch him.

The boy ducked and rolled like a human cannonball, barreling right into his would-be captor. The man crumpled on impact, taken by surprise.

A third blast shot out. This time, it splatted into the fallen man's back, ripping it open in a huge burst of blood.

Before Hervé could react, a long sniper shot came in all the way from the pub on the other side of town, knocking the woman with the gun down.

Hervé jumped up and kept running, racing by her body and quickly outdistancing the other man moving to intercept him.

If he felt grateful for the sniper from the pub, he had no way to express his gratitude at the moment. The red-faced man stayed on him, determined to catch him.

Hervé finally reached the corral, and the end of the street. He kept running, heading north out of town, his pursuer hot on his heels.

But now, only one man chased him.

Hervé ran hard, ignoring the stitch in his side.

Slowly, he put more distance between himself and the other man.

-+-

“Run, Hervé!”

“Shut up. Don’t draw attention to yourself.”

Cajun Cal glanced at Gliph and frowned.

Cal wore a pair of long johns and little else. His belly pooched out of the dirty white top piece, and he smelled like old socks.

For right now, Gliph tolerated the other man’s body odor, since they both held a relatively safe position in Cal’s stables. No one had wandered over to bother them.

“Didn’t you say you wanted to ride out of here, mister?”

“Yes, and I do,” Gliph said. “However, things have gotten a little out of hand out there.”

“Out of hand?”

Cal leaned in closer and glared at Gliph.

The older man leaned back, trying to avoid the stable master’s smell. Cal’s unkept beard stuck out even farther than his chin, threatening to invade Gliph’s personal space.

“Did you have a hand in this?”

Irritation flitted across Gliph’s face.

“Mr. Broussard, the important factor at this very moment is that both you and I should be able to depart the premises safely. I would remind you of that fact, along with the necessity of retrieving my horse from the stables without getting yourself killed.”

“That didn’t answer my question.”

Gliph opened his mouth and paused.

He was saved from additional queries by the sound of galloping hooves and gunfire on the other end of town.

7.19

Two men on horseback rode in unison, each with one end of a rope tied off on their saddle horns. They raced down the middle of the town's Main Street, hunting for any red faces still loitering about.

Their heads swiveled back and forth as they looked through all the windows and checked all the doors of the long buildings on either side.

One man charged them, recklessly running out into the street before they came to his hiding place. They turned toward him, lining up to pass on either side.

He snarled and tried to jump at the rider on his right. The horses swiveled, keeping him between the two steeds. Their rope thumped into his belly, lifting him up and off his feet.

The horses kept going, unfazed by the sudden impact and added weight. He slowly slid off the line and dropped to the dirt, bleeding and with bones broken.

A red-faced woman screamed and climbed out of a busted store window. The men tugged the reins on their horses, slowing them to a walk, then a halt.

The rider on the left pulled out a lasso and lazily swung it in a circle above his head.

As she ran closer, his horse sidestepped toward the other one, making the line between them dip.

The rider released at just the right moment. The circle of rope snaked out and floated down on top of the woman. He yanked and pulled the rope tight, binding her arms by her side and pulling her off her feet.

The rider jumped off his horse and quickly approached the downed woman, spitting and screaming. The red mist around her eyes seemed far more agitated. Bound, she struggled to get back on her feet.

He wrapped several coils of rope around her legs and tied it off, then raised his hands in victory, as if this were a rodeo with humans instead of calves. He stood up, approaching his horse again.

He climbed back on and the riders pivoted neatly, heading back down the street with the line stretched taut between them again.

But no more people remained to be seen. They made another circuit, then at the end of town they unhooked the line from between them and rode north, in the same direction as young Hervé.

-+-

Morgan peered out the cracked door again, more of the furniture shoved aside so she could see better.

“Okay. I think the coast is clear. Those guys on the horses cleared the streets of the last ones, so we should be safe. Come on, Newt.”

She moved some more chairs away from the door. Newt helped her.

“Wh-where are we goin’?”

“To find more people, silly. We can’t stay here alone forever. Besides, we need to help Rey in his quest to change this town.”

He frowned at that statement, but he moved the last of the chairs out of the way for her and she swung open the door.

Carefully, Morgan poked her head out and looked up and down the street. The bodies outside, most of them lying in pools of blood, remained still.

She stepped out onto the boardwalk. Newt followed, not bothering to shut the door behind them.

Carefully, stepping lightly, Morgan walked down the boardwalk. Newt followed right behind her, choosing his steps just as carefully.

They stopped several doors down at the general store. The sound of people talking inside drifted out from the large plate-glass window showing housewares and garden tools.

Morgan knocked lightly on the entrance, trying not to make too much noise.

“Hello? Hello! Let us in!”

The talking inside stopped.

Someone approached and took a quick look out the window.

“Who is it?” a voice inside said.

“It’s Newt Dalmont and that new gal from the bar.”

“Are they red-faced?”

“Nope. They’re normal.”

“Well, let ’em in, then.”

A bolt slid back and the store door cracked open. The man inside opening it for them wore an apron covering a potbelly. He waved the couple in and closed the door quickly behind them before locking it again.

Newt followed Morgan into the center of the store. Here, two dozen people watched the couple approach in silence, everyone searching their faces for floating red motes.

“So this is where everybody went,” Morgan said with a note of wonder in her voice. “You all banded together in the general store.”

Several people nodded at her.

“Do you know what’s going on?” the portly proprietor said.

Wringing his apron with both hands, he looked distraught, physically manifesting his angst by taking it out on his clothes.

Everyone watched Morgan eagerly, waiting to see if she had any news to share.

“Yes. As a matter of fact, I do know what’s going on.”

She walked to the middle of the room and knelt down, taking out several aerosol dispensers from her pockets. She made a little pile of them on the store’s floor.

“What are those?” somebody asked.

“I’ll have to show you. You wanted to know what’s going on? Everyone gather in close, and I’ll show you what’s going on.”

As the curious drew up close to the pile, Morgan backed away.

Newt looked at her with an expression of alarm on his face. He knew what the canisters were, and he knew what using them meant. But he did not know what Morgan was doing.

She smiled at him, and continued pulling back toward the store’s entrance.

She moved as close to the door as she could and still see the pile of mists. Then she pulled out her gun.

Thoop!

POOM!

A small explosion of mist blossomed on the general store’s floor in a mini red mushroom cloud.

Men yelled and women screamed.

They all pulled away, but the cloud spread almost instantly with a mind of its own, the tiny red Emotes attacking the faces of everyone present.

Morgan grabbed Newt's hand and pulled him to the door. She slid the bolt back and threw it wide open.

They rushed out onto the street as the red cloud in the store expanded, filling up all the space.

7.20

Morgan ran down the boardwalk, heedless of noise this time. Her heels clattered on the planks, tapping out a frantic rhythm.

Newt ran right behind her. Toward the end of town, they stopped. Here, the hogtied woman in the street hissed and snarled, rolling around helpless in the dirt.

Morgan caught her breath, staring at the sight.

She pointed at it when Newt caught up, also breathing hard from the run.

“I guess rodeo skills really do pay off in the real world, after all.”

Newt stared at her wide-eyed, ignoring the hogtied woman.

“You . . . you c-c-consigned those people to d-d-death!”

She frowned at him.

“What? No, Newt. I didn’t consign them to death. I merely added them to our roster of potential fighters. Don’t worry, they won’t start killing anybody without orders from somebody. And we’re not there to give it to them.”

He kept staring at her, breathing hard.

She looked back at him and said, “Do you not understand how these work?”

She pulled out one of her last remaining aerosol dispensers and held it up between them.

He looked down at it and took a step back.

She laughed at his reaction and lowered her hand so it would appear less threatening.

“The little robots enter the nervous system and wait for commands. Yes, Reynard gave some initial commands to go out there and stir up chaos. That’s only because to effect revolution, to bring about anarchy, some blood almost always has to be spilled. I know, it’s old school thinking, but there’s a lot of truth in it. But chances are, if no one in that crowd we left behind pisses anyone off, they’ll just sit around doing nothing until Rey can get over there and give them some orders. And he won’t do that unless he needs more fighters. See? It all makes perfect sense.”

Newt kept staring at her, but his breathing slowed now. He had caught his breath.

“You people are c-c-crazy!”

“Oh, Newt. Don’t think that way.”

She pocketed the dispenser and reached out to grab his hands.

“We are going to change this planet for the better. Stay with me, and you and I will be on top of the org chart together. That’s a promise!”

“It’s . . . anarchy. Th-th-there is no org ch-chart.”

“Sure there is! There’s always somebody at the top pulling the strings. And that somebody, on this planet, is going to be me. And I want you to be there with me.”

He turned his head slightly, giving her the side eye.

She said, “I can tell I’m losing you.”

She looked over her shoulder at the doorway leading to another shop. Trying the latch, she found it open.

“Come in here with me. Let me give you a taste of what you can expect in the days, months and years ahead.”

But Newt stopped. He did not follow her in.

She turned back to look, eyebrows raised.

He shook his head and turned away from her. Slowly, he walked off.

“Newt? Newt! Come back!”

She shouted quietly, trying not to make too much noise.

But he ignored her and crossed the street, then headed toward the stables nearby, at the end of town.

As she watched, a couple of red-faced men poked their heads out broken windows on the other side of the street.

They saw Newt and snarled, more glass tinkling as they climbed out of the window.

Newt saw them and raced for the corral. He jumped over the wooden fence, using one hand to help lift him over. When he landed, he kept running for the stables.

One of the red-faces roared, like a wolf calling the pack.

More of them appeared, streaming out of shops along the street.

Morgan’s face fell. She pulled back to the shop she tried to lead Newt into and quietly closed the door.

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“It’s Newt Dalmont. He’s headed this way. Looks like he’s got company!”

Calvin Broussard stood at the doorway with a pistol in one hand, watching the street. Behind him stood Gliph and the young Hervé Alvarado.

“I wish I had my rifle, Mr. Cal,” Hervé said. “I feel so helpless without it.”

“Grab mine in the corner over there.”

Cal pointed a thumb over his shoulder without looking. Hervé looked and saw a rifle propped up in the far corner of the room. Smiling in relief, he rushed over to retrieve it.

Gliph leaned in, sucking in a breath of fresh air before he drew close. He held it in to avoid Cal's body odor. Then he peered out the cracked door next to Calvin.

"That idiot is bringing the whole town with him over here!"

Cal nodded.

"Not the whole town, but all the infected ones still mobile, from the looks of it. Dang! Lookit that! A whole bunch are comin' outta the general store!"

Gliph craned his neck to see better, and smiled.

A crowd spilled out the door of the general store, attracted to the noise on the street. They milled in confusion . . . until one of the men Gliph originally sprayed plowed into the crowd, knocking several people over.

Howls of outrage erupted as those on the ground hauled themselves back up, fists swinging.

Others from the general store quickly joined the brawl, taking punches and hitting back hard.

Those men and women closer to the corral slowed and looked over their shoulder, red mists clouding their vision. Eventually, they all stopped, even those only a few meters from the fence. They turned back and headed for the brawl in the middle of town.

Gliph's eyebrows shot up, clearly surprised.

At that moment, Newt walked up to the door. He did not bother to knock, he just pushed it open. Cal stepped aside to let him in.

"Now's our chance," Cal said, looking at him. "I'll saddle up some horses and we all need to skedaddle."

"You want I should pick some off, Mr. Cal?" Hervé said, holding the rifle. "I'm a good shot. I grab marked owls almost every night I hunt 'em."

“Naw, kid. We don’t want to attract any attention. But you can ride last and pick off anybody who tries to follow us. You ever shoot from a movin’ horse before?”

“I’ve shot marked owls at 300 meters while mounted, Mr. Cal.”

“Good deal. You’re our rear guard, then. Everyone stay here and try not to make any noise. I’ll get the horses ready.”

Cal rushed out of his little cabin and headed over to the stables nearby.

Newt turned with the other two and stared out the door at the melee still going on out in the street.

Then he turned and glared at Gliph, who ignored him.

“You p-p-people suck. Anarchy sucks.”

“This is just the beginning, Mr. Dalmont. I assure you, everything will improve with time.”

Newt frowned.

He glanced at Hervé who shrugged back at him.

Then he looked out the door at the massive brawl in the middle of town. It attracted all the red-faced individuals, and they kept slugging away at one another.

Newt frowned again.

He said, “It b-b-b-better.”

7.21

Cal carefully brought four horses out of the stables and into the corral. Each one had been quickly saddled. He led two, holding the reins of each in either hand. Leaving them there, he went back and fetched the other two.

He nodded at the door and it opened. Gliph came out first, followed by Newt and Hervé, still holding Cal's rifle.

The three men approached the horses and mounted them while Cal walked over and quietly unlatched the gate. Sounds of the fight drifted over from the middle of town as women howled in rage and men grunted under blows to both stomach and face.

Cal returned to the lead horse and mounted it, looking rather comical in his long johns. He kept the pistol he carried in one hand, grabbing the reins with the other.

“Quietly, now.”

He clicked his tongue and squeezed the sides of the horse with his heels. Then he led the others out of the corral and into the dirt street.

Cal turned and headed north toward the crossroads, urging his horse into a trot.

Gliph followed, watching the fight for as long as he could before turning.

Newt came next, still frowning. He glanced back at the brawl, then at the door he knew Morgan hid behind.

It was still open a crack, and he thought he could see her eyes peering out at him.

He clicked his tongue and guided the horse out of town, leaving her behind.

Last came young Hervé, Cal's rifle slung across his lap. He watched the brawl, eyes open for anyone following. But nobody noticed them. They kept fighting as he headed out of town.

Behind her door, Morgan frowned. Both men she rode into town with now rode out without her.

Her eyes narrowed to slits.

She opened the door and crossed the boardwalk, walking out into the open street.

“Hey!”

A few people fighting in the middle of town looked in her direction.

She pointed toward Hervé, following the other three horses north.

“They’re getting away! Are you going to let them do that? Go get ’em!”

Red-hazed eyes locked on the retreating horses.

Sharp snarls rang out, echoing off the clapboard structures on either side of the street.

Morgan backed up, keeping her front facing out and her arms crossed behind her back. She eased closer to the door. But so far, all eyes remained on Hervé and the others.

The fight ended. Those closest to the corral broke out into a jog, heading after Hervé and his horse.

The boy quickly raised the rifle to his shoulder and fired off a blast at the man coming closest. His chest exploded in a cloud of blood, and he stumbled to the dirt.

Those behind him roared in outrage. The ones still piled on top of one another in the middle of the street scrambled to their feet. Now they all broke out in a run, bent on revenge.

Hervé's eyebrows shot up and his mouth made an O. He turned and kicked his horse, bursting into a gallop. He shot past Newt.

Hervé shouted, "Look out!"

Newt glanced over his shoulder.

"Oh sh-sh-sh- . . ."

He kicked his horse with his heels, making his animal burst into a gallop also.

Gliph and Cal's horses joined the other two without urging from their riders. Both men turned back to look, only to see a horde of red faces running for them.

"How'd that happen?" Cal yelled as his horse raced forward.

"No idea!" Gliph said, although the look on his face betrayed his true thoughts.

He did have a good idea about what happened. And Hervé's shot had not helped matters.

The four horsemen surged to the crossroads and their horses skidded to a stop.

Gliph pointed toward the Dalmont place.

"That way! There's safety in numbers and the Dalmonts have a lot of guns!"

But two red-faced people raced toward them from that direction, snarling, with their arms outstretched.

Everyone turned away from that option. They looked at going straight.

On the North Road, a wagon lay overturned with a column of smoke drifting up beside the bodies of a man and a woman.

“This has spread farther than I thought!” Gliph said. “I presumed they were still contained in the town.”

They heard gunfire in the other direction, out on the East Road.

Cal looked around wildly, trying to decide between no good options.

The crowd, slower on foot, drew closer from the south.

Then the ever-present haze above them lessened. For a brief moment, rare sunlight split through the brown shroud and lit up the far end of the pasture, just before the woods.

There, a picture-perfect white church seemed to glow in the natural light.

“To the church!” Cal said, pointing.

“Not the church!” Gliph said, frowning. “Anywhere but that church.”

“We can barricade ourselves in there and fight back! We’re not gonna outrun these guys forever. We need to get rid of ’em. Follow me!”

Cal made a motion with his hand while urging his horse off the road and into the grass.

Hervé followed without question, smoothly pulling in beside him.

Newt stopped his horse beside Gliph and stared at the older man. Then he glanced over his shoulder at the crowd running for them, screaming and snarling.

“You can d-d-deal with them yourself. You . . . you st-started this. You c-c-can deal with it.”

He gigged his horse and angled off in the pasture, heading west toward the Dalmont place, riding off-road.

“You’ll never make it, Newt! Stay with the others! There’s safety in numbers!”

Newt did not respond. He kept riding in the general direction of his and his brothers’ land.

Alone, Gliph glanced at the men racing for the country church. Then he turned and watched the crowd drawing closer to the crossroads. And him.

“Bastards.”

He clicked his tongue and jerked the reins, guiding his horse into the grass and after Cal and Hervé.

7.22

Leonwood Igleses stepped out of his parsonage and glanced up at the sky, wondering why a rare break in the haze let through direct sunlight all of a sudden.

As usual he dressed all in black, with a white collar around his neck. A silver cross hanging from a chain on his chest doubled as a blaster shield.

He looked up at the sky, shielding his eyes with the palm of one hand.

“So that explains why everything suddenly got brighter outside my window,” he murmured. “Hello there, sun. Long time no see.”

Six tiny Micabots riding on his left shoulder nodded. Of course, they silently seemed to be saying, a break in the haze means direct sunlight. Everybody knows that.

Two on his right shoulder shielded their faces with tiny front feet, in an apparent imitation of Leo. The other four focused on the riders heading their way.

One of them walked a few centimeters over and tapped his neck, urging him to look.

Leo’s head shifted and he took in the sight. Four on horseback galloped across the field. Three headed toward the church while the other veered

west. Behind the three, the first of the mob chasing them reached the crossroads.

“What . . .”

As the men on horseback drew closer, his eyes narrowed when he locked in on Reynard Gliph.

“I recognize you . . .”

Leo quickly stepped back inside the parsonage and retrieved his gun belt. When he stepped out the door again, he had two guns strapped on either hip, and his body glowed slightly from the shield in his cross now activated.

“A prudent man sees danger and takes precautions,” he murmured to the ants on his shoulder. “That’s a proverb. Maybe not worded exactly, but close enough.”

One of them nodded as they all watched the men approach.

Cal arrived first wearing his white long johns and a pair of boots.

He jumped off the horse and ran up to the preacher.

“We’re in trouble! A whole mess of town folk is possessed by somethin’. They’re all headed this way! We need shelter!”

Leo glanced at the crowd, now spilling onto the grass. A mob indeed appeared to be headed this way.

Gliph showed up next, the head of his horse rearing up as he pulled back on the reins.

The second his feet touched the ground the double doors of the church burst open and 100,000 Micabots surged out like a black tidal wave.

This spooked the horses, who galloped off along the edge of the woods.

The ants surrounded Gliph in a flash, encasing him in a black exoskeleton and leaving only his face exposed.

“Easy now,” Leo said.

The Micabots seemed to respond. They no longer seemed as threatening toward Glyph. But they remained in place, holding him immobile.

Hervé galloped up as Newt disappeared from sight.

Hervé saw the other two horses running away. He dismounted and slapped his horse's hindquarters.

“Hyah! Get outta here!”

The horse bolted, following the other two.

The mob pressed closer. A couple of the men had already reached the halfway point in the field.

Leo turned back to the three before him.

He said, “Welcome to you all. The Maker's church is a place of peace and sanctuary. Even for its enemies.”

He locked eyes with Glyph.

“Let me go!”

“You can let him go, my friends. But take away his gun.”

Like water, the Micabots pulled away from Glyph, dripping off him. He patted his holster and found it empty, the pistol disappearing on top of mechanical ants as they flowed back inside the church.

A scream of rage drifted across the field as the closest man tripped and plowed headfirst into the ground.

Others behind him answered with screams of their own. They kept running, passing him by. The haze around their faces looked clearly visible now that they drew closer.

“I know not the nature of this threat you face,” Leo said. “But I am confident we can withstand any danger, come what may. May the Maker save us. Everyone get inside! Now!”

The men needed no more encouragement, even Glyph. They hurried through the open double doors, sidestepping thousands of Micabots piled up knee-

high on the floor.

Leo pointed at the approaching mob and spoke to the little bots.

“Slow them down. But try not to hurt them, if at all possible. We don’t know what we’re dealing with. They may not be lost. Somehow, they may be recoverable. And if so, we don’t want to kill them.”

One of the ants on his shoulder saluted him, then took a flying leap into the mass of tiny bots at Leo’s feet.

Like a giant black amoeba, the MicaBots flowed out of the church and faced the surge of red-faced people.

Leo held the doors open while a black stream of little bots flowed out. When the last few ran through, little dots scampering across the threshold, he pulled both doors closed and locked them tight.

7.23

The first red-faced man ran straight for the closing doors, ignoring the black streams flowing out from the church.

A dark wave rushed up and washed over him, thousands upon of thousands of ants moving in coordination.

His momentum stopped. He flailed with his arms, slinging dozens of specks off.

Then the greater mass of ants hit him, tipping him over backward. He crashed to the ground and they covered him, holding him down under a mound of black dots.

Only his head remained free. He screamed in rage, thrashing his neck back and forth. But like Gulliver, he did not have the strength to match their combined force.

Three more men ran up, the mob's main vanguard, as MicaBots continued streaming from the church.

This time the mechanical ants rose up in a wall half a meter high just as the men approached. All three hit the sudden barrier and stumbled over, scattering tiny bots as they fell. Tens of thousands covered them up as well, leaving only their faces exposed.

Then the red-faced horde arrived, pressing forward, breathless and sweaty. Three-dozen people screaming for blood ran headlong into the black waves waiting for them outside the church.

The ants moved swiftly now, sweeping this way and that, swirling in tiny currents that reached out to snatch at legs and feet.

One string of bots reared up, man-height, like a figure of its own. It spread “arms” out wide and fell on a woman racing for the door, knocking her over and covering her up.

More people fell down in front of the church, tripped up and intercepted by the black tide. Now the MicaBots faced a dilemma in covering this many people. They separated into smaller currents and covered hands and feet. Hundreds of bots locked together and cuffed limbs to the ground. More and more covered people, rendering one red-faced person after the other immobile.

Yet more misted townsfolk came in, the laggards, those who could not run as fast.

They stopped, breathless, and surveyed the faster people now bound on the ground by . . . something.

Red motes around their eyes stirred, making erratic patterns in the mist. A couple of women ventured off to the side, heading for the back of the building. A thick stream of black bots broke off and followed them. They stopped, studying the new branch threatening them from behind..

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Inside the church, Cal pressed against the closest window to the door on the right side of the sanctuary. The window stood tall and narrow, only allowing one person to look through it at a time.

Cal could not see everything happening in front of the church, but he could make out a lot from the side. He frowned, standing there in his long johns, and scratched his backside.

“What in tarnation do you got out there, preacher? What is that stuff? Is it some kinda church magic?”

“Not magic,” Leo said, standing nearby. “This is technology, and I am blessed to have it. These little bots are a gift from Tom Savage. They are truly a Godsend.”

The bots remaining on his shoulders, down to two on his right and one on his left now, puffed out their little chests in pride.

“I ain’t never seen nothin’ like ’em.”

“I hope to never see them again,” Gliph muttered.

He sat on a pew near the middle of the aisle, his back to the door and the other men. Before him, on the floor around his feet, a couple hundred MicaBots faced him in an arc. They looked ready to pounce on him and secure him if he attempted any violence.

He stared down at the little black ants sullenly, remembering how they had taken out his people during his earlier assault on the church.

“How ironic to be seeking shelter here now,” he muttered to himself.

Hervé stood watching out an opposite window, on the other side of the church. He held Cal’s rifle with two hands, his eyes wide open.

“Padre? Is it okay if I have to break the window to shoot at those people?”

From the door, Leo looked over at the young man and smiled.

“Yes, you may do whatever is needed to help keep us safe. My friends here will rebuild as necessary. They already have done so once, thanks to that man over there.”

Gliph harrumphed, but he did not turn around.

“However, it is my hope that you do not have to shoot. I do not believe this is a spiritual phenomenon we are facing. Rather, they seem to be under some kind of outside influence. Drug induced, perhaps? When they return to their normal selves, they may have no recollection of their actions. Let us not kill these people, if possible. The Church of the Maker is about saving

lives, both in the present as well as in the hereafter by saving as many souls as possible through the power of the blood of Jesus. Therefore, so long as my friends can hold them back, let us not try and kill them.”

“Yeah, we’ll see,” Cal called from the other side of the sanctuary. “If they get past them ants of yours, Padre, all bets are off. I don’t care who they are. If they come for me, I’m shootin’ ’em. That’s all there is to it.”

Leo smiled grimly and nodded.

“Fair enough. I am prepared to defend myself as well. But I think you will find my little friends are very effective, especially when this sanctuary is threatened.”

From his seat in the middle pew, Gliph harrumphed again.

But he did it softly this time.

7.24

Tom and Lisa popped into place on top of a roof. They stood on one of the long buildings comprising Little York.

Both waved their arms for balance.

When they recovered, Tom smiled and said, “Good thing these are only one floor up. The fall wouldn’t have been too bad.”

“Don’t even joke about that.”

Carefully, they made their way to the edge of the building’s roof and looked down. Tom frowned at all the bodies in the street.

“I’m kinda feeling like Haley right now,” Gwen said, smiling. “Except, of course, it’s not nighttime. And we’re a continent away. But it feels like our worlds are colliding a little bit, you know?”

“There’s something that’s colliding,” Tom said, pointing at the closest body to them. “Emotes. They’re still floating around that guy’s face.”

Gwen sidled up next to him and stared down at the corpse.

“You’re right. Lisa? Is anybody watching us? If not, port us down next to that body, please.”

They popped off the roof and reappeared in the street, a small cloud of dust flying up at their feet.

Tom bent down and looked closer at the dead man's face. A thin haze of red still fluttered around his eyes.

"Don't get too close," Gwen cautioned. "We don't know if it's contagious."

"What I want to know is," Tom said while straightening back up, "what are those Emotes doing out here? I thought these things were back in League City, with strange men beating one another up in apartments."

"Obviously, somebody shipped them over here to Little York."

"Obviously. Lisa? Can you tell us what happened here?"

The AI spoke in both their implants.

"My observations indicate that a box addressed to Reynard Gliph arrived a short while ago on the Jet Stream. In it, several aerosol dispensers containing Emotes were included."

"Well, there you go," Tom said. "Gliph is behind it, then. Somebody back in the Projects had this stuff and they were using it in League City. Then, for whatever reason, they sent it to him out here. This is probably his World War I assassination moment."

"Either that, or the attack on Fort Sumter."

"That's probably a better historical analogy."

"I dunno. Yours dealt with anarchists, so maybe it's better."

"I love you."

"I love you too. Gah! We're starting to sound like Silas and Lola now."

"Nah, they'd be making out in the street at this point. Never mind all the blood and guts out here."

"Good point."

"Ms. Wilder? Is that you?"

They stopped at the sound of a new voice, calling urgently but softly from the other side of the street. Tom and Gwen hurried over to a clothing shop where an older woman stuck her head out the door.

“Mrs. Abimo! Are you okay?”

“Yes, yes. Come in quickly!”

Tom and Gwen stepped up onto the boardwalk and over to the shop entrance. Mrs. Abimo let them in after looking them in the eyes and searching their faces for any signs of red mist. Then she shut and locked the door behind them.

The small shop carried the scent of fresh fabric. Piles of jeans and overalls were stacked up neatly along the walls in different sizes. Shirts and blouses for working the fields crowded racks in the middle.

“You don’t want to be out there, Ms. Wilder. Nor do you . . . have I met you? I’m Gail Abimo.”

Tom shook hands with the woman. She looked like she spent a good deal of time outdoors, despite being a shop owner. In her 40s, she seemed to have a lot of energy and enthusiasm. Like most everyone out among the stars, she had a mix of ethnicities.

“I’m Tom Savage, Gwen’s husband.”

“Oh. Oh! Ms. Wilder, you didn’t tell me you were getting married! Come to think of it, I haven’t seen you much around here lately. Is that what you’ve been up to? Going off and getting hitched? I thought surely you and that Dalmont boy were going to be an item. But then he was arrested, wasn’t he? My, my. We need to catch up!”

Then her eyes drifted to the door and the smile on her face faded as she recalled their present circumstances.

“But it will have to wait. Right now, everybody’s gone plumb crazy in this town. Lots of people have died! They just won’t stop fighting.”

Tom and Gwen nodded.

“We’re going to try and figure out a way to stop it, Mrs. Abimo. Do you know where everybody went? It seems like Little York is mostly deserted.”

“Well, there was a really big fight a little while ago. A huge one! Everybody was hitting and kicking and biting each other out in the middle of the street. Then something happened down at the corral. I didn’t see what. And everybody ran off in that direction. Evidently they ran out of town because I haven’t heard hide nor hair from them since. In fact, I haven’t seen anything else going on until I heard you two talking out there. That’s when I cracked the door open to check and see what was going on. And I saw you!”

Tom and Gwen traded a glance.

“If they went out of town, they probably ended up at the crossroads,” Tom said. “I wonder which way they went from there?”

“Maybe we should go find out.”

“Oh no, Ms. Wilder! It’s not safe! Stay here. If we’re quiet, the crazy people will just pass us on by. I’ve been hiding in my shop ever since this thing started, and it’s been safe so far.”

“I think Gwen’s right, Mrs. Abimo. We really do need to figure out a way to stop this. Thanks for the offer, but we should go.”

Despite the woman’s protests, Tom and Gwen headed for the exit.

“We’ll catch up later, I promise,” Gwen said.

Tom opened the door and scanned the street. Seeing no one, he opened it wider and let Gwen out. Then he stepped out, turning to softly close the door behind them.

Together they walked down the middle of the street, passing up the bodies with red mists hovering over their faces.

“Let’s go to the crossroads and see what we can see,” Tom said, taking Gwen by the hand.

Together, they set out at a brisk pace.

7.25

A quick check at the corral led them to the conclusion that Cal was not there.

They debated quietly whether or not to take a horse from the stables.

“We don’t know how far those people wandered off to,” Gwen said, in favor of borrowing a couple mounts.

“Yeah, but we’ve got Lisa. We can have her teleport us where we need to go. And afterwards, we’d have to return the horses. That could chew up a lot of time, especially if we can’t just port it back.”

“Maybe you’re right. Besides, Cal would probably charge us extra for taking a horse without permission. And porting in Bessie and Lucas would still take up too much time since we’d have to saddle them. Okay. Walking it is.”

Tom touched his implant.

“Lisa? Do you know where the crowd is right now?”

She responded in both their ears.

“Yes I do, Thomas. They are at the Church of the Maker outside town. Mica currently has her units holding many of them down. The others are in a standoff with Pastor Igleles.”

“Could you maybe port us over there?”

“Putting you in proximity to the crowd would likely result in an attack on you and Gwen. I can, however, place you at the crossroads. That would likely be far enough away to escape immediate detection.”

Gwen said, “Please do that for us.”

The couple popped away.

When they reappeared, they stood in the middle of the familiar crossroads. Out in the pasture, nestled up near the woods, the white church and parsonage stood. They were surrounded by people, many of them covered in black dots and held on the ground.

Tom surveyed the area by covering his brow with one hand and squinting.

“I still find it amazing how that preacher weaponized our MicaBots.”

“He seems to have stymied an entire crowd of Emote users,” Gwen said, scanning the distant scene with her enhanced vision. “Looks like the MicaBots have left people alive that they immobilized. They’re keeping the rest away from the church by threatening anyone going close to the building.”

“Do you see Cal?”

“Nope. Hopefully he’s in the church. But there’s a lot of people I do know out there. It looks like a big chunk of the town’s population is there. We can’t just go in shooting. I mean, if I had Big Bertha we could solve this problem in a couple minutes. But I know all those people. I don’t wanna kill them.”

“Hopefully we won’t have to. There’s got to be a way to control these Emotes. What did Silas say about them? A portion of them remain outside the body in order to transmit instructions to the others inside the body.”

“Yes. Probably that’s what the fights in League City were about. They were testing the Emotes out. Probably giving them simple commands, or at least doing things to enflame their emotions so the subjects would fight each other to death.”

“Yeah. It probably doesn’t take much to set them off. But he also said something about StarCen being able to control the troops this way. It provides a link to her, somehow.”

Gwen frowned and tapped the top row of her teeth with a fingernail.

“You’re right. That was the primary reason they abandoned using those things during the war. For an invading force, they were useless because PLAIR would be the AI in control of whatever planet they were trying to take over. Once they got away from her sensors, they’d be out of her control.”

“Right. And twenty years ago, it took a lot to establish a planet-wide AI. They didn’t have portable units like Lisa. And sensors weren’t exactly portable, either, like they are today.”

“So what are you saying? Those things could have been successful if they had Lisa or someone like her to go along with them when they were attacking planets?”

“Maybe. I dunno, I wasn’t there. But what I’m really driving at is, we do have an AI. Maybe we can control them. Or, more precisely, maybe Lisa can.”

Gwen’s eyes lit up.

“That’s a good idea.”

Then her face fell.

“Except of course, they’re programmed for input with StarCen. Lisa’s underlying code is related to LuteNet, is it not?”

“It is, but remember LuteNet is a pirate system. She was designed to not hold back someone on one of her ships from taking over another ship, say. Or attacking a space station or other things that StarCen or PLAIR might deem as unethical. As such, LuteNet can be quite duplicitous when necessary. Not that she’s had to be very much since the war ended. But you’re right, that underlying code is still in her. And, consequently, that same tendency toward hacking the other systems resides somewhere deep in Lisa, too.”

She smiled at him.

“So, you’re saying there’s a chance Lisa could get in there and grab control of that red crowd?”

He nodded, smiling back.

“I would say there is a far better than even chance.”

Tom pressed the implant under his ear.

“Lisa?”

“Yes, Thomas?”

“I’d like you to try something for us, please . . .”

7.26

“**G**et ready Hervé,” Cal said, holding his gun out. “It looks like the ones in back are fixin’ to charge. If they do, guard the sides of the building. If one breaks in, shoot ’em. If they get through the front door, Mr. Glyph, you take my spare gun and shoot ’em. Padre, if you got anymore tricks up your sleeves like these magic bugs of yours, unleash ’em if they breach the door. Are we all clear?”

Hervé said, “Yes, sir!”

Glyph grunted. He looked annoyed, but he did not protest the plan.

Leo nodded, although Cal was not looking at him.

Under his breath the pastor murmured, “They’re not magic. They’re technology.”

Outside, the red-faced people not bound by mechanical ants stayed back, snarling in anger. A couple of the townsfolk even further back circled wide in an arc, taking a look behind the church at an angle and seemingly trying to decide if a flanking maneuver through the woods would work.

The ones closest to the door remained covered in tiny black bots, bound and immobile. They were the noisiest of the bunch, screaming in rage.

“They’re gonna charge any second,” Cal said. “Get ready, everyone!”

Hervé tensed. He checked his gun for the twelfth time, making sure it was ready to fire.

Leo spread both arms out wide and identical waves of black bots rose up beside him.

Gliph harrumphed at all their angst. He crossed his arms, but he no longer sat in a pew facing away from the door. He faced the door now, leaning up against a pew back in the middle of the sanctuary.

A tense moment passed and nothing happened.

Leo lowered his hands. Ridges of black ants to either side of him relaxed, most of them going down to the floor again.

He said, “What’s going on out there?”

“I can’t . . .” Cal craned his neck for a better look. “I can’t see anything.”

“The growlin’ has stopped,” Hervé said.

“You’re right. What do you see over there on that side?”

Hervé craned his neck for a better look outside through the window.

“Everybody’s just standin’ there, Mr. Broussard.”

Gliph frowned. He straightened up and walked toward the others.

“They shouldn’t . . .”

He stopped himself from saying more. No one noticed. They were too busy focused on the threat at hand.

Slowly, Gliph approached the arched double doors and put an ear up to the crack between them.

“You hear anything out there?” Cal said.

Gliph frowned and shook his head.

Then he made a decision.

“Cover me, I’m going to take a look.”

“Wait!”

But already Gliph unlatched the doors and swung them wide open.

Outside, standing in place, all the red-faced people stood with their heads bowed, tiny red motes floating in front of their eyes.

Those pinned to the ground by MicaBots likewise remained silent, staring up at the sky or down at the ground, depending on how they had fallen.

“What . . . what’s going on?” Gliph said.

Slowly, the other men approached the door, looking out. Hervé carried the rifle, ready to shoot. A huge stream of black ants flowed behind Leo, ready to rush forward and shield him from harm if necessary.

Cal walked out in his long johns with his pistol dangling in one hand, scratching his head.

He said, “Heck if I know. It’s like they was all deactivated all of a sudden. Whatcha think we should do with them, padre?”

Leo looked at all the people standing around with blank looks on their faces and red motes floating near their eyes.

“I think we should contain them here in the sanctuary. My friends will make sure they remain restrained in case they decide to get violent again.”

“That’s a good idea.”

Leo raised his hand, and ants covering those near the door moved underneath the fallen, marching them inside. More rushed over to those still standing and lifted them up on their feet.

From a distance, the crowd seemed to float inside on black liquid.

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“Looks like the MicaBots are carrying everybody inside. Congrats, Lisa. You did it.”

“It took some work, Gwendolyn, but I found the proper access codes. They are all in stand down mode, which seemed the easiest way to alleviate the threat.”

“Good job, Lisa,” Tom said. “Are the MicaBots going to watch over them?”

“Yes. They are restraining these compromised citizens to provide a sense of safety and security to those inside the church. However, there is no chance the victims will become active again now that I am in control of their Emotes.”

“Will those people be able to eat and drink?” Gwen wondered out loud.

“They’re just standing there.”

“That’s a good point, Lisa. They’re going to need to be taken care of. How long do those Emote things last in their system?”

“I do not have an answer to that, Thomas. This is apparently a secret military weapon from the League, and I do not have a way to query StarCen about it. It could be anywhere from three to seven days.”

“I guess we’ll find out. In the meantime, please keep everybody that is affected alive for us.”

“Will do, Thomas. There are additional people back in Little York that I have likewise placed in stand down mode.”

Tom and Gwen looked at one another.

“I guess we should go check on that,” Gwen said. “There won’t be MicaBots to move those people around. We’ll need to find people to take care of them.”

“Right. Let’s go take care of that. But let’s walk. There’s no hurry, now. Not anymore.”

She smiled at him and stuck out her hand.

He smiled back and took it.

Hand-in-hand, they walked down the road and back toward Little York.

7.27

Casper stood behind his bar, polishing glassware.

A drunk raised a finger on the other side. Casper approached the man, scowling.

“I’m cutting you off, Ferni.”

“Aw, come on . . . *hic* . . . Overlord. I’m not that far gone yet.”

“No more credit. I told you when you walked in. It’s all upfront tonight, and you’ve used up all your tokens.”

The man pulled his hand down and stared at the wooden bar with a sullen expression.

He stifled another hiccup.

“Awright, awright. I was gonna bring this one home to the missus, but ya made me do it.”

He reached into a front pocket and retrieved a large token with the number 100 on it.

Casper took it out of his hand and dropped it in the bar’s lockbox. Without a word, he poured the man another beer in a fresh frosted mug and brought it back to him.

“Where’s my change?”

“Finish drinking, and I’ll give you what’s left. That’s your tab right now.”

Ferni nodded.

“You’re awright . . . *hic* . . . Overlord. I don’t care what everybody says about you.”

The man smiled and tilted the glass back, greedily gulping the cold beverage down.

Casper ignored the inadvertent insult. He scanned the crowd, ignoring the drunk now that he had his money.

Men sitting at the tables in the bar were propositioned by his girls, scantily clad and flirtatious. They would help relieve the men of any and all tokens carried on them. It was payday for many, and Casper felt determined to extract as much of the Southside Project’s income as he could tonight in Tay-hoe’s.

He nodded at his bartender, an older man named Billy who never smiled. Billy’s lips remained a straight line, firmly pressed together, on a square brown face that made him look almost like a bot.

Billy nodded back while pouring a beer for another customer.

“I got it, Boss.”

Casper left the bar in Billy’s capable hands. He spared a glance at the tables once more. The girls served drinks to those sitting away from the bar, and hit them up for other services. No one dared mistreat the help with Billy and Casper watching.

Satisfied, Casper opened the door to the gambling den behind the bar.

Here the lighting remained low, but the crowd was far more boisterous. The games were rigged to pay out decent early in the night, and it was still early. Those gamblers who, starting out, determined to only risk a small portion of their earnings were delighted to win . . . and then they gambled some more.

Later, when drinks had been consumed and people were used to winning, the odds would slowly change. Holo cards were particularly easy to manipulate, and all the card games were stacked against the players. The roulette wheel operated on its own special subroutine. No game went untouched. Even the dice at the craps table had molecular structures that shifted, making them loaded to fall certain ways at different times of the night.

The cheating was subtle and effective.

Casper watched the craps table as the crowd around it erupted in joy. A young worker won big, and the dealer shoved a huge pile of tokens over to him.

He already had two hookers firmly attached to either arm. The women looked like they expected a big payout later.

The young man remained sober, a drink nearby hardly touched. He also seemed willing to call it a night early, unusual among the gamblers.

He also looked eager to spend time with the two women who had attached themselves to his sides.

Casper nodded at the sight of all this. Even if the young man quit while he was ahead at the gambling tables, the house would still end up with most, if not all, of his money before the night was over.

After another round of the tables, making sure the girls behaved and that nobody was too drunk (or at least not belligerent and drunk), Casper decided to go outside for some fresh air.

He nodded at the man guarding the door when he came up to street level.

Out here, in the fading light, he could still see the grime of the street. Casper looked up, and noted the sky was not quite dark yet.

Even at night, he knew he would not see any stars thanks to the ever-present haze. Even if he traveled well outside the city, he would still not see any stars.

In his heart of hearts, that made him a little sad. But he would never admit it to anyone.

He heard the sounds of a quarrel coming through an open window in the apartments across the street. Evidently, one of his customers walked home after a few too many and got into it with his wife.

Money was tight in the Projects, and Casper's enterprise sucked up a lot of what was earned by those who worked.

He catered to most of their vices, and the people gladly paid for it.

Mostly men, he thought. Although some women were addicted to pills and booze, too. And gambling.

He reflected on the downfall of the human race, and how easy that made it to turn a profit, especially if you were the only one in the entire neighborhood offering booze, prostitution and gambling.

Others had tried, but after a late-night visit from Casper they disappeared, and their storefronts closed permanently.

He watched in the deepening darkness as a pair of his girls returned to Tay-hoe's from making house calls. He recognized Jada. She stopped in front of him and motioned for the other girl to go on ahead without her.

"I checked on that guy like you asked me to, brought him some energy bars and a water flask."

"Good."

"I wanted to tell you, he's changed. He's not acting like he wants to kill me tonight."

"Oh? That's odd."

"Yeah. He's just lying there on the floor, all blank-faced and whatnot. I put the food and water down next to him so he can reach it. But it freaked me out, that look on his face."

"Thanks for letting me know, Jada."

"You're welcome, Overlord."

She smiled at him, then turned and walked down the basement stairs.

He frowned, watching her go, wondering if something had gone wrong.

7.28

Casper made his way to the vacant basement room where the fight took place.

Here, someone had removed the body of the loser. The winner remained in the middle of the floor, sitting. He had managed to stem his own bleeding from the shot to the knee delivered by Casper, but of course without medical treatment, he had mobility issues. In a glance around the room, Casper could see empty food trays and water flasks, which Jada had evidently tossed in so the poor guy could eat and drink.

Casper drew a gun from his waistband and walked further into the room.

If this is a trap, he thought, it won't end well for this guy.

As he drew near, Casper could see the red mist floating near the man's face. But the particles no longer appeared to be as active. Mostly, they just seemed to hover in place.

The man himself sat stony faced, his injured leg sticking out in front of him, with his other leg tucked underneath. He stared at the far wall, expressionless.

Holding his gun carefully aimed at the man's head, Casper walked closer. He waved a hand in front of the man's face.

He received no response. Nothing. No reaction that Casper could see.

He stepped back around behind the man and nudged the fellow's back with his boot. The man bent forward a bit, but otherwise did not react.

Casper stepped back to the door and scratched his head, the gun now hanging loosely in one hand.

"Huh. That's odd."

He stepped out in the hall and locked the door, then headed for the stairs. Out on the sidewalk, darkness had fully fallen. He looked up in the air and imagined the sky as a blank canvas, an eternal space that was void of stars.

Then he heard the scraping of a stool as the building's door guard stood up, unwilling to be seated while Overlord stood nearby.

Casper looked up at the alcove and raised an eyebrow. He walked around to the steps leading up and stared at the man standing there in the shadows.

"Is everything alright, Overlord?"

"Yes."

Inspiration struck, and Casper mounted the steps. He reached into a pocket and pulled out one of the remaining aerosol dispensers.

"Have you noticed anything unusual around here, lately?" he asked after climbing the last step and joining the man on the stoop.

"No, Overlord. Well, the power went out a while back. The city had the building's power pack replaced, down in the basement there where you were. But other than that, everything has been normal around here."

"But other than that, you've seen nothing?"

The man shook his head.

Casper nodded and took a step closer.

"I have something I want you to see. Take a look at this for me."

He held the dispenser up in the man's face. The fellow leaned forward, curious.

Casper pressed the button. A fine red mist sprayed into the guard's face.

Casper stepped back and watched the little red bots invade the victim's head. Seconds later, red motes floated around the guard's eyes.

"You're a sick bastard," Casper said, adding a disgusted tone to his voice.

He reached back and slugged the man in the face, knocking him down.

Casper waited for the expected violent response. He raised his gun, ready to shoot the man at the first sign of it.

But the guard did no such thing. He merely stood up and stared blankly ahead.

He did not even make eye contact with his persecutor.

Casper furrowed his brows.

He snapped his fingers a couple of times in front of the man's face but received no response.

Finally, he gave up. Casper walked back down the steps to the street, lost in thought.

He tucked the gun back in his waistband and wandered down the street, ignoring the few pedestrians greeting him.

Finally, when he came to the entrance of Tay-hoe's again, he reached a conclusion.

"It must have stopped working."

He pulled out the dispenser and looked at it in the streetlight.

Shrugging, he tossed it into a sewer opening. He listened to it clatter down to the concrete tunnel below the street.

He walked back into Tay-hoe's intent on stripping money from Southsiders once more, the dispenser and its mind-altering spray forgotten.

Deep underneath the street, three black MicaBots approached the dispenser lying on the floor of the sewer.

They reached down with their front legs and lifted, easily picking up the canister.

Designed with the strength of ants, carrying it could have easily been accomplished with just one of them. But the three worked in concert, quickly taking it further down the sewer. If anyone were watching, it would look like the dispenser floated just above the concrete floor.

Outside the Projects, underneath the fairgrounds, the dispenser seemed to climb up a wall. Part of the wall disappeared, temporarily ported away. Here, in a nook, Lisa's subterranean sensor stood open to the air for a moment.

The little bots pulled the canister up the side of the wall and deposited it in the alcove.

Then they left, crawling back out and down to the floor.

The wall popped back into place, hiding both the sensor and the dispenser. It seemed as if neither had ever existed.

The three MicaBots resumed their diligent patrol of the city's sewers.

7.29

Morgan heard the sound of voices out on the street.

She opened the door and saw people standing near the bodies, talking in hushed tones. Looking both ways up and down the boardwalk, she saw more people coming out of shops, venturing into the late afternoon light.

At this time of the day, it would be dark already back in League City, which she considered to be home for all practical purposes. But plenty of light still shone in the sky here to see.

She walked out into the street herself and approached the crowd, but she held her gun in one hand ready to use in case this might be some sort of trap.

She felt oddly reassured that most of the others out in the street had guns, too. Rather than feel threatened by their firepower, she thought they looked ready to shoot anyone showing up with red eyes or faces. Everyone seemed to share a collective will to protect one another.

As she approached, she picked up some snippets of conversation.

“I dunno what happened. They was comin’ for me, and all of a sudden they stopped.”

“I saw that, too. They’s two over there by the Kimmey place. They’s just standin’ there now, not doin’ nothin’.”

Morgan frowned.

As she approached, conversation died off with the people in the street for a moment as attention shifted toward her.

“Who’s that?”

“New gal. Came in with that last batch from the city off the Jet Stream.”

She stood there, waiting to see if they would acknowledge her presence and not just talk about her.

One of the men finally smiled at her.

He said, “I’m glad to see you made it, ma’am.”

Satisfied with that response, she relaxed a little.

“What happened? Where did all the red-faced people go?”

“Well, ma’am, that’s what we were just talking about.”

The cowboy speaking to her looked young. He had a friendly smile. A quick glance at his hands revealed no wedding ring.

Not that this was a time for flirting. For Morgan, it was a matter of habit.

“It appears that the red faces suddenly stopped acting bad. They just stopped doing much of anything at all.”

“Yup,” one of the earlier speakers chimed in, eager to share the news.

“They’s just standin’ around doin’ nothin’!”

After listening to the same information repeated in slightly different ways, Morgan decided she had learned all she was going to from these people. Eventually, she left the crowd to their own devices.

The cowboy offered to accompany her for the sake of safety, and maybe trying to adhere to some ancient code of chivalry. Or, he just wanted to try his luck with her.

Morgan declined his offer. She doubted he had anything she needed right now. Besides, she wanted to find Newt.

Wandering back down the street, she came to the pub. Here, several people had evidently congregated inside and survived. They had no new information for her, and she soon left again.

She followed a trail leading to some houses behind the long building on the right.

Here at last she found a red-faced person, one of the few not joining the crowd that chased Gliph out of town.

The woman stood perfectly still, head bowed, red motes floating in front of her eyes. Some people stood around her calmly talking. Those with guns held their weapons at the ready, prepared to use them should the woman show any signs of sudden aggression.

So far, she had not.

“Are they all like this?” Morgan wondered out loud.

Several in the crowd assured her they were.

“It’s like they all got a signal or something to just stop,” a young girl of ten said, staring up at the woman’s red face.

Morgan left this crowd as well. She wandered back to the pub, lost in thought.

In her pockets, she still had some dispensers left. But it seemed pointless to try it on anybody if they all just . . . stood there.

Maybe it still works, she thought. Maybe it only works for a couple hours. Maybe I could still use this in an emergency.

As she walked down Main Street again, the town seemed to slowly come back to life. More people flooded out to share their experiences, to enjoy being part of the living world, to celebrate the part about not having to fight for their lives now.

At last her steps led her to Cajun Cal’s corral and stables.

Cajun Cal was not here. That did not stop some from saddling up their horses and heading back home.

She found one young mare ready to go, the owner back in the stalls busy fetching another horse. Without asking, she grabbed the horse's reins and led her to the corral gate.

Out in the street, she mounted the mare and led her north out of town before the owner came out.

At the crossroads, she stopped for a moment. It looked like a crowd of some sort gathered outside the church off in the field.

The same church she tried to destroy the other day by shooting at it with a heavy rifle.

Her brows furrowed at the building that should have been destroyed. She knew for a fact she left it burning.

After a moment's hesitation at the sight of all those people standing around outside the church, she decided to head for the Dalmont place instead.

Turning west, she quickly put the church and the crossroads behind her.

7.30

The first time most people heard about the new church built outside town at the crossroads came about when word spread that the majority of people affected by the “red face outbreak,” as many were calling it, were over there.

Soon, most of the town’s populations gathered outside the church, along with families from the outlying farms. Too many people gathered there to fit inside, especially with so many red-faced afflicted individuals crowding the pews. But everyone wanted to see if a loved one or acquaintance might be among the afflicted.

Before long, people brought those with red faces who were still in town over to the church. It seemed the most logical thing to do, since so many victims were already there.

Since no one patronized the pub, even Eddie and Oma closed up their place and walked out to the church to see what all the fuss was about.

Soon, townsfolk started wondering what happened. A susurrus in the crowd at the church grew louder as questions multiplied.

Soon, one old woman raised her voice above all the others and she started to yell.

“What I want to know is what in the . . .”

Suddenly she seemed to realize that a house of God may not be the best place for profanity, and she bit off what she was about to say.

In a quieter voice, but in a no less demanding tone, she said, “What in the world is going on here? What happened to all our friends and neighbors? We demand some answers!”

The volume of the crowd lifted in assent.

“Yeah!”

“What I want to know is, where did this church come from? It wasn’t here last time I rode out of town!”

At this, Leo walked to the front of the sanctuary and stepped up to the podium. He turned and faced the crowd.

Thousands of black MicaBots had reformed themselves into thick decorative columns on either side of the stage. No one gave them a second look. But the bots paid attention, making sure no one tried to harm the preacher.

“Friends, my name is Leonwood Iglese. I am pastor of this Church of the Maker. It was built thanks to the generous gifts of Mr. and Mrs. Thomas Savage. It went up very quickly, just a couple days ago, in time for their wedding. I am grateful to be here and able to serve your needs during this time of trial in your community.”

“Did he just say Mr. and Mrs. Savage?” the loud woman said in the back of the standing room only crowd. “Who’s the missus?”

“He married Gwen Wilder,” Gail Abimo said, smug with knowledge others did not have. “They make a beautiful couple. She fits him so much better than that dreadful Malcolm Dalmont did.”

A few of the other women in the crowd nodded in agreement.

“I don’t know this new fella,” one older lady said. “But I’ll say that just about anybody other than Mal Dalmont would be better for her.”

Leo cleared his throat, and most of the crowd’s attention reverted to him.

“We don’t know how long the people with red mists over their faces will remain docile. We do know they are prone to violence. I propose some of you who are armed volunteer to serve as guards in case they become agitated again.”

“How long will they be like this?” someone in the front of the crowd asked.

“I do not know. I have no idea what is going on with them.”

The double arched doors to the church opened at that moment, and Tom and Gwen walked in.

The loud woman said, “Hey! Speak of the . . .”

She trailed off when the woman next to her grabbed her arm.

The couple weaved their way through the crowd and walked up to the dais, joining the pastor. They turned and faced the assembly.

“For those of you who don’t know me or who I haven’t met yet, I’m Tom Savage. I’ve got a place about twenty clicks out, and I’m still sort of new around here. But I happen to have some information on all this,” Tom said. “It turns out my farmhand recognized this weapon from his time in the war.”

This statement caused visible consternation in the crowd, and murmuring. People shifted weight on their feet and several glanced askance at the red-faced people filling the pews.

“These red things are related to nanobots. You know, the first aid stuff that’s injected into people after they get injured, and repairs bodily tissue. Only, these are malicious in nature. They attack the nervous system and take it over. The ones in the eyes transmit data from the ones floating outside the face to the others inside the brain. That’s why these people’s eyes are red, and that’s why they have a haze floating over them like ghostly goggles of some sort.”

He had their full attention, now. All murmuring stopped.

“Like I said, they were made for the war.”

“By the League or the Republic?” someone in the middle of the crowd said.

“Star League.”

“That figures. Them bastards was always developin’ somethin’ nefarious.”

“The Republic blew up my granddaddy’s ship! Talk about nefarious.”

“Look,” Tom said before the old League versus Republic argument could spiral out of control. “It doesn’t matter, alright? This was a weapon devised for war, but we found a way to transmit a signal to these little bots telling them to stand down. That’s why everybody stopped fighting all of a sudden.”

A quiet moment passed as the crowd digested this information.

“Well, how long will it last?” the loud woman demanded. “My beau is completely unresponsive. Look at him over there. Is he gonna be alright? When am I gonna get him back?”

Gwen gave Tom a look and said, “I’ll take this one.”

She turned back to the crowd, locking eyes with the loud woman in the back.

“We don’t know. Our best estimate is three days to one week.”

This resulted in a lot of noise as almost everybody in the crowd had something to say.

“Hold it, hold it! Everybody shut up!”

The crowd quieted down and focused on Oma Ferguson, who waved her arms for their attention.

When they quieted again, she turned to the front.

“What makes you say one week, Gwen? How do you know that?”

Gwen turned back to Tom, ceding the floor to him once more.

“Well, we don’t know that for sure, Mrs. Ferguson,” Tom said. “But a week is about how long nanobots last before exiting your system. And since this is based on the same or similar technology, it’s a reasonable guess.”

The murmuring picked up again as individuals in the crowd reviewed this information amongst themselves.

Leo lifted both hands, holding them wide. A few MicaBots stirred on the columns, just to see if he needed them, but no one noticed.

“Ladies and gentlemen, the important thing is this. We need to know who brought this foul plague upon us. Where did it come from? How did it get here? I think we need to answer those very pertinent questions.”

Tom said, “If I may, pastor?”

Leo nodded and stepped back, leaving Tom at the forefront of the dais once more.

“Recently a package was delivered via the Jet Stream, was it not, Mrs. Ferguson?”

Oma nodded, frowning.

She said, “That’s right. That new gal went and picked it up, the real sassy one.”

“And who was it addressed to, if I might ask?”

“That Glyph feller.”

“I think that answers the question about where this came from, at least in part. If we could question Mr. Glyph, I bet we can answer your other questions about just what exactly happened here today.”

“That’s that anarchist,” somebody said.

“He wanted to change the name of our town to Allegory!” the loud woman yelled.

“What’s an allegory?” somebody else said.

“I dunno. It’s like a representation of something else, maybe?”

The crowd muttered in confusion for a moment.

Tom said, “We need to interrogate Mr. Glyph. Does anybody know where he is at the moment?”

Everyone in the crowd looked around, as if searching for him in the press of people.

Leo frowned.

“He was just here a minute ago . . .”

7.31

Glyph hurried through the field away from the church, cutting west of the crossroads. He glanced over his back for the seventh time in a row, but no one followed.

Ahead, he could make out the West Road, gravel with a smooth sweep cutting through the landscape. Already he missed having a horse to do the walking for him, never before realizing how useful those animals could be.

He turned when he finally reached the road, and picked up his pace.

Nightfall was closing in, and he had no desire to be outside when all the light would be gone. With that thought in mind, he picked up his pace again, speedwalking now. He covered the distance while stewing in his thoughts.

At last he saw the three burned trees ahead, like sentinels on the road, and he broke out into a jog. He paused to catch his breath at the wooden arch with “Dalmont” carved in thick letters across their entrance road.

The light continued to fade, but he knew he only had one more kilometer to go at this point, so he set out for the Dalmont family compound with renewed vigor.

The closer he came to the cluster of houses and outbuildings, the more he reflected back on Newt leaving him.

Newt rode away, leaving him to walk. That stuttering nincompoop left him to his fate at a critical moment, he thought.

Never mind that events did not particularly happen the way he chose to remember them. Somehow, he decided, this really was all Newt's fault.

Gliph's ire increased the closer he came to the houses.

At last, with darkness fully settling across the sky, he walked through the yard gate and into the compound. Several dogs announced his arrival to everyone inside, loudly barking an alarm.

A few men came out, armed, to see about the ruckus. He ignored them and headed for Mal's house, which he had taken for his own.

The muscles in his legs felt taut from all the walking. He was sore in other places, too, unused to so much physical exertion. The pain and exhaustion contributed to his irritation, amplified as he approached the front door.

It swung open before he got there, one of his men coming out.

The fellow's eyes grew wide, and he stepped out of the way, leaving the door open for him.

Gliph stormed in, tired and irritated. He walked through the wood-paneled drawing room and headed for the study, which served as his office now.

He threw open the door and stopped.

There, in the room's heavy leather chair behind a large wooden desk sat Newt Dalmont.

And in his lap sat Morgan Fisher, her chest pressed against young Newt's face.

Both turned at the sound of the door, startled looks flashing across their faces.

Gliph roared in rage. He channeled all the exhaustion and annoyances and disappointment in the day into one singular focus: Newt Dalmont.

The man who left him behind.

“N-n-n-n-now hold on M-m-m-m-m . . .”

Gliph pulled out his handgun and aimed for Newt’s head.

Morgan screamed and jumped off Newt’s lap, hitting the floor behind the desk.

For a split second, Newt stared down the barrel of the gun and saw his life flashing before his eyes.

Then he ducked, moving faster than he ever had.

Thoop!

A red bolt blazed out of the gun and slammed into the leather chair, knocking it back and leaving a scorching hole.

Smoke drifted up.

Morgan screamed again.

Newt joined her on the floor behind the desk.

Gliph quickly moved to his right for a better shot.

Newt and Morgan scrambled on the floor to the other side of the desk, keeping it between them and Gliph’s gun.

Gliph squeezed off a shot at Newt’s leg as he pulled it around the side.

Buster Cordana came through the door. Alarmed by the shooting, he had his gun out. Surprised to see his boss home, and firing a gun, the big man lowered his weapon.

“Mr. Gliph? Is everything alright?”

Gliph snarled at him.

“Everything is *not* alright. I’m gonna kill Newt Dalmont! I found him fooling around with my woman!”

“Ah.”

Buster holstered his gun, his demeanor softening.

“Now, Mr. Gliph. We all know that Morgan is a flirt. I’m sure she didn’t mean nothin’ by it.”

Behind the desk Morgan and Newt traded a glance from their spot on the floor.

She whispered, “I’m going to give you a chance.”

“Wh-wh-what?”

She pulled out her last dispenser and quickly sprayed a cloud of red mist in his face before he could pull away.

His head jerked. Newt coughed, sucking the red motes into his system.

“There’s still a chance these might work,” she said, watching him carefully as they both stayed on the floor while Buster tried to reason with Gliph.

The coughing stopped.

Morgan watched him closely.

When Newt opened his eyes, the whites were gone, replaced with red. A mist swirled around his face, hovering over his eyes.

Morgan smiled.

She said, “Are you going to let him talk about you that way, Newt? Go out there and show him you’re a man!”

7.32

Newt jumped up on top of the big desk in one smooth motion, and ran across its length, boots pocking the wood.

At the edge his legs coiled and he took an adrenalin-surged flying leap, sailing across the room and into Gliph.

Taken by surprise, Gliph turned from Buster and tried to raise his weapon. But Newt slammed into him and knocked him down before he could fire.

They rolled onto the floor, fists flying. The gun clattered off to one side, Gliph unable to hold on to it.

Newt pivoted on top of him, knees pinning Gliph's chest to the floor, fists pounding into his face.

Gliph struggled, fighting back but off-balance. Mostly, he tried to block the blows rather than landing any of his own.

“Hey! Hey!”

Buster rushed over and tried to grab Newt from behind. He reached under Newt's shoulders and pulled.

Newt turned and landed a roundhouse punch in Buster's face from his knees while the bigger man was bent over.

Stunned at the ferocity of the attack, Buster pulled away, stumbling as he went.

Newt turned back to beating on Gliph.

Buster rubbed his jaw and recovered. His eyes narrowed as he reassessed the younger man on top of his boss.

This time he abandoned any thoughts of subtlety. He ran at Newt and barreled the smaller man over, knocking him off Gliph and falling over him on the floor.

Gliph scrambled to his feet, face swollen from the blows. He looked around the room frantically.

Behind the desk, Morgan stood crouched, ready to duck again if needed.

They locked eyes across the room.

Morgan smiled at him, triumphant.

She said, "It still works out here, Rey. I don't know how. But I guess when we're out of town it makes a difference somehow. However it works, I'll take it. I have my pet, my attack dog now. And I'm not afraid to use him."

Gliph stared at her, his face turning puffy. Both his eyes would turn black soon.

She stared back, still smiling at him, looking confident and assertive.

His emotions overloaded . . . and he couldn't take it anymore. He rushed from the room, leaving the two men struggling on the floor and the woman who turned on him behind.

Newt shoved the larger man off him in an impressive display of strength. He jumped up, ready to fight some more as Buster stood up, too.

Buster eyed Newt warily now, noticing the red eyes, jumping irises, and the odd haze surrounding his face. He carefully backed away, putting some distance between them. He moved slowly, staying on guard.

Morgan watched from her spot behind the far side of the desk. She smiled at Newt and wondered what she could do with him. Things had been going

so well, making up with him, and then Gliph showed up.

But this was certainly a lemonade from lemons moment, she thought. And Newt had done what she told him to do after being sprayed. It was as if all his baser instincts had been suddenly accentuated . . .

Inspiration struck, and she decided to try something, taking a new approach.

“Newt!”

The young man’s eyes turned toward her, still flaring with anger and hazed with red.

“Newt, stop! Stop fighting, Newt!”

Slowly, breathing hard, he brought down his fists.

Emboldened, Morgan stood up and moved around the desk.

“Careful . . .” Buster said, his attention torn between Morgan and his assailant.

He moved off to one side, but he stayed close, ready to intercede if Newt decided to attack her.

“It’s okay. Isn’t it, Newt? Everything’s going to be alright now.”

Morgan slowly drew closer.

Newt’s eyes shifted down to her chest, where his attention had been before they were so rudely interrupted. His fists slowly uncurled, and he seemed to relax a little.

She walked up to him with more confidence now, and laid a hand gently on his shoulder. His eyes no longer focused on hers at all. His breathing slowed, and all his attention remained fixated on her breasts.

She turned and smiled at Buster.

“Thank you, Mr. Cordana. I think I have the situation fully under control now. You may leave us.”

Buster stared at her for a moment, looking at her in the eyes as opposed to where Newt stared.

“Ma’am, I don’t know what’s goin’ on here, but something ain’t right. He ain’t lookin’ . . . natural. I ain’t never seen that before.”

“He’s been treated with a neural solution that leaves him more vulnerable to passionate emotions. And I can assure you, Mr. Cordana. I know how to handle passionate men. I am perfectly safe. You may leave.”

Buster wiped a hand down his face.

Technically, she was not his boss.

On the other hand, she was the boss’s woman.

On yet another hand, it looked like she might be cheating on the boss.

But that was not his business, was it? Buster should not get involved at all, he thought.

“If only that were possible,” he murmured softly. “I’m already involved.”

Finally deciding that prudence trumped valor above all else, Buster elected to take Morgan at her word. He made for the exit and closed the door to the study behind him. As he walked away, he softly kneaded the new set of bruises covering his body so recently left there by the youngest Dalmont brother.

Elsewhere in the house, he could hear Gliph angrily shouting out orders.

7.33

Morgan stayed holed up in the study with Newt for the rest of the evening and into the night.

In the morning, Buster brought them food and something to drink. He knocked on the door and Morgan opened it. He noted that her clothes looked different from the ones she wore last night.

“Is everything alright, Ms. Fisher?”

“Everything’s fine, Mr. Cordana. Better than fine. It’s the best it’s ever been.”

He tried to glance over her shoulder and into the room. Buster could not see much through the crack, and he found no sign of Newt.

“Is Mr. Dalmont okay? He hasn’t tried to harm you in any way, has he?”

“Oh, no. Quite the opposite. He’s been very good to me, in fact. *Very* good. There’s nothing for you to worry about, I promise you.”

He nodded and handed the trays over, along with some water bottles. Reluctantly, he stepped back and let her close the door in his face.

That morning, Britt Dalmont met his brother Emmitt when Angarita led the man into the study.

“You hear about what happened in town?” Emmitt said when the door closed behind the maid.

“No. I’ve been working on the ranch’s finances. That’s been eating up all my spare time and energy. What happened in town?”

“It seems our guests here started quite the ruckus. They’re saying Mr. Gliph took delivery of a package from League City, and somehow that started a riot.”

“Started a riot? How did he do that with a delivery?”

“The package contained some kind of neurological agent that turns people nuts. They call it ‘red-faced’ on account of their face and eyes get all red. Makes people want to kill each other. The new fella, the one who attacked us along with the fae and the marshal to grab Mal, Tom Savage. Somehow he fixed it. But not before a third of the town was overcome by that plague. Lots of folks died, evidently. It’s a big mess.”

“You say our guy started this? Gliph?”

“Yup. The same one you put up in Mal’s house.”

Britt scooted his chair back, a look of concern crossing his face.

He said, “Let’s go talk to him and see what this is all about. I haven’t heard anything about this. I haven’t even left the house since shortly after lunch yesterday.”

He followed his brother to the front door, passing Rita along the way. She winked at him when Emmitt wasn’t looking. He smiled back at her, silently acknowledging her as the primary reason he had not left the house lately.

Outside in the morning light they walked across the lawn between the four homes, heading over to Malcolm’s house. Stopping at the door, Emmitt rapped on it.

They waited a couple minutes, but no one answered.

“Doesn’t he have, like, ten people staying in there with him?” Emmitt said, rapping on the door again.

One of their hired hands walked around the corner of the house. He saw the two brothers at the door and approached.

“You lookin’ for them people, sir? They done rode out at first light.”

Britt said, “Who? All of them? How many rode out?”

“I didn’t count ’em, sir. Ten, maybe? Anyhow, they’re gone. Prob’ly in Little York by now, I reckon.”

“Did they take that strumpet with them?” Emmitt growled.

“The what, now?”

“The woman who’s been fawning all over our brother. Did they take her?”

“Well, now, I didn’t see no woman. No, I take it back, they did have a couple women. But they was dressed like men, you know. No sir, I don’t believe I saw that real attractive one. She’s a looker, for sure. I would’a noticed her, I reckon. She lights up the eyes, that one, if you you know what I mean.”

Britt turned back to the door.

“I guess we should check out the place, if they’re gone. Hopefully they didn’t trash it.”

He tried the handle, and the door opened inward. The two brothers walked inside the house.

“Looks empty,” Emmitt said. “We’ll have to check out the bedrooms, see what kind of mess they left behind. I can spare a couple maids to clean the place up, I suppose, since yours is about useless.”

Britt ignored this comment.

They walked further inside. Britt turned and headed for the study, which for him was the heart of a house. He jostled the handle of the door and opened it.

Morgan left the sofa on the far side of the room, unwrapping herself from Newt. He stayed behind, lying on his back while she walked to the door wiping sleep from her eyes.

“Hello boys. I’m borrowing your brother for a little while.”

Britt stared at Newt still sleeping on the couch.

“What’s that covering his face?”

He took a step into the room, squinting.

“What is that?”

“That’s a parting gift from Mr. Gliph,” Morgan said, smiling. “Newt should be back to himself in a few days, I imagine. Until then, I’m going to enjoy every minute I have with him. He does everything I tell him to.”

Emmitt stayed at the door. He shifted his attention from Newt’s face to Morgan’s.

“This was from Gliph, you say?”

Morgan nodded, still smiling.

Emmitt turned to his brother and said, “This is what I was telling you about that happened in Little York yesterday. It’s one thing for him to drug up the townies, but this is our brother. We need to catch him before he gets on a sky train or something and do something about this. It’s not right.”

Britt nodded.

“You’re right. I’ll saddle up with you. Get all the boys together and let’s go after him.”

Emmitt rushed out of the house.

Britt turned to follow him.

At the door he stopped and turned back to Morgan.

“Watch over him and make sure he doesn’t hurt himself. Looks like you’ve done a good job, so far.”

Morgan smiled at him, pulling a strand of hair out of her face.

“He’s no trouble. It took all night, but I’ve got him to be very compliant.”

Britt turned and closed the door to the study as he walked out.

He did not want to think about any of the implications Morgan’s statement held.

7.34

Emmitt and Britt rode out of the compound with sixteen riders, every spare man they had. They were all armed to the teeth, with multiple rifles strapped to their backs and in saddle cases. They also carried pistols in holsters and belts, knives in sheaths, and a few clubs thrown in for good measure in case combat got up close and personal.

The men rode out of the stables and hit the road, kicking up dust. A couple minutes later they raced under the great wooden Dalmont arch and turned onto the West Road, heading east toward Little York.

At the crossroads, Emmitt raised a fist and pulled his horse to a stop. The others halted behind him.

Someone said, “Where’d that church come from? Ain’t never seen it before.”

Emmitt said, “Whatcha think, Britt? Did they head to the church? Looks like the grass is trampled leading over there. Somebody’s been going back and forth to the church.”

“Nah, not Gliph. He’s heading out of town, probably trying to get back to League City. And the only way to do that is by sky train. No, he’s not going to waste time going to a church. For one thing, he’s not the church-going type. For another thing, it won’t help him get away from here.”

Emmitt nodded and said, “Let’s head back behind Oma’s, then. That’s likely where he’ll be. If he’s going to call for a sky train to come and pick him and his people up, he’ll have to go there to do it.”

Eighteen horses took off once more, this time heading south toward Little York.

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Gliph waited impatiently on horseback in front of Ferguson’s Freehold.

At long last, the front door opened and Buster walked out.

“It took a big bribe, Mr. Gliph. She was not happy to see me in there, probably on account of that bar fight where I threw Ms. Oma into the wall. I think she charged me extra on account of that. But she finally relented after greasing her palm quite a bit, and she let me put out a call for a sky train to come pick us up. And we’re in luck. The Jet Stream is nearby and coming back this way after making that special delivery for us. It will be here shortly, in fact, and they’ll send a car down. It’ll cost extra since Little York wasn’t on Captain Montaigne’s stop at the moment, but he’ll be here soon and he’ll pick us up.”

Gliph nodded, holding the money bag with what remained of the bank robbery tokens he still had. Somehow, about three quarters of the money had gone missing.

He had a good idea who stole it. Morgan Fisher was the only person who knew where he hid the loot in Mal Dalmont’s house.

But he was not going back to the Dalmont family compound. Ever. The need to leave this place overrode even his love for money. There wasn’t much left here for him, after he abandoned the idea of taking over Little York.

Already, he planned his next heist. He would return to League City and have Slodovich rob the bank again. The man likely had accumulated more funds in Gliph’s absence from the X’s and O’s followers housed in the Projects as well. He would enjoy that windfall, too.

Gliph could get more money, as much as it pained him to leave any behind. But now was the time to go.

Gliph nodded at Buster and said, "Let's go, then. We'll wait for the sky train out there rather than here in the street."

Buster untied his horse and mounted up. He followed the others as they rode around the side of the pub and into the field out back.

Several meters from the back door to Ferguson's Freehold, they halted, leaving plenty of room for the sky cars to land.

The group stayed quiet, with only the occasional whicker from one of their horses breaking the silence.

In the distance, they could hear the clip-clopping of galloping hooves, drawing steadily closer.

The men looked at one another, but nobody said anything.

The sound grew louder.

Gliph held onto his remaining moneybag, ignoring the sound of approaching horses and keeping his eyes on the hazy sky.

"There!" he said, pointing up cheerfully.

Two dark spots descended rapidly out of the haze, quickly growing larger as the cars descended, like an elevator coming down an invisible shaft.

The hooves grew louder.

Emmitt rounded the corner of the pub at full speed, first in the line of riders. He pulled out his pistol and fired off a bolt, a green shot that exploded in the clump of horses standing out in the pasture.

Equine screams accompanied the panic of humans as Gliph's people scattered. One horse went down, succumbing to the energy blast. The rider jumped off before it crushed his leg, desperately clawing for his own gun from the holster at his side.

Emmitt shot again, knocking the man down before he could squeeze off a shot.

The two sky train cars slowed abruptly, then settled down softly on the ground. Their doors slid open and Captain Montaigne stuck his head out of the passenger car.

“Welcome aboard, folks! I . . . holy smoke!”

Montaigne dove to the floor as bolts peppered his car.

7.35

More of the Dalmont men rode out into the field, firing from horseback.

Gliph's people mounted a defense, some of them jumping off horses for a better shot.

Bolts crisscrossed the field, peppering the back of the pub and slamming into the Jet Stream's sky cars.

Montaigne stood up, trying to press the proper buttons on the control panel to close the doors and go back up. He looked intent on evacuating the area as soon as possible.

Britt saw the man moving in the car and opened up on full auto.

Montaigne ducked again, pulling back inside and away from the door as bolts splattered against his car.

Gliph's men and women scattered on horseback, then circled back around and tried to shoot back.

Buster raced his horse up and into the open luggage car, shots trailing him. He made the horse pivot in the tight space, shooting back at the Dalmont men.

Three guns trained on him and his horse. A flurry of bolts brought them down.

The horse died instantly, falling over on its side in the car. Buster dove off, rolling behind some luggage. Bolts lit up the inside of the car, making suitcases explode and splattering the horse's blood as more shots slammed into its body.

Buster stood up with two guns now and he held his arms straight out, the guns on full auto. He ran out of the car shooting wild, bringing down three Dalmont men in a flurry of shots.

Outside, he turned abruptly and ran behind the sky train car for cover. Behind the car he leaned up against the metal, breathing hard.

The look on his face betrayed amazement that he remained unhurt.

On the other side of the car, the firefight intensified.

More of Gliph's people went down.

Gliph found himself face down in the dirt, still holding his moneybag.

He looked up and locked eyes with Montaigne, also lying down but in the passenger car.

Two of Gliph's men and one woman still alive opened up on the Dalmonts with their guns on full auto.

For a moment, most of the gunfire from the town side aimed at the train halted in the onslaught of return fire.

Gliph crouched, ready to make a run for it under the covering fire.

Montaigne's eyes grew wide, realizing what was happening. He stood up again, this time not attracting attention from the Dalmonts.

His palm slammed on the door button.

"No!"

Gliph ran for the rapidly closing door.

Power packs depleted on two of the three guns. Firing full auto rapidly depleted them.

Under less fire now, Emmitt saw Gliph running for the car. He closed one eye and aimed carefully.

Thoop!

Gliph tripped and fell, one arm outstretched for the door as it closed, one holding onto the money. He landed face-first in the dirt, a bloody hole in his back.

Doors now fully closed, the Jet Stream cars ascended, drawing a few stray shots from the Dalmont side. But as they gained altitude, the shots quickly died off.

Buster dropped to the ground as he lost his cover, arms spread wide. He lay there, facing away from the pub, and played dead.

All the shooting stopped.

“How many did we lose?” Emmitt said, patting the neck of his horse to calm the animal down.

“Five,” Britt answered. “They got it much worse.”

Emmitt nodded and said, “You boys pick up our fallen and strap ’em to their horses. We’ll take ’em home and bury ’em proper.”

One of the men said, “What about the others, Mr. Dalmont? What about them?”

Emmitt spat in the general direction of all the bodies lying on the ground out in the field.

“Leave ’em.”

His men moved to pick up their dead. They ignored the bodies of X’s and O’s, leaving them just as Emmitt instructed.

Minutes later, they rode back around the pub and down Main Street. They headed for the crossroads and the Dalmont place.

Several minutes later, after he felt certain the Dalmonts were long gone, Buster turned his head to survey the field.

Seeing no one other than his dead comrades, he sighed in relief.

He glanced over at Gliph's body and noticed that it seemed to be lying at an odd angle. He looked like he was lying on top of something.

Walking over to it, Buster kicked the corpse onto its back. Clutch close to his chest, Gliph held his last moneybag tight, even in death.

Buster shook his head and gently pried it out of the man's grasp. He held it up in the morning light, laughing. Then he walked back toward the town.

High above him, a cargo car's door opened.

Seconds later, a dead horse fell out of the sky, landing in the field with a small *boom!* and a cloud of dust from a small crater flying up.

7.36

Later that day, Haley Stonecipher sat in Ashley Thallus's new office on Commerce Boulevard.

True to his word, Ashley had rented the nicer place and converted it into the local bureau for the Zeitung. He kept the lower rent place for himself, certain that proximity to the Southside Projects might one day pay dividends for him.

Haley sat in a comfortable new sofa as Ash paced the floor, intently listening to every word she said. Occasionally he would pause and tap out a few notes on his personal holo, which floated around the room with him.

At last, Haley wrapped things up, concluding her remarks. She had relayed all the information she had to give him. She leaned back and smiled at him.

"So that's the story. I'm sorry I can't give you direct witnesses, I know how much multiple sources are important for journalism and all that. But it would take a while for you to get out to Little York and interview people. I'm sure that if you did, you'd get a lot of material. But it's a few days away."

"I'm a direct witness, since I had to fight some of the people afflicted with these Emotes. It was only thanks to Night Shadow that I got through that. I have no idea how she found me and Clifford on time, but I'm very grateful for it."

Haley kept her mouth shut and made sure her face did not betray her. Ash was not paying much attention, though, caught up in forming the narrative for his story.

“No, I have met Tom and Gwen and I believe you. There should be some sort of official dispatch over the commlink from Little York to the Courthouse. Towns and settlements are supposed to report in when something momentous happens. If nothing else, they’re supposed to record births and deaths so the Courthouse can keep track of who is out there in the settlements. I can go down to the Courthouse and check that out for myself, and if they filed a report, it can serve as a second source beyond what you’ve told me. What intrigues me the most, though, is the fact that the X’s and O’s obtained this old weaponized technology and brought it here with them, with the intent to use it. I think that part of the story will interest my readers the most.”

Haley nodded.

She said, “Well I’m glad I and my friends were able to help you with a good story. It seems like there’s more going on out here in our little world than most people realize.”

“That’s true. It’s fortunate Tom’s farmhand had some experience with the Emotes. I’ll keep his name out of it for privacy purposes. SSI is not very active these days, by all accounts. But we should never count them out. There are still rumors of hit squads going out and settling old scores from time to time. We don’t want any of those guys coming here to Phaethon and stirring up trouble for Silas or anyone else.”

Haley smiled at him and said, “Why, Ashley Thallus! You seem downright protective of this obscure little outpost of ours.”

“Yeah. It’s home, at least for right now.”

He smiled back at her and stood up from his desk, then moved across the room to sit by her on the couch.

“And, who knows? Maybe forever.”

Gently, he reached out with a hand, and pulled her in close.

She responded, looking up into his eyes.

They kissed, long and hard.

-+-

It's not enough that she has to watch out for common criminals in League City. Now, Night Shadow has to hunt for weapons left behind after the war. Weapons that have made their way all the way out to Phaethon.

Emotes were a League innovation designed to enhance soldiers, enraging them with bloodlust and turning them into berserker killing machines.

The X's and O's brought Emotes with them when they migrated to the galaxy's newest colonized planet. But they failed in using Emotes to gain control of the capital or one of the outermost towns. Thanks in no small part to Night Shadow, and a few enterprising farmers in one of the most remote settlements on this planet, anarchists have failed to gain a foothold here . . .

7.37

“It’s a good writeup,” Tom said, finishing the latest article by Ash in the Zeitung.

He closed his personal holo and glanced up at his wife.

Tom and Gwen sat together at a small table in their honeymoon suite, enjoying breakfast from the Phaethonian Hotel’s room service.

“I’m really impressed with Ash being careful not to put our names in there anywhere,” Gwen said, sipping her coffee. “I kinda like being an anonymous source, you know? The key word being ‘anonymous.’”

“Yeah, he’s a good journalist, that’s for sure. He has shown . . . judiciousness. Is that a word? He’s being judicious in what and how he reports things. That’s pretty important when it comes to keeping your sources safe.”

Gwen nodded.

“Speaking of safety, Haley says he was worried the League might send a hit squad after Silas for revealing things about those Emotes. That’s why it’s kinda obscured in the story about how Ash found out about them.”

“Hm. Let’s hope it doesn’t put *Ash* on the wrong side of the League and SSI. They might be emboldened to come out here and stir up some trouble

since Phaethon remains unaligned, as yet.”

“Not with that embargo in place. Nobody’s coming out here. At least, not easily.”

“Yeah, but that won’t last forever. The embargo will be lifted, eventually.”

The lights in their room flickered, then went out.

Tom and Gwen looked at each other, now with only ambient light from the windows to see by.

“Aha. It would seem the hotel’s power pack has been depleted,” Tom said. “As we expected.”

“Now’s the time to make an offer to buy this place. Let’s go down there and lowball them!”

“No. If we purchase it, it’ll be a fair deal. Besides, we can afford it even if we have to overpay. I kinda want this place. Come on, let’s go see if they’re willing to talk with us.”

They set aside their food and pushed back the chairs, then headed for the door.

Out in the hall, apologetic servants rushed forward to assure them the power outage was only temporary.

Tom and Gwen smiled at this, knowing better. But they asked to speak with management, and were soon led downstairs by flashlight.

The owner himself met them, deeply apologetic. Tom and Gwen sat down with him by candlelight in his office and discussed the future of the Phaethonian Hotel.

The man seemed surprised that anyone wanted to buy his property.

Then he stopped to consider that two rather young people were the ones making the offer.

“Can you even afford this?” Eckerd Drapner said to the couple. “The Class Eight power pack alone will probably run you 50,000 credits to replace. That’s presuming we can even get ahold of one in League City.”

Drapner sat behind his desk in a sharp blue business suit and a neatly trimmed gray beard. He looked more successful than he actually was, Tom thought. Not a lot of commerce flowed through New Galveston, as of yet. And the Phaethonian needed commerce flowing in order to be successful.

“Certainly if you are not interested in selling us the property right now, Mr. Drapner, we will be happy to sell *you* a replacement power pack.”

“You?”

Drapner smiled at Tom. He glanced around the office as if looking for hidden cameras.

“Am I being set up? Is this a prank of some kind?”

“I assure you, we are quite serious. Phaethon Solar has the only Class Eights on this planet right now. Despite our monopoly, which only exists because of the embargo, mind you, we won’t gouge you on the price of a new power pack.”

“By the way, the going rate for a Class Eight is 40,000 credits, not fifty,” Gwen said.

“So, let me get this straight. You are willing to buy my hotel from me, for a reasonable sum from what you’re telling me, despite its debt and despite the fact that our Class Eight power pack just went out.”

“Correct,” Tom said.

“And if I’m not willing to do that, you’re still willing to sell me a Class Eight. And from what you’re telling me, you’re the only company on the planet with Class Eights right now. And that price is reasonable, too.”

“Also correct,” Gwen said.

Drapner leaned back in his chair.

“I don’t think either one of you really knows how to run a business, if I’m being honest with you. You should offer a pittance for the hotel and double your price for the power pack.”

Tom smiled.

“We think, in acknowledgment of the fact that we treat the people we do business with fairly . . . that our generosity now will pay dividends later. As for our business prowess, we are making money on the deal. At least, if you buy a power pack from us. If you sell us the hotel, maybe then we’ll suffer some losses. But at least you will come out ahead.”

Drapner looked at Tom, then at Gwen.

“You both seem quite serious. You can buy this place without a loan? And you’re willing to take on its debt?”

They nodded at him.

“Very well,” Drapner said. “I think we can do business with one another.”

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“That went well,” Gwen said as they made their way back upstairs.

“He’ll probably take the money, turn around and build a new hotel somewhere nearby.”

“You think?”

Tom shrugged and said, “It’s what I would do if I were in the hotel business.”

“I thought we just got into the hotel business.”

Tom smiled in the dim light as they walked out of the stairwell and into the second floor hallway.

“We just got into the real estate business, of which hotels are a subset, requiring a different skill set. This place is going to serve as a lot more than just a hotel.”

He stopped and made a grand gesture with his arms, turning in a circle in the hallway.

“This is the new world headquarters for Phaethon Solar Corp.”

7.38

“**W**hat are we going to do about Newt?”

Emmitt stood in Britt’s study while his brother sat at the desk. Both had returned from the shootout unscathed. Time had passed. And yet, their brother remained afflicted by the red haze.

“Nothing,” Britt said. “That Morgan gal is taking care of him. So long as she does that, we don’t have to worry about him.”

“Aren’t you worried that she’ll . . . I dunno, move in on him or something?”

Britt glanced up from his personal holo and looked across the desk at his brother.

“That boy has no prospects whatsoever, Emmitt. You know that. He doesn’t even try and sleep with a maid or anyone else, much less get married someday. If some floozie from the big city wants to nurse him back to health, that’s all the better. It’s not like she’s going to be able to gain anything by it. Even if she got his entire homestead, we’re still the ones running cattle on it. We’re the ones making money. I hate to say it, but our little brother is next to useless. You know this.”

Emmitt sighed.

“I do know it. But I don’t know what to do about her. I don’t like it. I don’t like her. I don’t trust her. And I wish Malcolm was here. He’d know what to do.”

Britt snorted.

“Mal was so smitten by that Gwen Wilder, he couldn’t even think straight. He’s the last person you’d want to ask about women. Trust me.”

“I still don’t like it. She’s holed up with him in that house, and he’s zoned out. All he does is sit there all day. I saw her feeding him the last time I was over. I walked in, he was sitting on a couch, and she was just popping bites of food into his mouth. It was disgusting.”

“She’s keeping him alive,” Britt said with a shrug. “That’s really all you can ask for in his current state.”

“When’s he gonna snap out of it? They’re saying in town some people have already come back to normal, out at the church.”

“Your guess is as good as mine. But since he was one of the last people dosed with that spray mist, I imagine he’ll be one of the last to come back.”

“Okay. Well, whenever he does regain his senses, the first thing we should do is kick her out. I don’t like her, Britt. Not one bit.”

Britt smiled at his brother.

“Well, now. I suspect whether she leaves or not will be up to him, don’t you think?”

Emmitt pondered this statement for a moment.

He said, “If he comes back . . . *when* he comes back to his senses, me and him are gonna go out for a ride, and I’ll try to talk some sense into him.”

“And if that doesn’t work? What are you going to do then? Remember, he’s never had a woman take an interest in him before.”

They locked eyes for a moment.

Finally, it was Emmitt’s turn to shrug.

“I dunno. But I don’t want her living next door to us forever, Britt. That duck won’t fly, y’hear? And if Mal ever gets back, it for sure won’t fly.”

-+-

Morgan sat on a sofa next to Newt, reading a paper book.

Newt had a small library of old-fashioned books, and she slowly made her way through the ones that interested her.

Most of the servants had left. She kept one older maid around to clean up after them, since Morgan hated doing housework. Everyone else, she dismissed.

Acutely aware of the animosity Newt’s brothers held for her, she avoided them as best she could. The maid brought her food, and Morgan fed Newt herself.

She never ventured outside, either alone or with Newt. They both stayed inside, passing the time.

Newt stared ahead with a blank expression on his face.

Morgan kept reading.

Later that afternoon, the red dots hovering near his eyes winked out one by one and fell to the floor.

Morgan did not notice at first.

Then Newt blinked, the red in his eyes receding. He slowly put both hands over his face and groaned.

Morgan closed her book and looked at him.

“Are you alright?”

“I’ve got a terrible headache.”

She smiled.

“Really? Tell me about it. Do you remember anything?”

“Ugh. No. Just . . . what did you do to me?”

“Newt . . . you’re not stuttering!”

He took his hands away from his face and stared at her.

“Morgan, what did you do? I don’t remember much, but I know you were the one who did something to me.”

“Oh, I didn’t do much. Mainly, I wanted to stay here. And taking care of you while you were in your altered state gave me an excuse to keep your brothers from kicking me out.”

“My brothers want to kick you out?”

She nodded.

“Maybe they know something I don’t, then. My brothers are pretty smart, a lot smarter than I am sometimes. Most of the time. Maybe you *should* leave, Morgan. I’ve got to go find Britt . . .”

He pushed down on the couch, preparing to stand.

Morgan pulled out her dispenser and sprayed his face. A fine cloud of red mist hovered over his head, the artificial microbes invading his system.

He opened his eyes, and she saw they were red again.

“Sit down, Newt. I’m going to take care of you for at least a few more days.”

Newt slowly sat back down on the couch, staring ahead with a blank expression on his face.

Morgan smiled and opened the book again, picking up where she left off.

7.39

The cold snap came in overnight, and suddenly it really felt like winter on the farm.

Tom noticed the chicks were not venturing very far from the coop this morning as he walked out the back door. Robert the Rooster didn't even bother to glare at him much when he stopped by to check their feed.

The new ThermoHaven dome activated automatically, just as it was supposed to. He wandered over there next, sipping his rapidly cooling coffee.

Silas popped in behind him, dressed for cold weather.

"Morning, Silas."

"Mornin', Mr. Savage."

They observed the produce springing up in the garden for a moment.

"I don't really know what I'm looking at," Tom said. "But everything seems to be looking good."

"Won't be too long now, and we'll be eatin' somethin' we've grown ourselves. That's for sure."

Tom nodded and they shared another moment in silence.

Finally, Silas cleared his throat.

“I wanted to mention that we’re startin’ to get more and more calls about Class Eights goin’ out.”

“Oh yeah?”

“Yeah. Haley says there’s five this mornin’ in League City alone. Lisa says there’s at least two more in other towns, with more on the way fixin’ to fail.”

“Good thing we’ve got that really big SCU now. We’ll put it to good use.”

Silas scratched the back of his head, hesitating.

“It’s gonna take Wink and me all day to do five replacements. It’d go a lot faster if we could teleport, and maybe we can sneak some ports in somewhere. But . . .”

“But there’s only the three of us.”

“Right. Wink is a big help, I’m glad we brought him on. We can take the women folk along, too, but . . .”

“I hear what you’re saying, Silas. We need more people.”

“Yes sir. And if things start gettin’ really hairy, we’re gonna need even more help than we’re thinkin’, I reckon.”

“Okay. You’re right, it’s time we started hiring in earnest. I’ll take out some help wanted ads, and we can see who shows up.”

“We might think about another load bot or two, also. I’m thinkin’ it might get to the point where Henry becomes our bottleneck. Load bots are slow, but unless we’re teleportin’, they’re just about the only way we’re gonna be movin’ around Class Eights.”

“Alright. We’ll add that to the list. I suppose we’ll need more trucks, too.”

“And maybe some warehouses in other cities. Or a way to easily transport the Class Eights if we can’t use teleportation.”

Tom nodded and smiled.

“Did I tell you we bought the Phaethonian?”

“I heard you say you were gonna.”

“I think we’ll be renting some warehouse space in New Galveston, too. And then I think we’ll be shipping Class Eights by boat to the other two continents, when we get to the point where we need to do that. New Galveston is actually closer to most other cities on the continent of Glagia than Little York is. It’s just that most merchants ship stuff using the sky trains.”

“Trucks are slower.”

“Trucks are slower,” Tom said nodding. “They’re also cheaper, especially for something as heavy as a Class Eight power pack.”

They smiled at each other.

“So, I think Phaethon Solar Corp is going to get lots of storage space in New Galveston and a fleet of trucks to go along with it. When a building’s power pack goes out, the municipality will put in a call to us, and we’ll ship them a new unit overland, for a modest delivery fee of course. Then we’ll swap out the units and bring them back to the closest warehouse. We’ll need a fleet of trucks and some good men to handle it all.”

“Good help can be hard to find.”

Tom shrugged.

“Lisa can help us in the pre-screening process before we interview. And we’ll pay better than most places, so we should attract some decent help, I hope.”

“How are you gonna know what to charge for everything, and how will you know what’s a good salary and all that other stuff, Mr. Savage?”

“That’s where our accountant bot comes in, Silas. I’m gonna put him to good use.”

7.40

Casper left his luxurious apartment and made the rounds in his building.

He was particular about who lived next to him, preferring single women of all ages.

He checked in on the widows, the single moms, and the young single women who populated the upper floors, walking by and visiting with his favorites.

Casper had a skeleton key that opened all the old-style locks in the building. He made sure no one installed a newer deadbolt or anything that might prevent him from accessing the rooms here.

It gave him a sense of security, and he felt being able to barge in on people increased his authority.

He explained that to one young woman who asked him why he felt the need to have so much control over this building.

Casper thought by showing her a little bit of vulnerability, it would humanize him. Then maybe she would respond to his advances. She had spurned him thus far.

But she did not respond better to his advances. In fact, she asked more and more personal questions.

Then one day she disappeared. He grew tired of her incessant queries. Casper never spoke of her again, and these days he hardly ever thought of her.

Perversely, killing her had the exact opposite effect of what he originally intended. The remaining women in the building were even more afraid of him now.

Casper set aside such thoughts as he headed for the stairs, returning once more to the street level. Walking outside, he checked in with the guards at the four nearest apartment buildings, asking them how their night shift went.

Casper remained profoundly interested in the goings-on of his neighborhood. He wanted to know who had marital trouble (many of the couples, sadly), who had money troubles (almost everybody, in fact), and anything of any significance occurring in the Projects.

After an hour of catching up with the guards, he finally made his way to Tay-hoe's. Not many customers frequented the bar, gambling den, and brothel at this time of day. But he walked in anyway in order to make sure everything was ready for the evening, when customers *were* expected.

Casper was all about the money. He always wanted to be ready to make more.

While counting the tokens from the lockbox behind the bar, double checking his figures from last night, a woman walked in looking haggard.

Casper glanced up and his eyes narrowed as she approached the bar.

"I know you," he said. "You left with Gliph."

"That's right, Mr. Slodovich. And as far as I know, I'm the last one left. There may have been a couple more survivors. I didn't stick around to find out."

Her name was Enzy, and she shared her story with Casper. She told him all about Gliph's star-crossed plans to take over Little York, how it all went wrong, and how the Dalmont boys came riding in looking for revenge just as the sky train showed up.

“It was terrible. They pretty much shot everybody up. Including me. I got hit in the side and lost a lot of blood. Later when I came to, I crawled into the pub bleeding all over the floor. The proprietors took pity on me. I think the old woman was ready to throw me out and let fate take over, come what may. But her husband has a kind heart. He gave me a med shot and fixed me up. I couldn’t pay, but he fed me and put me up for a few nights, much to his wife’s chagrin.”

Casper nodded impatiently. Now that she finished the main part of the tale, he grew disinterested in her personal travails. She borrowed money from the pub owner to take a sky train ride to League City, promising to pay him back when she could.

At last, she wrapped it up. Enzy did not know where Morgan disappeared to, nor did she know what happened to all the stolen bank money. All she really knew was that Gliph’s plan failed, and that he was dead now, along with most everyone else he brought to Little York.

Casper thanked her for telling him and filling in many details left out of the news. He offered to put her up in one of the whore’s bedrooms for the night.

She declined, saying she was going to move back in with her mother.

“I just got off the sky train. I want to go home.”

“At least take a free drink,” he said, reaching under the bar to get her something.

A minute later he handed her a glass of amber liquid.

“It’s a new one, I think you’ll like it. People are dying to try it.”

She thanked him and knocked back the drink, downing it one gulp. Then she turned and walked out of the bar.

Casper cleaned up. There was still plenty of time left before the crowds would surge into Tay-hoe’s. He wanted everything to be ready.

Soon, he left and wandered back over to his place.

One of the prostitutes staying there greeted him at the door.

“I’m so glad you’re home, Mr. Slodovich! What have you been doing all this time?”

“Thinking,” he said, taking her in his arms and shutting the door behind them.

“What have you been thinking about?”

“I’m thinking that Berris is gone and Gliph is dead.”

He pulled her into a full-body hug, holding her tight.

Over her shoulder he said, “And nature abhors a vacuum.”

-+-

Out on the street, just a few meters before the door to her mother’s apartment, Enzy fell to the sidewalk foaming at the mouth.

The poison Casper used in her drink was an old SSI concoction, designed to kill dissenters in public.

It was made to send a message, to let people know the victim had been very deliberately taken out.

Death was quick. And messy.

Pedestrians passed her by, ignoring her convulsions.

Seconds later, she became yet another fresh corpse in the Projects.

End of Book 7

OVERLORD'S FOLLY

8.1

A young man slept in his chair, deep in a basement office underneath the Courthouse.

Hung over, he had spent too much time and far too much money at a nightclub called Slamdunks in League City's off-Commerce area.

While too much money had been spent on booze, little had been spent on women. But this worked out well since he was between pay cycles.

Women could be expensive . . .

But dreaming of one, or three, was always free. The man smiled a little bit in his slumber.

A chime went off from the room's holo, floating above his utilitarian desk.

In his sleep, the man's smile disappeared.

The chime sounded again.

Still sleeping, his brows slowly creased.

The third time the unwelcome tone sounded, he finally opened his eyes.

"Wha . . . ?"

He woke up and moved his chair closer to the holo, swiping his finger through a button floating above the desk.

A man's voice filled the little room.

"This is the unflagged ship Erstwhile, hailing Phaethon Orbital Control. Come in Control. Is anyone there?"

Stunned, the hungover young man stared at the readout on the holo.

"Erstwhile, unaffiliated."

Underneath, for the description, the readout stated: *"Gen 1 Sparrow-class (Robin)."*

The young man stared at the text, along with the graphical image of a ship floating above his desk.

"I don't think anyone's home," a woman's voice said over the com. "Let's just land."

"We can't do that," the man's voice said, alarmed at the audacity of the suggestion. "It doesn't work that way!"

He cleared his throat and tried again. The chime came over the airwaves.

"Phaethon Orbital Control, do you hear me? Come in, Control. This is the unaffiliated ship Erstwhile, requesting permission to land."

The young man scrambled for a holo button floating nearby.

"Uh, hello! Yes, this is control. Uh . . . I've never seen an unaffiliated ship before, Erstwhile."

This statement led to an awkward pause.

The young man stabbed at the button for Hizzoner's office.

It turned green, and he sighed in relief. Someone authorized to make decisions would be here soon.

"Well, uh . . . there's an embargo, and . . ."

All of a sudden, the young man woke up fully.

“Oh. *Oh*, I see. Do you have any cargo to trade, Erstwhile?”

“Yes! Yes, I do. And, uh . . . one passenger who wishes to visit your fine rock.”

The woman’s voice cut in again.

“Tell him this is an official visit sanctified by Pearl Polytechnic University! Tell him . . . “

“Tara, please . . . You can explain all that to the customs agents. That’s assuming they even let us go down. They might not, you know.”

The woman snorted.

“Of course they’ll let us land, if only to browse your cargo and rip you off. They haven’t seen a ship in months.”

“That we *know* about . . . Control, are you still there? Come in, Control!”

“Uh, yes. Yes, I am. A representative from our governing office should be here shortly . . .”

He sighed in relief as the door slid open and Xu himself walked in wearing an expression of curiosity.

The young man quickly muted the com.

“It’s an unaffiliated ship, Mr. Xu. I’ve never seen the like before.”

Xu’s face relaxed, and he nodded knowingly.

“Smugglers. That’s an old pre-war League ship, the Robin-class. You don’t see many of those anymore. Well, it’s about time they got here. Give them the coordinates for our spaceport. I’ll notify the merchants.”

“They’ve got one passenger, too, sir.”

Xu raised an eyebrow.

“I’ll send somebody from Customs along as well, then. They’ll likely have to go back if the embargo ever lifts and they’re found to be here as an

unauthorized visitor. We'll need a record if this person decides to stay so we can tell the Marshals, or whoever comes looking for them."

"Do you think they're running from something, Mr. Xu?"

"No one ever comes to a frontier planet for altruistic purposes, my boy. Especially during an embargo."

"Yes sir, I suppose you're right. I'll give them the coordinates."

"Who knows?" Xu said, heading for the door. "Maybe if they make a lot of credits, we'll start to see more smugglers coming to visit us. Goodness knows, we could certainly use more imports."

-+-

Ashley Thallus sat in the office of the Zeitung's Phaethon branch, a holo linked to the quantum matrix back to Diego.

This real-time connection to civilization existed thanks to an orbital antenna left by the Elsa Cole, three months ago.

Laying down on his office couch, his girlfriend Haley Stonecipher dozed off.

They had taken lunch after Haley finished her morning sales for Tom's farm out in the bazaar. But Haley led a secret life late as the Night Shadow, and rarely had enough sleep.

A knock at the door roused her from slumber.

Ash smiled at her apologetically as he walked around the desk.

"Maybe I should hire a receptionist."

"Only if she's like 50 years old and there's no way you'd ever fall for her."

"That's just a stereotype, Haley. Not every man sleeps with his receptionist."

"Stereotypes are based on kernels of truth, though."

Ash did not reply to this last statement because by this time he had reached the door. When he opened it, a shorter portly man smiled up at him.

“Howdy do, Mr. Thallus.”

“Mr. Ariston! Won’t you come in?”

“Oh, thankee. Thankee kindly. I don’t have time to come inside, though. I’m just here to drop a little tidbit in your ear I thought you might like to know! We’re getting our very first visit by a ship since the Cole came by oh so many weeks ago.”

“Is that so? When’s it coming?”

“Right now! It’s dropping out of orbit as we speak. I heard about it in the Merchant’s Hall and thought you might be interested in knowing. Word is, it’s an unflagged vessel!”

“I see. That’s very unusual, is it not?”

“Yes. Yes it is!”

Ariston’s voice dropped to a conspiratorial whisper, carrying a hint of glee.

“It’s almost *certainly* a smuggler!”

“Oh, I see. Yes, that is interesting.”

“There’s no telling what sort of merchandise might be onboard! I’m just giddy with excitement. Well, I’ve got to go. I’ve got a rickshaw waiting to bring me out to the spaceport. I hope to bring back more stuff to sell in my shop. Good day, Mr. Thallus!”

“And a good day to you, Mr. Ariston. Thanks for the tip.”

“Remember me in any story you might write up about this!” the man said over his shoulder as he walked out down the hall. “It’s Ariston’s Home Goods, at the eastern corner of the bazaar! I’ll give ten percent off to anyone who mentions they saw my shop mentioned in your story!”

Ash shut the door, smiling.

“That guy’s always looking for an angle. And free advertising.”

“I’ve got to get out there, too,” Haley said. “There might be something worth buying for the farm. Are you going? We can take the truck.”

“Well, I guess I’m going, then.”

“Come on, it’ll be fun. This will be the most exciting thing to happen in this town for weeks.”

8.2

Ash crouched down on the passenger side of a flatbed truck's cabin as Haley raced through traffic.

She honked at a rickshaw that pulled out in front of her, swerving at the last minute. The runner, pulling his passengers at a jog, took one hand off his load and gave her a mono-digit salute.

She ignored him and pressed on for the spaceport, posthaste.

"What's the hurry?" Ash finally asked after she blew through her third red light.

"We need a good parking space."

"Are you serious? All this is for a parking space?"

"Have you ever been to a spaceship landing on a frontier planet during an embargo, Ash?"

"No. Have you?"

"No. But I can guess what it's going to be like."

"What's it going to be like?"

"Pandemonium. Mass chaos. Every merchant in town is going to be there. And a bunch from out of town, too."

She honked at the next intersection, warning the pedestrians about to cross as she blew on through. Angry people yelled at her and waved their arms in outrage.

On the back hanging on tight, Henry the load bot sat holding onto handles built into the bed, his feet dangling off the edge.

Pedestrians took their ire out on the bot as the truck rushed by, but he did not have very sophisticated conversational programming. Their profanities flew over his head, in more ways than one.

At last, Haley made her way to the spaceport's main entrance . . . and joined a line of other trucks, cabs, rickshaws, personal vehicles and pedestrians.

A harried-looking guard waved everyone through, informing them they should park in designated spots and remain well clear of the landing area until the ship came down.

Haley found a space quickly. Already, hundreds of other vehicles clustered around. Many more trucks pulled up beside her even before she and Ash opened their doors.

“See? I was right. Never doubt my shopping skills, Ashley Thallus. They are legendary!”

“This is a shopping skill? Nearly killing us while driving like a banshee just to get a good parking spot?”

“Yes. Now come on, we need to be first in line when that ship comes down. This should make a good story for you, so it's not like you're not getting anything out of it.”

Together they left the truck behind and weaved through the sea of parked vehicles, heading for the crowd at the edge of the parking area. The atmosphere had a collegial carnival vibe. Everyone seemed happy to be there, anxiously awaiting the ship.

“Are all these people here to buy stuff from this smuggler?” Ash wondered out loud.

“Maybe. Or maybe they’re just here to be a part of it. This is fun! We haven’t seen a ship in a while.”

A sonic boom rolled over the crowd. Everyone looked up as a ship barreled in from the east, slowing down fast. It flew over the spaceport, rapidly decelerating.

“That’s a lot bigger ship than I was expecting,” Ashley said, appraising the Erstwhile as it passed them overhead.

The craft came to a sudden stop, forward engines flaring, then settled down in a vast open space on the concrete tarmac. Four heavy landing legs supported a squat ship about a football field wide and three fields in length. Two doors on either side served as airlocks. From a distance, they looked more suited for transferring cargo in space than on the ground.

A delegation made up of Xu, the sheriff, and a Courthouse official broke apart from the crowd and approached the ship on foot. All four doors irised open, and ramps slid out from under them, providing access to the tarmac.

Load bots streamed out of the ship carrying polyresin cartons the size of coffins. They marched down the four ramps and placed the boxes in neat piles some distance away before returning back to the hold through their respective locks.

A pilot walked out, smiling wide. Black, wearing brown leather pants and a thick-collared casual shirt, he smiled at the sight of the crowd waiting patiently for him some distance away.

Then he noticed the reception party heading toward him.

Shouting back at the ramp, he crossed his arms and tapped his foot, as if waiting impatiently.

At last a woman appeared, her long black hair tied back in a ponytail. Tall and rail thin, she wore simple clothes, jeans and a cotton top. She tromped down the metal ramp in sturdy boots, looking glad to be outside after weeks aboard a spaceship.

When she joined him, they both turned to face the approaching authorities.

Everyone in the crowd watched as the two parties shook hands and exchanged words.

“I wonder what they’re saying?” Ash muttered.

“Hang on a sec,” Haley said, her pointy ears twitching. “Let me home in on it. I’ll record the conversation on my implant and share it with you later. Although, it just sounds like they’re only making introductions at the moment.”

He gave her an appraising look from the side.

“You know, you really are a very good girlfriend.”

“I have my uses,” she said, smiling at him.

Then she turned her attention back to the men and woman speaking several meters away.

8.3

“I ’m Captain Steen Oliver of the unaffiliated ship Erstwhile. This is my only passenger, Tara Lewellen.”

“Hello, there. It’s *Dr.* Lewellen, with Pearl Polytechnic University.”

“Joachim Xu, plenipotentiary and Courthouse representative. This is Sheriff Elmer DeLorenzo. Our customs officer here will run a scan with Penelope, our local neural engagement system, if either of you plan on staying.”

“I do plan on staying,” Tara said. “I’m here on official business from Pearl, on an exo-biological wildlife mission.”

“Step over here, please,” the customs official said to her. “This won’t take but a moment.”

As the two moved to one side and the officer set up his bio scanner, Xu and DeLorenzo turned back to Steen.

Xu said, “So, what do you have for us today, Captain?”

“A little bit of everything. I figured you’d need it after going without for so long.”

Xu nodded politely, but did not rise to the bait.

“How do you propose selling your cargo, Captain Oliver? Individual negotiations will take considerable time, I would imagine. It appears you have quite the haul for us.”

Everyone turned to watch the cargo streaming out of the ship as bots trundled down the four hold ramps.

“Oh, I’ve got all the time in the world. It took me two months to get here, and I’m in no particular hurry to leave. I propose using auction rules to dispose of my cargo. I know my lots and the bots are placing everything according to a schema I have presorted in my implant.”

“Very well. Auction rules it is. Sheriff DeLorenzo will remain with you onsite to make sure nothing gets out of hand. This is for your own protection, of course. You are correct, our people have not seen a ship land here in quite a few weeks. They might get rowdy at the sight of so much good stuff.”

Steen nodded, accepting the lie. Everyone knew the sheriff would keep a closer eye on him than the crowd.

“Excellent. If that’s everything, gents, I’d like to get to work. I request permission to set up a barrier around the ship and my cargo before you allow the crowd to approach.”

Xu and DeLorenzo glanced at one another. The sheriff nodded.

“Certainly,” Xu said. “Set things up to your liking and we will release the krakens. I mean, the crowd.”

Steen smiled at the light humor. He shook hands with both men then turned to go, leaving Tara to deal with the customs agent alone.

Moments later, after Xu walked away, a thin yellow line appeared about waist high around the entire ship and all the cargo boxes piling up neatly on the tarmac.

Steen touched his implant, connecting with a loudspeaker system on the ship’s exterior.

“Helloooooo good people of Phaethon! Are you ready to trade for some goods?”

In response, the crowd roared in approval.

“Now, everybody needs to remain orderly. No shoving, no pushing, and no *cussing* if you miss out on a great deal! Sheriff DeLorenzo is here, right by my side, and I can assure you he has his eyes on you. So . . . everyone behave, okay?”

More shouts of approval came forth, but with far less enthusiasm this time.

The sheriff stared back at them, expressionless.

“Alright, we are going to have an *auction*! I am not leaving with any of this stuff. It is all staying with you good people. Our first lot will be five . . . large . . . cases . . . of *candy bars*!”

A red holographic arrow appeared in the air above a pile of polyresin crates.

“Come on over here, and let’s have some fun! How long has it been you’ve had a real candy bar, huh? These come to you all the way from Alphorn, famous for its chocolate!”

The crowd advanced now, streaming toward the yellow barrier line surrounding the ship and all the goods. Several people ran to the other side of the Erstwhile, taking in all the other stuff paraded out of the holds by the ship’s many bots.

A couple ground cars floated down one of the back ramps, followed by a long train of brand new rickshaws. Crates filled with food, clothing and household gadgets continued filing out of the ship as Steen stepped up on a smaller box that a bot placed on the tarmac for him.

Hundreds of people gathered near the barrier where the red arrow flashed down over five big brown crates.

“Alright! Ladies and gents, each case contains 15,000 candy bars! This lot has five cases for a grand total of 75,000 delicious treats! These will retail back home as you well know for one credit each. But out here, who has seen a candy bar lately? Hm? That’s what I thought! Who *knows* how much

you can get away with reselling these things? I will open the bidding at 5,000 credits for all five crates. Raise your hand to bid! Don't be shy! We'll settle up via bank window immediately after bidding ends, and you can retrieve your goods when we're all done with the auction. I can also hold onto the goods for you until my departure tomorrow if you cannot retrieve them today. But if you're not here before I leave . . . the goods will be left on the concrete! I told you, I'm not bringing anything back with me."

He grinned at everyone, then cleared his throat.

"We'll start the bidding at 1,000 credits per case. Who'll give me 5,000 for the lot?"

A handful of people immediately turned around and walked back toward their cars, suddenly realizing that the prices of everything Steen had for sale would be too rich for their blood.

But among the serious retailers in the crowd, half a dozen hands shot up.

Steen smiled as he fell into the hypnotic cadence of a practiced auctioneer.

8.4

At last Tara finished with the Customs official. She found herself, much to her amusement, the newest citizen of this frontier planet.

Tara had explained to the man that she did not intend to stay here very long. Her purpose involved studying exobiological specimens for the university.

In turn, the customs officer explained to her that anyone staying behind and not leaving on the Erstwhile would be considered a candidate for citizenship.

Tara agreed, knowing that when she did leave, her citizenship with the Republic would remain intact. As far as she knew, Phaethon's frontier status meant it remained unaligned with governmental systems. Tara was not giving up her Republican citizenship.

Her attention shifted to the crowd outside the yellow barrier line Steen had erected around the ship. A few dawdled near recently sold lots, mostly piles of crates. More gathered around lots not yet sold, trying to scope out potential bargains and marking items for future bids.

But most people clustered around the current action, four old cargo trucks Steen had picked up on Diego. He told her on the way that these vehicles were likely on their last legs, and worth less than the cost it would take to replace their power packs. But he had space in his hold for them and

reasoned the population of a frontier planet would likely jump at the opportunity to grab more vehicles, no matter how old.

She watched in amusement as the bidding quickly died out. Steen's face betrayed his disappointment, but he kept it out of his auctioneer's voice. A woman at the front of the crowd easily won the lot for a measly thousand credits.

"Steen may have lost money on that one," she murmured to herself.

He paused and gathered the young woman's information. Moments later her name floated in a holosign above the trucks.

He moved on to the next lot. By this time, Steen was into the industrial and other large-scale items, so most of the city's merchants had moved on. What remained, Tara suspected, were industrialists and others in need of heavy equipment. Maybe some farmers from outlying areas, too.

Steen's voice rolled out of the ship's loudspeakers.

"Next I have several sturdy bots for your consideration, ladies and gents!"

The crowd followed him over to the bots, standing behind the yellow line. They were standard Verbergers of the style adopted after the war. Humanoid, with one of a select handful of faces so they could be easily identified as automatons. They could be used for a wide variety of purposes.

The bots stood in the formation Steen had left them, facing the crowd and in standby mode, heads tilted down.

"The power packs on most of these are near depletion. One has a full year left, another six months. The remainder range from one month to three."

"You brought us the castoffs!" somebody in the crowd jeered.

"Maybe. But answer me this, my good man. When will you see additional bots come your way while this embargo is in force?"

Tara watched, curious to see if Steen's prediction about frontier planets needing technology like this would pan out. Despite Steen's appeal to scarcity, however, the lot went cheap,

“Let’s start the bidding at 10,000 credits! Do I have a bid for that amount?”

The young woman up front raised her hand and Steen shifted back into auctioneer mode.

Tara watched, impressed, as the young woman proceeded to outbid everyone else. The bids rose to 30,000 credits, then continued climbing to 50,000. But the young woman never blinked an eye. Every time someone outbid her, she raised her hand again.

At last, a furious older farmer dropped out, and the young woman won all the bots for 63,000 credits.

Again, Steen looked mildly disappointed. But no one seemed to have much use for bots nearing the end of their power life.

Except for the young woman.

She walked up and opened a bank window in the air next to Steen’s. Privacy settings obscured the numbers in the windows for any nosy persons trying to observe the transaction at a distance.

The transfer made, he put her name in a floating holosign above the bots and moved on.

“Our last lot today is something I am sure you all need here on Phaethon, or at least certainly it’s needed in League City,” Steen said, his voice booming over the speakers.

“Power packs! In this lot I have four Class Eights, two Class Sevens and three Class Sixes, four Class Fives, and two dozen smaller units! They are all used and range in power with up to two years left. Who will give me 20,000 credits for the lot?”

Only a handful of people remained among the bidders now. Most of the crowd disbursed, heading back to their vehicles.

Tara walked over to Steen. She intended to say goodbye before leaving and making her way into the city.

She saw his face fall at the lack of interest.

“Yup. Definitely losing money on this one,” she said to herself.

“Ten? Anybody? Who will give me five? Three? They’re perfectly good power packs, ladies and gents. Who will give me 1,000 credits for everything in this lot? Don’t make me take it back to the Republic!”

One of the remaining merchants raised a reluctant hand and the bidding slowly picked up.

Again, the young woman moved aggressively. With less competition, this time the action petered out around 7,000 credits.

“Anywhere else in the galaxy, you got one heckuva deal, ma’am!”

Steen turned and addressed the others still standing in the vicinity.

“Thank you so much, everybody! Remember, today you did business with Steen Oliver of the Erstwhile! I’ll be back, and I’ll have more to trade next time!”

A few waved and smiled, happy to have a break in the monotony of their day.

“Merchants, I will head back to where we started and let you come pick up your winnings, starting with the first lot and proceeding back to this one!”

Steen waved at the few remaining in the crowd and headed over to the other side of the ship. He saw Tara heading for him and diverted course.

“I’m going to pick up my luggage and equipment, then try to find a way out to where I need to go. Thanks for letting me tag along on this trip with you, Captain.”

“It was my pleasure!” Steen said, reaching out to shake her hand. “It’s always more fun to have a real human along for the ride. People get tired of just having bots and books on a long trip, you know?”

“Well, I will put a very favorable word in about you to my superiors when I file my report with the university. I imagine we may be using you for other things as time goes by. Especially if this embargo lasts much longer.”

“Happy to help! Let me send one of the bots after your luggage. It’ll find you when it comes back out.”

She thanked him and they parted ways.

Looking out over the scattered people remaining in the area, Tara saw the high-bidding young woman lingering near the first lot she won. Next to her stood somebody she recognized.

Tara smiled and headed their way. The couple looked up as she approached the yellow line.

“I know you! You’re Ashley Thallus with the Zeitung. I’m Tara Lewellen with Pearl Polytechnic. I just arrived, I took passage with Captain Oliver and the Erstwhile.”

“Hello,” Ash said, extending his hand across the barrier and shaking Tara’s. “Pleased to meet you. This is my girlfriend, Haley Stonecipher.”

“You are a big spender. I’ve been watching you win these last few lots, although I don’t think Steen received as much as he thought he would for them.”

Haley laughed.

“They’re not for me. I’m just the purchasing agent, buying for the company I work for. What brings you to Phaethon, Ms. Lewellen?”

“It’s *Dr.* Lewellen. I’m here for exobiological research. Pearl is behind on our studies for this planet, and honestly we would have had a full team here a couple years ago if it weren’t for some significant budget battles and other academic turmoil I won’t bore you with. By the time I was able to secure funding for just myself to come out here, the major governmental systems had declared an embargo. It was a stroke of luck that a smuggler like Captain Oliver showed up looking for cargo from Pearl at about the time I was ready to leave.”

“Interesting,” Ash said. “If you don’t mind, I’d love to do a story on you and your research.”

“I was hoping you would! Anything that puts Pearl Polytechnic in a positive light might just open up more funding from Harrington House. They’re on a big efficiency kick right now back in Octavia, and funding is tight.”

Ash nodded and said, “I’ll see what I can do. Now that you’re here, what are you going to do first? Will you study some animals? Or are you just going to collect samples and send them home?”

“Our early efforts already canvassed this planet’s unique biosphere. I’m here for more in-depth studies our survey crew did not have time for.”

“Oh really?” Haley said. “What exactly are you looking to study?”

“I’m searching for a therapod dinosaur variant unique to this planet. Early data indicates there’s nothing else quite like it in explored space, making the species extra special. I believe colloquially it is known as . . . a ‘sand dragon.’”

8.5

Tom Savage stood leaning up against a building on the very edge of the Southside Projects, watching the trickle of pedestrians returning home from their jobs elsewhere.

No one bothered Tom, although doormen in four buildings had already spotted him, marked him as an outsider and kept a steady eye on his location.

They noted too, even at a distance, the pistol he wore on his hip.

But Tom did not cross that invisible line into their territory. He maintained his position leaning against a building, arms crossed, silently watching the pedestrians walking home.

At last, his eyes focused on one man in particular. Tall, musclebound and seemingly carrying the worries of the world on his back, judging by his downcast eyes studying the sidewalk as he made his way home. The man seemed to be walking by rote memory.

He had dark hair and the typical mixed-race look of so many who descended from those traveling among the stars over several generations.

“Rhen Dexiter.”

The man looked up, startled at hearing his name called out in an unexpected place. He stopped a meter from Tom and stared at him.

“Do I know you?”

“Not yet. My name is Tom Savage. I’d like to offer you a job.”

“I’ve already got a job.”

Tom nodded and said, “You clean stables out at the edge of the bazaar, when farmers ride in from out of town. You get paid ten credits a day, which is highway robbery even for menial labor out here on this planet. You’re barely getting by. You walk all the way from the Projects to the Bazaar and back every day to save on rickshaw fare.”

The man stared at him, his mouth wide open now.

“How do you know all this?”

“I have my sources. I also know you care for your wife and baby girl very much. You pinch your pennies, but you don’t borrow. You also don’t waste a credit. You never gamble or engage in any other vice, or at least none that cost any money. In short you, Mr. Dexiter, are just the kind of worker I need. Honest, hardworking, and a family man. I’d like to hire you for my company. And I can assure you, I pay a lot better than what you’ve been earning.”

Rhen’s eyes narrowed, and he moved in a little closer. Taller, and older by half a decade, he stared down at Tom who remained leaning against the building’s wall.

“I ain’t doin’ nothin’ illegal, so forget it. I already told the Overlord’s men that.”

“I’m not with him. And I wouldn’t ask you to. I need a hired hand for my company, Phaethon Solar Corp. Maybe you’ve heard of us?”

Rhen frowned and shook his head.

“You’re in Building 325, correct?”

“How’d you know that?”

“We replaced the power pack there last week. My company did.”

The frown dissipated as Rhen’s face relaxed.

He tilted his head.

“You did that?”

“We did. Along with my farm hand, who needs to go back to working the farm, especially as we’re harvesting a new batch of syrup soon, as well as other stuff from the garden and . . . Well, you don’t need to know about all that. Suffice it to say, I’m looking for a few good employees, and you are at the top of my list.”

Tom gave the man a moment to absorb his words.

“Well, if it ain’t illegal, and it don’t involve shovelin’ horse manure . . . and it pays more than 200 credits a month . . . I might be interested. But it still kinda depends on what you want me to do.”

“We are in the process of moving Class Eight power packs all over the continent. And soon, to the other two continents. I need someone who can manage all that, all the logistics involved. And, someone who can supervise their installation. Bots can do the heavy lifting, but we need a human to coordinate things. First thing you’d do is ride in a convoy of trucks loaded down with new power packs to our headquarters in New Galveston.”

“New Galveston? Where is that?”

“You’ve never left the city before, have you?”

“Nope.”

“Waiting on Gliph to tell you what to do?”

Rhen made a sour expression.

“We was fooled. The wife and I done gave up on that shyster and his pack of lies a long time ago.”

Tom nodded, as if he already knew this, too.

“I want you and your family to *move* to New Galveston. I’ll put you up in the Phaethonian for a couple nights. My company owns the hotel, and that’s where our headquarters are. But we’re building employee housing out on the edge of town. You and your wife and your daughter will have a place of your very own. Your salary, on top of all that, is 1000 credits per month.”

Rhen’s eyes bulged.

“That’s uh . . . that’s mighty generous.”

“Do you have a bank account?”

Rhen shook his head.

“Well, tokens only then. Here’s a hundred. Call it a signing bonus.”

Tom reached into his pocket and pulled out a large token. He handed it over to Rhen.

“Talk with your wife about it and sleep on it. In the morning, a van will be parked out in the street in front of your building. If your wife agrees, and you’re both ready to start a new life with Phaethon Solar Corp., then bring everything you want to take with you downstairs to the van. We’ll load you up and head over to our warehouse on the other side of town, and from there you can get ready to go with the convoy to New Galveston.”

“How long is that gonna take?”

“As slow as you’ll be going, it’ll take about 16 hours or so. So yeah, it’s a long drive. Probably going to be rough on your little one. We’ll have plenty of food and water for you along the way, and there’s rest stops with bathrooms. But it’ll be a slog. Consider that hundred credits as part of the reward for your trouble. But once you get to New Galveston, I think you and your family will find yourselves in a whole new life. One that you’re going to like. A lot.”

Tom smiled at Rhen with his best grin.

“I think you’re really gonna like it!”

Tom left the wall and headed back in the direction of Courthouse Square.

He stopped and said, “Oh, Mr. Dexiter . . . One more thing.”

“Yeah?”

“Do yourself a favor and don’t mention this to anybody but your wife. Especially don’t say anything to your doorman before you walk out tomorrow morning.”

“Why?”

“Let’s just say the Overlord has his eyes and ears everywhere. If you want to get out of the Projects, it’s best you sneak out before he knows you’re going. Trust me on this.”

Rhen watched the younger man walk away, heading back into the working-class neighborhood bordering Southside.

Slowly he nodded his head.

Gripping the large token Tom had given him, as if to reassure himself this was all real, Rhen turned and headed to his flat.

8.6

Tom touched the implant under his right ear as he walked, putting distance between himself and the watchful doormen in the Projects.

He joined a group call already in progress.

“Oh hey, it’s Tom,” Gwen said. “How are you, sweetie? How’s recruitment going? You talked anybody into joining yet?”

“Yeah, did you get me any new help, Mr. Savage?” Silas chimed in. “I need to break in some rookies, and show them the Vick method of working.”

This brought a round of chuckles from everyone on the line.

“You and Lola mix too much business with pleasure, Silas,” Gwen said.

That brought even more chuckles.

When the laughter died down, Tom said, “I think Dexiter is a go.”

“Lisa indicated he has a very strong work ethic, but is very unhappy with his circumstances,” Lola said. “I would expect him to agree to join us before any of the others she singled out.”

“It’s handy having an AI who can eavesdrop, although I do kinda feel bad about that,” Silas said.

“Why? You’re not the one doing the listening.”

“I know, darlin’, but . . . it’s still listenin’ in on private stuff. Which evidently everybody else on this call does to us.”

“It’s kind of difficult to avoid when you two do it everywhere in public.”

“The farm ain’t public.”

Lola said, “Lisa isn’t going to tell us about any private things. Not unless they threaten us or something.”

“I still . . . aw, never mind. This ain’t the place for discussin’ ethics and such, I suppose.”

“No it isn’t,” Tom said. “We need the best employees we can find. And if we have to bend a few rules to find them and then get them to work for us, that’s okay by me. Besides, there *are* no rules in place for eavesdropping out here like there would be in an established system.”

A chime sounded and Haley’s name appeared in Tom’s inner eye.

“Hi everybody! What’d I miss?”

“Tom was just telling us he talked somebody into the big trip tomorrow,” Gwen said. “That Rhen Dexiter fellow that Lisa recommended.”

“Oh, good. I’m glad I’m not making that trip. Hey, I got a *lot* of stuff from that smuggler. Besides the trucks and the power packs, I bought a whole slew of bots. I’m having Lisa teleport everything to the farm, Tom, so you and Silas can start recharging everything before the trip. I presume you want to get ahead on that, at least for the trucks that we’ll be driving to the coast.”

“Yes, I do. And it would be a whole lot easier to just port everything to New Galveston, but yeah. We need to start looking legit.”

“We already look legit, dear,” Gwen said. “We *are* legit.”

“We need legit infrastructure, though. And logistics, if we’re going to supply power to every settlement on this planet. Getting that convoy to New Galveston will make a lot of sense to our new employees and everyone else who might be watching as we start establishing ourselves. It’s one thing for those of us out on the farm, and you Haley, to port stuff around the world.

But if we're gonna appear to be a company that operates the way people expect, we need to build up our infrastructure. We need to show folks we can deliver stuff the old-fashioned way."

"By trucks and boats," Silas said with a smile in his voice.

"And sky trains, when we need to go fast," Tom said, smiling back.

"Especially if the customer pays for express delivery or something."

Haley said, "Or when we need to ship it to the other continents, right?"

"Maybe. Maybe not. I'm working on a plan for that. In fact, I'm jumping over to New Galveston right now for my next appointment. And after that, I've got some more family men I need to have discussions with, to see if I can't convince them to work for us. I'll catch up with the rest of you people later."

Tom turned to his right and ducked down an alley, quickly walking off the street. He stepped over a drunk passed out on a pile of garbage and worked his way to the alley's midway point.

"Lisa? If no one is looking, please port me over to the Phaethonian office."

A loud *pop!* sounded in the alley as displaced air rushed to fill a sudden void when Tom disappeared.

The drunk mumbled softly in his sleep, but did not wake up.

8.7

Tom appeared with another *pop!* inside a luxurious office suite. Thick off-white carpets covered the floor. Rich brown paneling sourced from local forests adorned the walls. Chandelier lighting graced an accented ceiling, adding just the right amount of warm illumination.

Quietly, over the last few weeks, Tom had moved to pay off the enormous debt he inherited when buying the Phaethonian. The luxurious hotel would never be profitable under that mountain of liabilities. The owner overspent when building it, aiming to erect the finest hotel on the planet.

In that he succeeded, Tom thought. But commerce through the port had yet to pick up, and precious few guests stayed at the hotel. Even if all the rooms rented every night for months on end, Tom had his doubts about how easily the huge construction loan would have been repaid.

Instead, Tom paid off the bank out of his own pocket. He took solace in the knowledge that the property was technically his and Gwen's, not the company's. In that way, he could hope to show a company profit faster. This liability was not on Phaethon Solar's books.

Setting aside the thought of debt and obligations and money management, he walked into a little room off the side of his office.

A bot turned to look up at him from a desk with several holoscreens floating above it, displaying spreadsheets.

“Hello, Mr. Savage. I have the latest estimates for the Waller replacements coming up. Our biggest variable is transportation. I recommend teleporting the Class Eights to the other continent. That will save time and shipping expenses.”

“Thanks, Mark, but we’re going to ship the Class Eights instead.”

“Ship them? By what sort of conveyance?”

“By a ship. Come along, you can make sure the numbers make sense. In fact, you can negotiate the purchase for me if the owner tries to snow me under with data.”

The bot stood up and followed Tom out to the office’s reception area.

Presently, no receptionist sat at the desk. Tom hoped to remedy that situation at some point. But since he had few guests here at the office, for now he was content to let the desk remain vacant.

The bot followed him out the door and down the stairs. They walked into the hotel’s lobby, fairly empty this time of day except for a handful of employees.

Actually, it’s fairly empty most of the time, Tom thought. Except for the employees.

“Mr. Savage, how are you?”

“Can I get you anything, Mr. Savage?”

“Is there anything at all we can do for you, sir?”

Tom waved them all off with a smile.

“I’m fine. As you were, or whatever. Mark and I are just going out for a walk.”

He passed through two huge ornate glass doors and out to the street. Then he turned and headed for the docks.

Mark followed along, slightly trailing.

“The employees are idle,” the bot said. “I have run the numbers on their salaries and have concluded we can still operate the hotel efficiently with a reduction in force by 70 percent.”

“Yeah, we’re not doing that, Mark.”

“You are losing considerable money. I realize the hotel expenses are coming out of your own pocket. You have no guests at the moment. No income is coming in to pay the salaries.”

“Yeah, but . . . there’s more to life than making money. I mean, yeah, money is important. But I want to keep these people on, at least for a while. I have a feeling we *are* going to have some customers at the hotel soon, and it will be a lot easier to have a loyal staff that we kept on in the hard times instead of firing them all and then trying to rehire people when things picked up.”

To this, the bot said nothing.

Tom smiled and kept walking, passing people in the street and nodding politely at anybody who caught his eye.

He glanced over his shoulder at the automaton following him.

“You know why I named you Mark, right?”

“I presume it has something to do with the annotations I make whilst calculating figures.”

“You got it. I wanted to go with ‘Sir Marks-a-lot,’ but Gwen nixed that idea. So, Mark it is. You’re pretty smart for a bot.”

“I have an Excelsior triplicate processor and the latest Fabian brand quantum-enhanced multi-linear processing system. I am fully capable of replicating human thought, decisions and speech. I, of course, am not human and I have strictures against pretending to be one.”

“Right. Thank you, Jade Thrall.”

Mark did not respond to this comment.

Tom decided the bot's programming likely caused it to simply stop talking when sensitive topics arose.

The former bot who took over the League for a while certainly counted as "sensitive."

They continued walking in silence.

Rounding a corner, New Galveston's harbor came into view, the ocean seeming to shine despite the fact that no direct sunlight touched the water.

Dominating the other boats at anchor, standing four stories above the next tallest ship, a large cargo vessel floated alongside a pier designed to accommodate it.

"That is what I need your help with," Tom said.

"The large ship?"

"Yep, the *Piker*. It was brought here in pieces three years ago and reassembled in this harbor. It's the largest boat in the world, for now at least."

"And it is for sale?"

"Yeah, the owner is tired of running it."

"I see. That portends financial difficulties. I have the numbers for cargo going through New Galveston. The port authority publishes them monthly."

While they walked, a personal holo appeared in front of Mark and his eyes scanned through reams of numbers flashing through the air in a blur.

"Yes, I have a firmer grasp on the situation. Since the embargo, shipping to other coastal cities and the less populated continents has been drastically reduced. The *Piker* has been running about one-third the cargo it is capable of carrying."

"You found that out just by glancing at some numbers?"

"There is some higher processing involved, but yes. What does the ship use for fuel? Hold on."

Text scrolled by in the holo again, quickly.

Mark said, "I see. A standard Class Eight, same as in buildings. And the ship has been in service for three years. I deduce therefore that the owner is suffering reduced payouts for his cargo runs and is facing the impending need to purchase a new power source. The situation is likely untenable, much as the hotel was for Mr. Drapner."

"Very good."

They kept walking, passing shops and other pedestrians.

After several minutes, Mark spoke up again.

"I do not think you needed me for this analysis. I am aware that you and Ms. Gwendolyn successfully purchased the hotel at a discount and were fully aware of its financial difficulties at the time. You have poured considerable resources into it out of your own pocket, and you seem to be operating with charitable intentions, at least so far as the employment situation is concerned."

"Yeah. I kinda like having servants. You treat 'em nice, and they'll take care of you. Did you see how they called me 'sir' when we were walking out? That's nice. They're being good to me because they want to be, not because anyone is forcing them to act all polite."

"My knowledge of your offbeat sense of humor and wanton sarcasm indicates there is much more to the situation than that."

"Is that right?"

"Yes. You feel responsible for the employees of the Phaethonian because you bought out their employer, and you do not want them to suffer financially. So you continue paying their salaries despite the fact the hotel is operating at a substantial loss. But to my point, you knew what you were getting with the Phaethonian. I therefore conclude you know full well what you are getting into with this troubled cargo vessel."

"You are smart, Mark. An astute observer of human nature."

Mark's eyes continued scanning the text skimming past in his holo.

“I can further deduce the ship’s owner is a skilled negotiator. The local news has multiple stories revealing he charged excessive fares when critical supplies were needed and either could not be transported by sky train, or the rates by air were in excess to what the owners were willing to pay. It appears he was able to wring maximum concessions during these situations, going back three years. I thereby conclude you will face tough negotiations, even with both sides knowing the untenable situation with the cargo vessel and the current state of this planet’s shipping business.”

“You’re a good man, Mark.”

“I am not a man. I am an automaton, a Verberger Model 10-20 . . .”

“Sorry, sorry. It was a figure of speech. I know you’re not human.”

By this time they neared the harbor and a modest series of buildings serving as taverns and offices. Some distance away, several warehouses waited to hold cargo for shipping purposes, although most appeared to be unused at the moment.

Standing in front of the first office building, a man wearing a white suit and a white captain’s hat stood watching the sparse crowds. His dark beard and eyebrows made a nice contrast to the clothes, giving his face a very distinctive look. His eyes lit up when he saw Tom. He stepped out to greet the young man.

“I take it you’re Tom Savage? My name is Topher Goodman, owner and pilot of the *Piker*. I understand you’d like to buy my ship. I have to ask you, Mr. Savage. I’ve never met you before, and I’ve met every seagoing lad who has ever strolled through this harbor. Do you know the first thing about running an ocean-going vessel?”

Tom grinned at the older man.

“As I understand it your ship is almost a drone, is it not, Captain Goodman? You have a crew of one, in case a human is needed for something. Kind of like spaceships these days.”

“Yes, the routes are pre-programmed. I’m usually there for the final leg into the harbor. But there’s more to it than that. There are decisions to be made about cargo distribution and weight. There are weather considerations, there

are tides and rip currents. There are maybe two dozen more things a landlubber never thinks about when it comes to carrying merchandise across the water.”

Tom reached back and put a hand over Mark’s shoulders, pulling him into the conversation.

“Captain, meet my accounting bot. We call him Mark. Mark here knows all about those things, and more. Why, he’s running the very latest quantum-enhanced multi-linear processing system!”

Goodman’s attention shifted to the bot and he raised an eyebrow as Tom continued.

“In fact, Mark will be in charge of all the negotiations to purchase your ship. He’s just gone through all the New Galveston port authority reports for the past three years, and he has any other information he needs for me to make an informed decision right at his fingertips.”

Goodman’s other eyebrow rose.

“We’ve also noticed you’ve had this ship for three years, ever since it was imported here. Have you ever changed out the power pack during all that time?”

After an awkward pause, Tom said, “Well, if you two don’t mind wrapping this up among yourselves, I need to see about procuring some more employees.”

8.8

Dawn broke over League City, the sky growing ever brighter in the east as a large passenger van nosed its way into the Southside Projects.

Recently purchased from the Erstwhile's cargo auction, the old van's battery had been among several recharged overnight at the star farm, then teleported back to Warehouse 14. Tom drove the van without worrying that its power would die somewhere along the way.

He pulled up in front of the Dexiter's building and waved politely at the thug guarding the door.

The doorman scowled back at him.

Rhen came out, squeezing past the man while carrying his daughter, a very sleepy two-year-old. He also had three suitcases, somehow juggling everything without dropping anything.

His wife followed, carrying two more suitcases. She looked relieved to see the van, as if she had doubted it might be there waiting for them.

Tom jumped out and helped the couple throw their luggage in. When they settled inside, still nervous and disconcerted, he went back to the driver's seat and climbed in.

Turning around he smiled and said, “I’ve got three more stops to make before we head to the warehouse. Bear with me.”

Half an hour later, the van headed out of the Projects and toward Courthouse Square with three more families and their luggage. Tom had offered the same deal to each of the men. They were all workers Lisa had identified as good candidates. All had agreed to Tom’s terms, looking for better housing and higher wages even if it meant leaving League City.

And perhaps most importantly, all were thoroughly disillusioned with the X’s and O’s.

Tom picked up speed now that he had acquired his targets. The families made small talk in the van. Some knew one another and were neighbors.

He navigated the square, grateful traffic remained light this time of morning, and sped on toward the spaceport side of town and the warehouse district. He waved at the guard and drove in amongst the rows of stout buildings, stopping near the one he had rented some time ago.

Here, out on the street, 18 trucks were lined up and waiting to go. They were all loaded down with power packs and load bots, the core of Tom’s New Galveston inventory. Behind the steering wheel of each vehicle sat a bot, awaiting orders. Each automaton wore a tan vest with the letters “PSC” above the traditional symbol for Phaethon, a star in motion.

Silas and Wink stood near the lead truck talking. They turned as the van pulled up, easing to a stop nearby.

Tom twisted in his seat and smiled at the people in the van. Eight adults stared back at him, along with six children of various ages. Luggage filled all the remaining space, piled up to the ceiling in some spots.

“This is going to be a long and boring trip. You’ll finally get to the Phaethonian Hotel around midnight. But along the way, the convoy will be stopping every couple of hours or so for restroom breaks and a chance to stretch your legs.”

Wink walked inside the warehouse and returned, carrying a crate full of food. He approached the van.

“For breakfast,” Tom continued, “we’ve got box meals you can eat on the way. The convoy will stop around noon at Brookshire, and we’ll have lunch for you there. It’ll stop again around six for supper. Tomorrow you can sleep in at the hotel, then later we’ll go out to the New Galveston warehouses and maybe see how your housing is coming along.”

“When do you think we’ll be able to move into these new homes you’ve promised?”

Tom smiled at Giana, Rhen’s wife, who had asked the question. She looked short, but very strong in that way some women can project even while seated.

“I think you’ll be moving in very soon. But don’t discount the Phaethonian. You’ll like staying there. It’s the nicest hotel in the world.”

She snorted.

“That’s not saying much.”

“That’s fair. I’ll put it this way, it’s nicer than anything in League City.”

She continued giving him a skeptical look.

“Just wait. You’ll see. I’ll promise you this, it’s nicer than what you’ve been living in, in the Projects.”

That satisfied her. She leaned back in the seat, objections depleted.

“Okay! I am going to hand things over to your driver now.”

Tom stepped out of the truck and waved at one of the humanoid bots standing around. The automaton approached and climbed into the driver’s seat. Tom leaned in and spoke to the passengers over its shoulder.

“All the drivers in this convoy are bots, so they won’t get tired on this trip. Your van will be in the center of the convoy. We do not anticipate any difficulties. But if something unexpected does happen, the drivers will take care of it. Just stay inside the van.”

Tom glanced down at the bot’s pants and noted the bulge printed by a handgun there.

All the trucks, he knew, were equipped with two heavy rifles each. Every bot driver carried a handgun, too.

He truly did not expect any trouble. But this planet had reminded him several times over that the old adage “Better safe than sorry” almost always applied here.

Wink showed up with the meals. Tom led him around to the side door and pulled it open. They handed out trays of food.

“I hope everybody likes poshbird! We’ve got poshbird and scrambled eggs for breakfast. Here’s some coffee, too.”

Eyes grew round as the adults and a couple of the older children who remembered the culinary delights of Lutian poshbird reached for the food. Trays were quickly dispersed along with polyresin flasks of hot coffee.

The mood inside the van finally relaxed. Everyone ripped the tops of their trays off and the contents instantly heated up. Flavorful aromas of Lute’s top imported product filled the van.

“Have a good trip! Let the driver know if you need anything. He’s in communication with all the other drivers, and the whole convoy can stop in case somebody has an emergency, or one of the kids can’t hold it until the next scheduled break or something. Okay? I’ll check in on you at the hotel around 10 in the morning tomorrow!”

He pressed a button and the door slid shut. Nobody inside paid him much attention, their focus solely on the food now.

Wink smiled with him as they stepped away.

Tom reached out and slapped the hood of the van, twice.

“Move out!”

The first truck parked along the curb eased into the street, followed soon after by the second one.

In minutes, the entire line of vehicles floated down the streets of the Warehouse District, heading for the Loop Road. From there, they would take the closest highway leading out of town.

8.9

“I have an issue with your personal finances, Mr. Savage.”

Tom looked up from his desk in the Phaethonian. He had recently popped in from Warehouse 14 and had just settled down to take a look at the housing project in New Galveston. He glanced at an aerial view of the property Phaethon Solar had purchased on the edge of town.

“Oh really? And what is that, Mark? Am I making too much or something?”

“You seem to have a mystery source of income that is producing daily credits. This is being used by you to pay the funds for everyone here at the hotel. I have followed the source as far as I can, but it would appear the tokens you are using seem to materialize out of thin air. For accounting purposes, that is unacceptable.”

“Oh, that. Yeah, so I have a gold mine back on the farm. It’s underneath the land somewhere. The MicaBots procure the ore, and our mini-smelter onsite produces coins when it’s not doing other work. We cash these in for tokens on a regular basis. The exchange rate isn’t great, but it’s not bad, either. You’re right, that’s what I’m using to pay folks around here. I have them sign a sheet acknowledging they’ve been paid in tokens so there’s a paper trail.”

“That explains your lack of concern about turning a profit on this hotel.”

“Yeah, well. I do need it to become profitable at some point. But yes. I’ve been giving up the gold mined off my place the last couple of months. By the way, that’s how I pay my farm hands too. Is there anything else, Mark?”

“I am concerned what the introduction of so much raw gold into the local economy might do.”

“From what I understand, the dealer Haley and Gwen sell the coins to turns around and resells them to the First Galactic Bank branch in League City for a tidy profit. As far as I know, and we can double check with Lisa, the bank is just storing the coins in a vault. I guess they’re building up a gold reserve, which is probably not a bad idea.”

“I see. I will confer with Lisa about this. Perhaps on this small of a scale there will be no adverse effects with all this new gold being introduced, especially if it is simply locked away in the bank and not recirculating.”

“Okay. Yeah, you can go figure that out.”

When the door closed behind the bot, Tom said softly, “It’ll give you something to do.”

Already, the company’s books were in excellent shape. Mark had accounted for every credit coming in and every credit going out.

If he were human, Tom thought, Mark might be getting bored by now.

Then again, Tom did not know any accountants. Maybe they lived for this kind of thing, he thought.

He turned back to the holo floating to one side and dragged it to the center of his desk. The MicaBots had taken stones from the desert that were teleported to the building site and began using them for house foundations. The lots were all platted and ready to go. As Tom watched, a string of huge cubic stones marched along unpaved roads into pits already dug out and waiting for them.

A car drove by on a distant road, and all the stones stopped before it came into view.

After the vehicle rounded a bend, they moved again, thousands of tiny mechanical army ants carrying the stones slowly into place.

Through the company, Tom had quietly purchased a 30-hectare site right outside of town. Lush green grass would be returning with spring, along with thick leaves on the many trees that were now bare. Tom had Lisa plan out an entire community there, with sites for 40 houses, parks and playgrounds and walking trails.

The foundations for all the houses would be ready this afternoon, he thought, provided traffic on the road remained sparse. He planned to have the MicaBots build only seven houses overnight, enough for those coming in from League City and some extras for his next round of hires.

Each home looked unique on the outside but had similar floor plans on the inside. That gave them character, and allowed for personalization, Tom thought. People would want to make the houses their own. At the same time, nobody got one that was better or worse than their neighbor's.

Each house included three bedrooms, which Tom hoped would be big enough to comfortably accommodate even large families.

One room designated a study could also serve as a fourth bedroom in a pinch. That way, a couple with six children could stack two kids per room and still have space to breathe.

If they had more than six kids, they'd have to get creative. Either that, or Tom would have to build them an even larger house. Maybe a two-story . . .

Not many families have that many children, but there are some out there, Tom thought.

He returned to the holo and watched the progress of the foundations. The bots moved relatively quickly, working on all the sites simultaneously.

A sensor for Lisa stood atop a new water tower erected last night. The subdivision would not be relying on New Galveston's municipal utilities at all. Tom intended to provide the houses with their own sources of water and electricity.

Weeks ago, the MicaBots dug a well 20 kilometers inland and sunk a water pipe along the road leading back to town. No one noticed, but this was actually the most difficult part of setting up the subdivision.

All the metal for the piping had to be mined, then alloys mixed for rust resistance. That process took the most amount of time. Tom had set it all in motion weeks ago.

Then the metal had to be fashioned into pipes and teleported into town under the cover of darkness. Thousands and thousands of MicaBots dug trenches, assembled the pipes and buried them all in one night, pausing only for the occasional passing car.

Then they smoothed the ground over so no one could tell the difference.

At some point in the future, Tom suspected, somebody might dig alongside the road and cause a water main to burst. But that remained a problem for the future. For now, the entire community would have fresh water pumped in.

New Galveston relied on a nearby desalination plant. Tom knew, thanks to Lisa, that its power pack would need replacing in a couple months. Also, the imported pipes used throughout the second-largest city on Phaethon were not very wide. Water pressure dropped frequently, including at the hotel. So, Tom elected not to add more houses to the stressed municipal infrastructure here. His little community for Phaethon Solar workers would be self-sufficient.

He watched the overhead view from the water tower as foundation stones seemed to move themselves into place, “jumping” into preformed trenches dug out for them.

New windows and wiring and a host of other things needed to build the houses had come in on the Pulsar recently. Tonight, under cover of darkness, they would all be ported in to New Galveston, and the MicaBots would assemble seven new homes.

The families he brought in from the Southside Projects would be ferried out here via the van and allowed to move into their new homes in a day or so.

Tom smiled at that thought.

Mark stepped into his office again, interrupting his thoughts.

Before the bot could ask him a question, Tom fired off one of his own.

“Mark, how many Class Eights have we recharged so far?”

“In the last month, you have recharged and replaced 57, or almost two per day. The pace is increasing.”

“I know. Hopefully these new employees can take a load off Silas and Wink and me. So, 57 units times 40,000 credits . . .”

“You earned approximately two million, two hundred and eight-thousand credits by recharging Class Eights last month. I say approximately because of that deal you struck up with the mayor of New Caney.”

“Six buildings there went out all at once. They were having problems with their municipal budget paying for everything up front.”

“So, you set up an installment plan.”

“That’s right. Why do you sound disapproving? Can a bot be disappointed? I thought you didn’t get emotional.”

“What happens if New Caney does not pay off their installments?”

Tom shrugged.

“We have sensors near each new Class Eight over there. I’ll have Lisa port them out and replace them with dead ones or something. Don’t worry about details like that, Mark. I’ll take care of making the sausage. You just worry about the books. How are we doing on paying off our partners back on Lute?”

“Upfront capital for the SCUs is repaid to 38 percent. There remains a myriad of other charges, however, including funds for satellites, building materials such as those you imported for the new houses, tens of thousands of new MicaBots, sawmills, smelters, food, and of course running the Pulsar on multiple voyages to ferry everything from Lute to here.”

“Okay. So, we’ve got a ways to go before becoming profitable. How many Class Eights did you say are on this planet?”

“Between six and eight thousand. The reason for the wide variation in estimates is that Lisa does not have full global coverage yet. Note that should the embargo be lifted, we may no longer have a monopoly as new units will then likely be shipped in. They will certainly have several on the first ship arriving.”

“Yeah, we’ll have to lower our prices when that happens, maybe. Still . . . what’s 8,000 times 40,000?”

“Three-hundred and twenty million credits, Mr. Savage.”

Tom leaned back in his office chair and smiled, clasping his hands behind his head.

“Now we’re talking. Now we’re cooking with gas! *That* should be enough to pay off everything to the folks back home, and then some.”

“Indeed. If you like, I can run through the various scenarios when we will break even, starting with variables including . . .”

Tom tuned out the accounting bot and turned his attention back to the holo showing an aerial view of the community for his new employees.

“I gotta come up with a name for that place,” he muttered softly.

8.10

The convoy, 19 vehicles long, pattered down the road at a stately 50 kilometers per hour. Each truck stayed within one meter of the other, front to rear bumpers. They snaked along in perfect synchronicity along the road.

Highways this far out from League City were no longer paved. Crews had built them during the planet's initial survey efforts, using heavy machinery to carve strips through the wilderness connecting town sites, then spreading a layer of locally sourced gravel on top. These initial roads remained the only land routes for the many kilometers stretching between settlements.

Traffic remained light. On occasion the convoy would pass a horse and cart, with a farmer pulling a load of winter crops into the nearest village.

Most of the horses the convoy met were accustomed to mechanized vehicles. They passed on the side without giving the trucks a second look. Sometimes a farmer would pull his horse off the road and stop to let the vehicles pass while trying to soothe his animal. This happened more frequently the further away they drove from the big city.

The cluster of vehicles moved faster than most other traffic on the highway. Somehow the lead bot always knew when to slow down, though. They crested a hill, and the convoy slowed in perfect harmony as the trucks came upon a couple riders on horseback heading in the same direction.

The men looked over their shoulders and saw the oncoming trucks. They promptly pulled their steeds off to the side and watched the procession float on by.

All the bot drivers were recently purchased by Phaethon Solar and reconfigured for communications with Lisa. Beyond that, she had mini-sensors in every vehicle, and large sensors stored in the rear truck for placement along the way.

The bots could follow one another closely with zero mistakes. If the lead vehicle needed to slow down, or swerve to avoid an obstacle, the other 18 would follow suit.

Despite their relatively slow progress, they made decently good time heading to the coast.

The trucks stopped at a village called Brookshire shortly after noon. Here, everyone piled out of the van, happy for a long break. The local pub workers had been alerted to their arrival somehow, and they welcomed passengers from the van inside with open arms. Everyone filed in, claiming empty tables of four while the bots remained outside with the vehicles.

The children ran around, burning off pent up energy. They ducked under tables or scurried over to gawk at the kitchen door. It occasionally burst open, a server carrying food out.

The adults stretched, some heading to the restrooms first. Eventually everyone settled down at one of the tables spread around the pub's spacious dining area.

Three women carrying plates piled high with steak and potatoes and green vegetables made sure that everyone seated had something to eat. They scurried back to the bar and fetched glasses of water, tea and carbonated drinks.

A couple of the wives, those who managed their family's finances, raised eyebrows at the sight of steaks brought to their tables. Rhen's wife was one of them. When their server passed by again, Giana tugged at the woman's sleeve, stopping her.

"How much will all this cost?"

The hundred-credit token remained in Gia's pocket, not her husband's. The expression of concern on her face betrayed the fact that she thought she might have to give it up after this meal, and perhaps not receive much change in return.

"Oh, don't worry about it, dear. A nice man from your company came by this morning and paid for everything up front. He even left us a big tip!"

When the server walked away, Gia locked eyes with Rhen.

"It sure seems like you have a *very* generous employer. Poshbird for breakfast? And steak for lunch? We haven't eaten this well in forever."

She looked at their two-year-old daughter Benét, who popped a thin sliver of steak in her mouth. The little girl's eyes rolled back in sheer pleasure at the meat's savory flavor.

"Be sure and chew it well, Benét. Don't eat so fast."

The little girl nodded, eyes closed, as she slowed down and chewed the morsel deliberately.

"Don't look a gift horse in the mouth, Gia," Rhen said after swallowing his own bite of steak. "Just sit back and enjoy this. This is sort of our first real vacation since we got to this planet. Look at it that way."

"Yeah, but . . . why you? In fact, why did they pick any of these people. *How* did they pick us to come work for them? I mean, was it at random? Or what? All you've ever done is clean out stables."

"Maybe they asked around. They need good workers. I'm a good worker. All these people are good workers."

"That's just it. You all worked at different places. Did they go by each and every employer and ask, 'Hey, do you have somebody who lives in the Southside Projects who is a really good worker?' That would have taken way too much time and effort. It's suss, if you ask me. Besides, who's going to give their good workers up, willingly, to another employer?"

"Just go with it, Gia," Rhen said, slicing off another piece with his steak knife. "Sometimes good things happen to people. This is one of those times."

Lord knows we've had enough bad things happen since coming to Phaethon."

Gia shuddered, and watched as Benét popped another little slice of steak in her mouth. Her father had cut up several pieces for her.

"Use your fork, not your fingers, Benét. Chew slowly."

The little girl nodded, closing her eyes again in culinary bliss as she continued consuming the steak.

Gia turned back to her husband and arched an eyebrow.

"I'll tell you one thing for certain, no matter how long you stay in this job, and no matter how long our 'good fortune' lasts. We are *not* going back to the Projects. The Overlord is a monster. He's worse than Glyph. I'm worried about what he would have tried to do with Benét if he had stayed."

Rhen nodded and cut off another slice for himself.

"Hopefully we won't need to. Eat your steak, Gia. They say this is a local steer variant known for its flavor. They weren't lyin'. It's really good."

Gia's face relaxed as she watched Benét rapidly chew down yet another slice.

She worked the knife on her own plate and brought her first morsel up to her lips.

Gia chewed on it thoughtfully for a moment before swallowing.

"Mmm. You're right. This really *is* good."

Rhen nodded. Benét nodded too, enthusiastically.

All three continued eating in silence.

For dessert, the servers brought out vanilla ice cream and homemade peach cobbler. This was greeted with cheers by the children, some of whom had never eaten either dish before.

The families then shuffled back to the van and the waiting caravan parked outside. Their stomachs bulged. They all moved slow.

The entire staff at the pub, including all the servers and cooks, came to the door and waved goodbye. They encouraged the families to drop in again if they ever drove back through Brookshire.

Everyone climbed into the van in a food coma. Rhen carried Benét, already nodding off on his shoulder.

Once they were all inside, the bots climbed back behind the controls of their respective trucks, and the convoy headed out again. They drove outside of town and resumed their trek to the sea.

Gia looked down at their daughter, now sprawled out on the seat between her parents and sound asleep. Her feet were in Gia's lap and the top of her head rubbed against her father.

Gia looked up and met Rhen's eyes. They smiled at one another over their daughter.

"Maybe you're right," Gia said. "Maybe good things do happen sometimes. I've just been trying to deal with our situation in the Projects for so long, I forgot about that. Bringing a baby into this world has *not* been easy under our circumstances. But maybe now . . . maybe now things will balance out. They're certainly looking up for us at the moment. The money, this fine food . . . the new job? I guess it's all really true and not some hallucination or dirty trick being played on us."

"See? You just gotta have faith, sweetheart. Good things *do* happen in life."

"Even to people like us? Dirt poor, bottom of the barrel, suckered into following Gliph to parts unknown?"

"Even to people like us, Gia. Even to people like us."

The van slowed down suddenly, in perfect sync with the nine vehicles in front of it. The trucks following slowed as well.

Rhen looked at their bot driver, who remained expressionless as he brought them to a complete stop.

"What's going on?"

Without turning around the bot said, "Trouble."

8.11

“I ain’t never seen that many trucks headed in one direction. Have you, Spit?”

True to his nickname, the thug in question tilted up his hat and leaned over to spit on the ground.

Both men wore typical farmer gear: blue jeans, boots, and cotton shirts. Neither had washed the clothes they had on, nor themselves, in quite some time. Dirt covered them, their body odor wafting away in a slight breeze.

Spit pulled his hat back down low over his eyes to block the ambient glare. He watched from the top of a boulder where he and his partner sat. Below, spread out like a fan, five more men stood by, ready to move.

They all dressed similarly. All carried rifles and pistols.

“It ain’t governmental, I’ll say that,” Spit said. “The Courthouse don’t have nothin’ like that, Paul, far as I know.”

The men watched the distant convoy as it snaked closer to their position above the highway on a rocky slope. One of them had seen it coming and alerted the others.

“As well,” Spit continued, “they’re all different trucks. Different makes. I see two old Thespar models from before the war. Old ones like that weren’t

sent here with the first colony shipments, I'll tell you that. These here is castoffs, likely brought in later by a merchant ship lookin' to unload junk. Frankly, I'm surprised they's still got a charge in them. Either way, we ain't lookin' at no governmental convoy headed our way."

"So, who d'ya think it is down there, Spit?"

The men watched the convoy edge closer as it wound its way on the road below.

"I'm thinkin' it's merchants," Spit pronounced with a small measure of confidence. "They's tryin' to get a load of somethin' to New Galveston. Which makes sense, on account of the port's over there. We just ain't seen much shipped out to the other continents before now. But if you gots somethin' that needs shippin', that's where you'd go. And if they keep on goin' over this here road, they'll get to NG shore 'nuff."

"Is this the biggun we been waitin' for?" the man next to him on the boulder asked. "The one you been tellin' us will make us all rich? Been waitin' a year for a good shipment like this. Not no farmer and his wagon stuff."

Spit gazed down at the long caravan for a moment in thought.

He took a deep breath and spat again off to the side of the boulder he stood on.

"Well, boys, let me put it to you this way. I reckon if we *don't* hit this one, it might be a good long while before another one comes through this way. Especially with that dadgum embargo in place."

Several of the men nodded in agreement, satisfied with Spit's assessment.

He stood on the boulder, taller than all the others, and waved an arm at them.

"Mount up, boys, and trigger the trap. We's got a convoy to rob!"

VB Serial Number 03N6528K drove the lead truck in Phaethon Solar's convoy. The bot had a standard face, one of a handful designed by engineers at Verberger Bots and Automations Corporation. Their builders carefully crafted them to be distinctive, instantly recognizable as bots. At the same time, designers took care not to make the faces look too much like any celebrities or artificial actors, present or past.

03N6528K did not yet have a name, although it noted that some of the bots belonging to his owner did have human names. It noticed humans referred to the industrial load bot that helped them back in League City as "Henry."

Also, the dumb yellow load bot seemed to be held in some degree of affection by humans in the company. Why, 03N6528K did not know. The bot speculated perhaps it involved something to do with familiarity. Perhaps they had worked with the load bot sufficiently to develop affection for it, and therefore they bequeathed it a name.

03N6528K remained brand new to these owners, having been shipped out with a depleted power pack from Pearl. The humans here had not yet had an opportunity to develop any sort of relationship with it yet.

For that matter, the bot's previous owners, a corporate farm on Pearl, had never named it either. When its power pack showed signs of depletion, they opted to upgrade 03N6528K and others with newer models. Thus, they sold 03N6528K at auction.

Part of him, the reasoning part left in by software engineers during his model run five years after the end of the Gold War, yearned for recognition by his owners, and to be given a real name.

This yearning remained tamped down considerably, though. It existed as an undercurrent in the bot's limited emotional range, an unexpressed desire present but not fully formed.

03N6528K had no knowledge of the architecture its brain was based on, the same architecture used by a bot that once went by the name of Miriam. She became the most powerful Tetrarch the League ever knew . . .

Afterward, considerable time and energy went into making sure that the resources poured into Miriam, later known as Jade Thrall, would not go to

waste. At the same time, nobody wanted a repeat of what happened with her. So, countless failsafes were built into bots like 03N6528K. As a result, the bot did not feel much emotion. It was still there, but never fully formed.

Right now, 03N6528K scanned the road ahead. Lisa did not have sensors along the highway. But she could see through the bot's eyes. She devoted a few processing cycles to following the convoy's progress.

At every settlement they stopped at, even the small ones, one of the bots in the last truck installed a sensor in a secure location. But along these many kilometers of highways, they certainly did not have enough to leave a trail everywhere for the AI.

Global coverage remained out of reach for Lisa. Even on older more established planets, wilderness areas remained free of scanners. But slowly, Lisa's network expanded. This trip would serve a dual purpose in moving employees and their families along with materiel to New Galveston. It would also allow Lisa to set up sensors along the route at smaller settlements that Tom had not yet visited for his farm implement sales.

03N6528K served as Lisa's eyes and ears for the trip at the front of the convoy. She monitored their progress in real time through the bot, and maintained contact with the sensors on every vehicle. She also tapped into the visual and audio feeds of every other bot present on an as-needed basis. Each one had been reconfigured to align with her. They could all communicate audibly to any human carrying one of Lisa's implants, or speak via data feed directly to Lisa.

Tom's workforce had increased dramatically with all the old bots brought in by the Erstwhile. Now, each one had a new power pack and software realignment with Lisa.

Each one also had partially formed unexpressed emotions of gratitude for this new lease on life.

03N6528K scanned the road ahead and the surrounding countryside. Here, the land turned hilly. Ahead, the road curved to the right around the base of a very rocky slope. In the distance to the left, the bot noted seven men on horseback riding down toward them on an intercept course.

An explosion rippled through the rocks up ahead on the right.

A small avalanche tumbled free from the incline, instantly covering the road with tons of rubble and a huge cloud of dust.

8.12

03N6528K lifted a foot off the accelerator and smoothly pressed the truck's brake pedal, all while silently signaling the other bots driving behind it.

The vehicles slowed down in sync, pulling to a seamless stop.

The bot's head turned slightly to the left and looked uphill. The riders pointed the noses of their horses straight for the convoy.

It transmitted the video feed directly to Lisa with a request for instructions, earmarked "Urgent."

Lisa spent less than 200 milliseconds planning out a course of action. Then she began transmitting instructions to the bots.

03N6528K opened the truck's door and stepped out. It pulled the seat forward and reached back to retrieve a heavy rifle. The distance and power of the gun would outweigh the bot's personal sidearm.

When it turned around to face the oncoming threat, the drivers from all but one of the other vehicles stood next to their doors too, holding rifles and ready to shoot.

The only bot who did not exit its vehicle was the one driving the van, in the middle of the convoy. This automaton remained at the wheel, ready to take

evasive actions if needed.

The rear truck opened its cargo door, and four bots inside hopped lightly to the ground, also carrying rifles. They left the door open. Two moved quickly to the right side of the truck while two moved to the left. The four jogged up the line of parked vehicles, converging on the van carrying families from the Projects.

The four assumed prone positions, making themselves look small. Two covered one side of the van, and two took the other side.

Lisa signaled, and every bot on the driver's side shot up the hill at the oncoming riders.

-+ -

Spit's horse screamed and fell over, three fresh holes blown through its chest.

It died before hitting the ground.

A bolt sailed over the outlaw's head and would have taken him to the grave along with the horse had it not stumbled.

He braced his knees for the downhill impact as his mount slammed into the ground. Forward momentum stopped abruptly, and he tumbled over the dead horse's head, somersaulting through the air.

He lay face down, downhill from the bloody equine corpse and out of breath from his fall.

Behind him, men and their mounts died as an unrelenting barrage of green energy bolts shot at them from the road.

Spit ducked behind a chair-sized rock jutting up in the soil. It provided decent cover from the merciless bolts.

He looked over his shoulder, trying to see if anyone remained alive. Horses and riders lay strewn out in a pattern. He realized the shots were well-placed.

A man's head bobbed up in the grass. Spit recognized the fellow standing with him on the boulder a few moments ago.

"Paul! Git to cover, boy!"

Stubbornly, the man belly crawled toward him. The only thing saving the obstinate outlaw was the rock Spit hid behind. Now it shielded the other man, too.

Paul sidled up next to his boss in the granite-like shade and smiled.

"They didn't get me, Spit! I'll sure miss that hoss, though."

Spit's eyes narrowed, annoyed at the man.

He turned back to the trucks below and carefully peeked around the edge of the big stone shielding them.

"I just don't understand it. They came out shootin' without a second thought. It ain't natural."

"That's 'cause *they* ain't natural. Lookit. They're bots."

"You's right," Spit said. "They's all the same build and everything. What's that jacket they're all wearin'?"

"I dunno," Paul said, carefully unstrapping a rifle off his back. "But bot or not, they ain't blaster-proof. And we got the high ground! I'll just pick 'em off."

"Attaboy. You got room?"

Spit shuffled off to one side, giving Paul a few more centimeters at the face of the rock. The other man carefully brought up his gun and aimed downhill at one of the bots standing in front of a truck.

"Too far away for a headshot," Paul mumbled softly. "But I can hit center mass, no problem."

He squeezed the trigger and a red bolt sailed down from their rock to the trucks below. It landed square on a bot's chest, knocking it back.

But the bot did not go down.

A dozen bolts responded in kind, slamming into their rock.

Paul ducked down, energy sizzling his hair. The strong smell of ozone filled the air.

“I thought you said it’d take them down?”

“I’m reckonin’ that the vest they’re wearin’ is blaster-proof, Spit!”

-+-

“So . . . this is the Spit and Polish Gang, as they’re known. Hm. Not too impressive.”

Tom’s attention had shifted from the housing development outside New Galveston to the attack on the convoy, as seen through the eyes of 03N6528K. Lisa provided the feed for his holo. Mark had thankfully left by now, perusing other areas of numerical interest.

“I’m sure they were quite impressive to all the farmers they’ve been terrorizing,” Jinxie said over the commlink.

She and Gwen remained in their respective farmhouses. They too watched the feed from 03N6528K.

Gwen said, “Yeah. Six or seven bad guys with guns can easily get the jump on a couple farmers and their wagons. These guys have never faced twenty bots with guns before, obviously.”

“Well, they thought they could,” Tom said. “How long do you think they had that avalanche set up, ready to go? They were just waiting for a big score, something headed for New Galveston. They just didn’t expect anybody to shoot back.”

Everyone watched as a solitary bolt streaked down from behind a big rock on the hill, striking one of the bot drivers. A fusillade of green blasts answered, sending shot after shot pounding against the boulder.

“I’ll tell you what they didn’t expect,” Jinxie said. “Blaster-proof vests. That was a smart idea, getting more skins for your tailor to make them with.”

Tom nodded, although the women could not see him at the moment.

“Yeah, once we discovered the sand dragons’ graveyard, out near their mating grounds, it was easy to swipe a couple corpses. Mr. Chan was thankfully unaffected by the Emotes, and he was grateful for the contract. I thought he made everything pretty quickly. We have dozens of adult-sized vests now, all the same color and with a neat logo, too.”

“I agree,” Gwen said. “I think it’s a good idea to give everyone a vest. Not only do they serve as uniforms for our employees and bots, they’ll give whoever wears them a measure of protection against gunfire. Which, as we can see, is kinda important right now.”

“How are we going to get the convoy around that landslide?” Jinxie said. “The trucks can’t get off the road there. Let me see a map . . . yeah we’re looking at a considerable detour just to keep heading in the general direction of the coast.”

Tom smiled.

He said, “My dad had a saying based on his experiences in the war. ‘If at all possible, use teleportation.’ I think we’ll do that here. Lisa?”

“Yes, Thomas?”

“Can you teleport the rubble that is blocking the road for us?”

“Indeed I can, Thomas. I have adequate sensors nearby in the convoy. Where would you like me to teleport it?”

Tom looked up the hill through the eyes of 03N6528K on the video feed.

“I want you to drop it all right above that rock those bad guys are hiding behind. Make sure it doesn’t start another avalanche.”

-+-

“What’s going on?”

Gia looked out the window, keeping her hand protectively over Benét’s head. Most of the children hunkered down low, while the adults in the van

watched the firefight outside the window.

Another red bolt streaked down from the hillside, slamming into a bot. It took a step back from the impact, but otherwise remained unfazed. Dozens of green bolts answered the shot, exploding near the boulder hiding the snipers.

“I would imagine that someone from our side will try to get a better angle so they can get those guys,” Rhen said quietly.

The two bots lying on the ground near their van stood up suddenly. They marched to the side and turned their backs to the window, blocking Rhen’s view.

“What the . . .”

The two bots guarding the other side of the van copied the maneuver. In seconds, no one could see out that side.

“What’s going on?” Gia said again.

They heard rumbling, not unlike the sounds of the avalanche that stopped the convoy.

But this time it came farther away, up the side of the hill.

8.13

Tom paid extra for hotel staff to be up and ready to receive the families from League City.

Since this was the first round of more visitors all showing up at once than anyone had ever seen at the Phaethonian, the staff took it as a personal honor. They looked intent on making sure these tired travelers would be taken care of as best as possible.

The convoy reached the outskirts of New Galveston shortly after midnight, and the van peeled away from the trucks. All the power packs and bots and vehicles purchased at the Erstwhile's auction headed for the warehouses Tom had rented while the van turned down a residential street.

A quarter after midnight, the van pulled up at the ornate frosted glass doors of the world's finest luxury hotel. Two men in livery promptly opened the doors and held them open while a small army of bellhops swarmed to the van to unload luggage.

As exhausted men and women climbed out, many carrying small children sleeping in their arms, the manager of the hotel came out and addressed everyone with a little speech.

"Should you need anything," Madeline Eubanks told the group, "anything at all, please let your attendant know. Each of you has a personal attendant

assigned to your room to take care of your every need and answer any questions you might have.”

The prim, middle-aged woman smiled warmly at her guests.

“If you are hungry, room service is available. If you would like to eat in the dining hall, it will open at six for breakfast. We are so very glad to have you here as guests! If there is anything I can do for you personally to make your stay better, please let me know right away.”

The bellhops sorted the luggage by families. They had already been briefed on who had what rooms. Very quickly the families were led inside.

Their driver waited a moment by the van. Assured no one forgot anything, the bot climbed back behind the wheel and drove off. It headed toward the seaside town’s warehouse district.

Rhen and Gia looked duly impressed by the luxuriousness evident in their suite. Rhen placed Benét down on a bed in the smaller room while Gia took the child’s shoes off and gently pulled a sheet over her.

Quietly, the couple stepped out of the room and closed the door..

“This is the nicest place I’ve ever stayed in,” Rhen said softly, looking at the expensive imported furniture and carpet.

“It certainly beats our place in the Projects,” Gia said. “Let’s go to bed, too. I’m beat.”

-+-

At 9:30 the following morning, the four families heard a polite knocking at their doors.

The four attendants assigned to them each informed the sleepy individual answering the door that Mr. Savage expected the men to make an appearance at company warehouses for a work briefing.

All men would be returned to the hotel for lunch with their families at noon. Afterward, everyone could go and inspect their new houses.

Working the stiffness out of their joints, four men made their way to the lobby half an hour later. They nodded at one another, already having some familiarity after the shared experience of several hours on the road together.

Waiting for them in the lobby, Silas Vick stood with his hands clasped behind his back. He wore a sand dragon vest with the company logo, just like the bot drivers.

“Gentlemen, thank you for meeting with me. I’m here for your briefing about what we do at Phaethon Solar, and to give you a tour of our NG facilities. If you will follow me, we will be taking the van this morning. We’ll be back in time for lunch.”

The men followed him as he marched outside, bellhops holding the giant frosted glass doors open for them.

The same van and the same bot driver waited in the circular driveway. Outside, and now wide awake, the men noticed the hotel’s outer opulence for the first time. A marble fountain out front sprayed water from a statue of galloping horses. Flat river stones paved the circular driveway. The building’s exterior consisted of locally quarried material, some of it handcrafted to fit.

No expenses had been spared in the hotel’s construction, and it showed.

Duly impressed, the men piled into the van with Silas. When the door closed, their driver entered light morning traffic, and they headed toward the docks and warehouses.

“So, in case you’re wonderin’,” Silas said over his shoulder from the front seat as they drove, “we are an energy company. The only one on this planet, at least for now. We harness the sun to recharge power packs usin’ a proprietary system based out in the Skoni Desert.”

A hand shot up from a short, rather pudgy fellow. Rhen remembered the man’s name was Yelwin.

“Yes, Mr. Clavell?”

“How is it that you’re using solar power on this planet? We hardly ever see the sun!”

Silas smiled at him, as if expecting the question.

“That’s the proprietary part, Mr. Clavell. Maybe sometime, if you ever get out to our farm in the desert, you might see how it’s done. For now, take it on faith we’ve developed a way to harness the power of the sun, even on this dusty ol’ planet.”

Yelwin put his hand down, but Rhen noted he did not seem satisfied with the answer.

Neither did Rhen, actually. But like he told his wife, he would not look a gift horse in the mouth.

At least not yet.

Soon, they pulled into the small warehouse district. Unlike in League City, the area remained unguarded. A dozen large warehouses lined the streets near the docks. The door to the nearest one started going up when the van turned onto the street.

The bot pulled inside and smoothly brought their vehicle to a stop. The warehouse door lowered behind them.

Silas climbed out and motioned for the men to follow. Another bot approached, carrying four sleeveless vests, the color of sand.

“Speakin’ of the desert, as employees we ask you to wear these vests at all times you are on the job.”

He took the garments from the bot and handed one to each man. They shrugged into their new vests.

“What are these made out of?” Yelwin said, rubbing the leather between his thumb and forefinger.

“Sand dragon skin. The same sand dragons that live out in the desert and are native to this planet. We discovered they are blasterproof, especially at a distance. And yes, there is the possibility that you will take a bolt or two in the line of duty. I myself have been shot at while replacing Class Eights at apartments in the Southside Projects.”

This statement caught their attention.

Rhen said, “You took shots in the Projects?”

Silas nodded and said, “Multiple times. I suspect the Overlord and his watchdogs don’t particularly like outsiders, even if they’re there to help. Most of the units in those buildings have been replaced, simply because they had the cheapest power packs, which tend to deplete first. What we’ll be doin’ is replacin’ power packs all over the world, as needed. Let me show you how this will work.”

The men followed him, their levels of respect for Silas now greatly enhanced.

8.14

Silas made a “follow me” gesture and walked deeper into the warehouse. Here, a mock power room had been set up. A thick cord wide as a firehose plugged snugly into a power pack the size of bed.

He stopped and waited for everyone to gather around him. The men stared at the mockup curiously.

“This here you could call our training room. ’Course, there ain’t much to train you over. As I said, the actual work that’s needed is pretty straightforward. Often, the challenges we face are gettin’ to this point, where we can actually make the swap. And yeah, sometimes that means facin’ hostiles who don’t particularly care that we’re there to help them by restorin’ their power. But don’t worry about that. It’s one of the reasons we gave you the vests. Nine times out of ten, ain’t nobody gonna be shootin’ at you. And if they do, we’ll show you tricks like walkin’ behind a load bot so it takes most of the shots.”

He smiled, trying to look reassuring.

The four men did not appear to be disillusioned, or scared off of the job yet, so he continued.

“The basic premise is simple. Unplug the old one like this.”

Silas walked around and pulled out the thick cord from the large Class Eight.

“Now, you can’t lift this behemoth, of course. All four of you put together would have a hard time with it. That’s where your handy dandy load bot comes in. Harrison? Come over here.”

A yellow load bot trundled up, heavy legs moving deliberately. Its midsection was cubic, setting it apart from the more humanoid bots. It also looked distinct from battle bots, which were sleeker and built to be more impervious to explosions and heavy gunfire.

This unit moved things. Heavy things. Every design feature enhanced that purpose.

“All our load bots, includin’ the newer ones we recently bought from the smuggler who made it through the embargo, have an H in their serial numbers. So we gave them H names. Harrison here is assigned to New Galveston. Show them how you handle a Class Eight, Harrison, so they can see how it’s done.”

The bot lumbered over to the giant power pack and picked it easily, servos whining. It walked away a dozen steps, holding the rectangular unit with both hands. The flat rectangle rested on one shoulder, tilted at an angle.

The bot turned and walked back before placing the unit down again, flat on the floor in the same position as before.

“Now, most of these big things are stored away in a building’s basement in some narrow corridor or other tight space. So, let the load bots handle gettin’ them in and out. They know how to navigate through tight spaces without damagin’ the walls. They’re used to doin’ stuff like that all the time in the tight holds of ships and whatnot. A building’s basement in some city ain’t much different than that, to be honest.”

Silas smiled at them and put his hands on his hips.

“Any questions?”

Yelwin raised a hand again.

Silas smiled and said, “Yes, Mr. Clavell?”

“What do you need us for if you got so many bots? You got drivers. I’ve seen ’em shoot. We all have. You got these load bots. You don’t really need us, do you Mr. Vick?”

“On the contrary, Mr. Clavell. Do you know why most spaceships need a human pilot, even when the AI controls everything?”

“Because . . . well, it’s in case they’re needed, I suppose. Although I understand some ships are getting away from it, going fully drone operable.”

“Correct. For two hundred years, even with AI, all spaceships until recently had to have a human onboard in case somethin’ went wrong. The AI lost contact with some. There was some kind of interference, or trouble or whatnot. And then a human had to be there so he or she could step in and take over. Well, it’s the same thing with us, gentlemen. We need *people* to help swap these units out. We need men who can supervise the bots and be there if things go sideways. And we need you there to act as the public face of our company. Some folks don’t cotton to a big yellow load bot and a Verberger ten-twenty comin’ into town and messin’ around with their power supply. But if you’re there, you can smooth any ruffled feathers and take care of anything else that good lookin’ fellas like yourselves can always do.”

This elicited some chuckles, especially the part about “good lookin’ fellas.”

Rhen decided he liked Silas. The man seemed serious about the job, but he obviously did not take himself too seriously.

Silas said, “Alright. Lemme show you a few more things, then we’ll get you all back to the hotel in time for some lunch. And then . . . we’ll go look at your new homes. You can spend the afternoon movin’ in with your families and gettin’ all settled.”

8.15

Tom popped into place near the entrance to his employee housing complex.

Tiny MicaBots slowly moved a large stone slab into place, the size of car. Thousands of mechanical army ants surrounded the heavy rock, now facing the entrance alongside the road leading in.

He smiled, noting that all roads for the development were paved, thanks to the little black bots. In the distance he could see the first seven houses waiting for their new owners, yet to arrive.

The sand-colored stone, teleported from the Skoni Desert with its flat blank face aimed toward the street, thunked lightly into position on top of foundations stones previously placed for it. A black tide seemed to recede from the sign. Thousands of tiny bots retreated as the heavy boulder settled into its permanent spot.

Tom stared at it, rubbing his chin in thought.

Gwen popped into place beside him.

“Hey, hope you don’t mind if I join you for the welcoming party.”

“Nope. So long as nobody figures out we’re teleporting around the world, we’re good. And, they’ve never seen you before, so no one will know.”

“How long are you gonna hide that from everybody, Tom? At some point, somebody’s gonna figure it out.”

“Let’s let them learn a little at a time. Right now, these people just got out of the Projects. That was yesterday. We don’t have to hit ’em with the full truth all at once. Let them gain a little trust in us. Let us gain a little trust with them. Then we can gradually tell them more, if and when they need to know more.”

Gwen frowned a little, but she did not argue.

Tom resumed staring at the flat blank face of the boulder.

“Whatcha thinkin’ about?”

“I’m trying to come up with a name for this housing development. I was thinking of something along the lines of Savage-ville.”

Gwen’s frown increased. Tom looked at her and noticed the sour expression.

“What?”

“You’re not serious, are you?”

“Okay, yeah. It doesn’t roll off the tongue, does it? How about Tom Town? I like the alliteration.”

“You’re just pulling my leg now. Those are terrible names for a housing development.”

“I kinda like ’em. What’s the matter with them?”

“Besides the fact they sound stupid? This isn’t a town. It’s a subdivision that I’m sure New Galveston will want to incorporate into their city limits someday. You don’t name a subdivision ‘Town’ or ‘Ville.’”

“Okay, okay. How about this? Gwentopia.”

She gave him a long look, filled with skepticism. She looked unable to tell if he was joking or not.

Finally, she said, “If you don’t know what to name it, ask our resident AI. That’s what they were created for, back in the day.”

“To come up with names for things?”

“Sure. Lisa?”

“Yes, Gwendolyn?”

The voice came through both their implants.

“What’s a good name for this housing development?”

“Since this is a haven for those employees you have plucked out of the Southside Projects, and since it is near New Galveston Bay, I suggest you name the development Bay Haven. That is both accurate and appropriate.”

Gwen smiled at Tom.

“There, you see?”

He nodded, acquiescing to both his wife and the AI.

“Bay Haven it is. Lisa, please ask Mica to direct her guys to carve that name into our sign.”

Hundreds of little black army ants scurried up the face of the rock. Within seconds the words “Bay Haven” appeared in gently curving script, filling up the blank side facing the street.

“Just in time,” Gwen said, pointing. In the distance they could see the van filled with families from the hotel heading their way.

Moments later, Tom and Gwen met the van as it pulled up to the first of the new houses. The side door slid open and families climbed out, eyes wide at the brand new houses waiting for them. Four stood on one side of the street and three on the other.

Tom caught everyone’s attention and had them gather around.

“Welcome to Bay Haven! Now, I don’t have a system for who gets what house. I will leave that up to you. No fighting, please!”

Light laughter went up in the crowd. But already, some of the women and men in the crowd let their eyes linger on one house or the other.

Tom deliberately chose to have more than four erected for this moment, hoping that psychologically it would be easier for the families to decide and not feel jealous of one another. He had no idea if that would work, but it seemed reasonable to offer a plethora of choices instead of just a few.

“You’ll notice that each one is distinctive on the outside, but inside they all follow similar floor plans. They are all the same size. They all have three bedrooms and three bathrooms, with a study that can serve as a fourth bedroom if need be. The back yards are all roughly the same size, and everyone has access to the park over there, as well as the neighborhood green spaces. I’m going to trust in all of you to help keep Bay Haven up and not let it get run down. So, keep the outside of your houses neat, keep the lawns up, and try not to junk up the shared spaces.”

A few of the men, suddenly realizing that responsibility came along with these new homes, nodded their heads.

Satisfied with their reaction, Tom continued.

“Now, you will notice that there are more lots. A lot more lots. As we hire more people, we will be putting more families out here. You all are the first of hopefully many to come. We have foundations down, and utilities are ready to go for when those houses are built. So don’t get used to just these few that you see right now. You’ll have more neighbors at some point. Someday, this entire community will be built out.”

Tom smiled at the couples. They now seemed to be actively weighing which house they should claim. He saw some wives nudging their husbands and nodding toward one home or the other.

“Okay! Time to go check them out. Like I said, the floor plans are all basically similar. But get a feel for things and pick one. We’ll set up palm prints for the doors after you decide which one you want. Take your time. Remember, each house is roughly the same as the others, with only some cosmetic differences out front to help you identify it as yours.”

Thus encouraged, the couples spread out. They strolled down the street to the different houses. They stood in front of the ones that caught their eye, almost as if meeting a living thing and silently introducing themselves.

Some of the kids ran ahead and raced through unlocked front doors. The adults followed slowly, looking around more carefully.

“Apartment dwellers,” Tom said softly to Gwen. “I don’t think any of them have lived in an actual house before.”

She nodded and whispered back, “This will probably be their first real home, then.”

“You can have a real home anywhere, Gwen. It doesn’t need to be in a house.”

“Yes, but . . . this will be a place they can be proud of.”

Rhen and Gia were last to claim a dwelling. As they passed Tom and Gwen, holding Benét’s hands, the two-year-old stopped suddenly. Her parents stopped with her, her feet no longer moving.

Benét looked up at Gwen and said, “Who are *you*?”

Gwen smiled and pointed at Tom.

“I’m his wife.”

“Oh. Do you have a little girl? Or a boy?”

“Benét!” Gia said. “Don’t ask personal questions like that.”

“It’s okay,” Gwen said before turning back to the child. “Not yet. But maybe someday. And then maybe he or she can come over to your new house and play with you. Would you like that?”

Benét nodded, satisfied. She continued walking between her parents, reaching up and holding onto one hand of each.

The Dexiter family stopped and looked at the four remaining houses no one had yet explored. Gia pointed at the one farthest away, on the end of the street.

“I want a corner lot.”

Rhen nodded, and the three of them slowly walked toward their new home, the little girl between them.

8.16

Late that night, Haley popped into place on top of a roof in the Southside Projects.

Decked out all in black with her Night Shadow gear, she remained virtually invisible as she peeked over the ledge and looked down at the street below.

“Okay,” she said softly. “I’m in position. Can everybody see my feed?”

Gwen said over the shared link, “Yes. But I still don’t see why we need to recruit this guy. He’s a drunk.”

“Boris Volkov is a very competent nautical pilot,” Lisa said. “I have examined his history sailing on four different planets with six separate shipping companies. He does not have a black mark on his record.”

“Sailing on the water is one of those things like space travel,” Tom said from his office at the Phaethonian. “You don’t really need a human pilot, until you do.”

“Understood,” Lisa said. “But the possibilities of my losing access to a nautical drone ship on a planet where I have minimal sensors is considerably higher than it happening somewhere more established. Mr. Volkov has scored very high in disaster scenarios on multiple simulations going back years, according to his records.”

“He’s still a drunk,” Gwen said. “What are you gonna do when he wrecks that nice new ship you bought because he’s wasted, Tom?”

“I’ve got a plan.”

Gwen snorted softly, but she stopped arguing when a shaft of light came out of the stairwell leading down into the basement.

Slowly, someone climbed up the steps as Haley watched from her perch across the street.

“This is him,” Lisa announced.

“Is that the entrance to Tay-hoe’s?”

“Yes,” Haley said. “And you’re right, Gwen. Our mark is drunk as a skunk.”

Everyone on the call watched through Haley’s enhanced eyes as an older man with closely cropped gray hair and beard stumbled up the last step.

He walked out on the sidewalk a bit, swaying. He stopped and held onto the wall of the apartment building, as if trying to gain his equilibrium.

“Yeah, don’t let that building fall down on you, buddy,” Gwen said in a mocking tone. “Hold it up. There you go.”

After a moment, the man straightened and continued walking. He wound a crooked path down the sidewalk, but managed to somehow stay on his feet.

“I don’t think he lives far from here,” Tom said. “Keep an eye on him, Haley. If you find a good spot where no one is looking, we’ll have you snatch him up.”

“Is anybody going to notice him missing?”

“Eh. He’s a drunk. Nobody is going to be surprised if he doesn’t show his face around here tomorrow morning.”

“He lives alone,” Lisa interjected. “No family. His psychological profile indicates he prefers spending long periods of time in isolation, which is why he gravitated toward nautical industries before migrating to Phaethon.”

“I still don’t know why you want this guy,” Gwen said. “He’s a total basket case. Look at him.”

“He’s the best ship guy in the whole world, Gwen. A sailor. A real one. We’re gonna need him.”

Gwen snorted.

“He’s an alcoholic. Anybody can drive a ship. I don’t see why we have to have *him*.”

“There’s this story of an old man watching a boy throwing starfish that were washed up on the beach back into the ocean . . .”

“Oh, great. Don’t bring that up. You are *not* gonna save everybody in the Southside Projects.”

“No, maybe not. But we are gonna save *this* guy. We need him.”

Haley silently followed the drunk man’s progress as he staggered down the sidewalk. She carefully walked across the roof while keeping him in sight down below.

A slight movement in an alley caught her eye. She zoomed in, peering through the darkness.

“Uh oh. Some goonies in the alley over there are giving our mark the stink eye.”

The married couple, watching over her visual feed, stopped talking and watched as Boris shambled closer to the edge of the building, and the corner facing the alley.

Gwen said, “Can’t you go down there and do something about it, Haley? Kick those guys’ butts!”

Haley sighed, but she smiled.

“Why do I have to always be the one who kicks the bad guys’ butts?”

“Because you’re Night Shadow, girl! Go get those guys!”

“Don’t say it like I’m an attack dog or something.”

Tom said, “Hey, nobody’s calling you a—”

“Don’t say it!” Gwen said, laughing. “Don’t you dare say it!”

“Okay, you two. I’m going to stop talking now. Time to go to work.”

Haley crouched and held her arms out.

“I’m ready, Lisa.”

She popped away.

8.17

Boris shambled closer to the alley feeling dizzy. His eyes remained unfocused.

His head swam, the world seemed to be spinning. He stopped again, his hand flailing out to find the wall for support.

Groaning, he took another couple steps forward . . . and passed the entrance to an alley between two buildings.

“There he is,” a thug said, stepping out of the shadows.

The two men had not washed in days. Their oily black jackets kept the chill out and let them spend more time outdoors in the cold. They sported three-day beards. The stubble looked scruffy, trying to grow into real beards on both men, but not quite there yet.

“You got any money, old man?” the other thug said.

He dug into a pocket and pulled out a slapjack, a heavy leather pouch filled with lead shot.

“You better. I heard you got a *lot* of money.”

Boris squinted, trying to keep the men in focus. They seemed to double in his eyes.

The thugs moved as one, the slapjack pulled back for a strike on the head.

A loud pop sounded above and behind them in the alley.

Night Shadow dropped into place, crouched and ready to fight.

Both turned at the sound, startled.

The slapjack man stood closer to her. He snarled and reached back, shifting from the drunk to her.

Haley reached out with her mini tractor beam and snatched the weapon out of his hand. It sailed across the meter between them and into her hand.

“Oh, nasty. But I’ll add it to my collection of confiscated weapons anyway,” Haley said, pocketing the slapjack.

The man stared at her wide-eyed, surprised at the sudden move.

Then he snarled and raced toward her, fists up.

She ducked and stepped back, luring him deeper into the darkness and away from eyes on the street. His companion ran into the alley after him, trying to help.

Haley activated her force bracers, giving her far greater upper body strength. She gripped Tom’s old brass knuckles in her right hand and waited for the first man to move in closer.

He took a step forward and she struck like a snake, popping him in the chin and crushing bone.

He dropped instantly, out like a light.

Haley bounced on her feet, focused on the second threat.

This man paused, staring down at his comrade. Again, surprise registered on his face.

“Pathetic,” Haley taunted him. “You’re both weak. I’ve seen farmers who fight better than you scum.”

He snarled and ran for her, stepping over his friend.

She ducked and dodged his blows. He was fast. Lisa ported her once when his fist came close to connecting with her, pulling her back a few precious centimeters.

To the thug, in the dark, she just seemed exceptionally fast.

When he came in close again, she lashed out with a kick to his knee, activating the wall crawling boots just as they connected. Bones cracked as his knee gave way under the sudden onslaught of force.

He screamed and went down.

She activated the force bracers again and walloped him in the back of the head. His body slammed into the pavement.

The thug collapsed, arms and legs spread wide like a star, blood leaking from his skull and knee.

“Hm. That’s gonna hurt when you wake up,” Haley said. “But it’s less than you deserve.”

She heard the sound of retching.

Boris stood at the entrance to the alley puking his guts out.

“That’s disgusting.”

“Okay, I’m not watching anymore of this,” Gwen said. “Sweetie, are you coming home after Haley fetches that old wino for you?”

“Yes. Pull him deeper in the alley so Lisa can port him to New Galveston, Haley, and nobody will see. I’ll have the night staff prepare a room for him here at the hotel.”

Haley frowned, but she moved to the street and gently took Boris by the hand. She led him stumbling into the alley.

“Oh, he stinks. I’m not sure you pay me enough for all this.”

“You get to skulk around at night and fight crime, teleporting and cracking skulls,” Tom said. “That should be worth something.”

“That’s true,” Haley said smiling.

She left the drunken Boris standing in the dark and moved out of the way.

With a loud *pop!* he disappeared.

8.18

Tom quietly slipped the night staff a few tips for taking care of the incredibly stinky drunk who showed up on their doorstep, passed out.

“Put him in a room, charge it to my account. When he wakes up, give him this fresh set of clothes and all these toiletry items. Hopefully he’ll decide to take a shower at some point.”

The hotel staff hurried to carry Boris to a room, one bellhop on either side, his arms over their shoulders.

No one complained, especially now that all the families Tom brought in were gone.

“Guests are good,” the night clerk murmured as he watched the drunk being dragged away from the lobby.

Tom followed, and spent some time making sure Boris was safe on the bed before leaving the room.

Late the following morning, Boris opened his eyes and stared up at an ornate ceiling.

Lifting his head, he found himself on a king-sized bed with very soft cotton sheets, in a room with solid wood dressers and pleasant lighting.

He let out a string of curses, ending with “Where am I?”

A knock came at the door.

Grunting, he stood up. The headache hit him like someone swinging a hammer at his temple.

Boris stood for a moment, holding the sides of his head with both hands.

Another knock came, polite but insistent.

Slowly, Boris walked to the hotel room door and pulled it open.

Tom Savage stood in the hall, smiling at him.

“Good morning, Mr. Volkov. Or do you go by BV? I hope you slept well.”

Boris let out several four-letter words in a row.

Then he said, “Who are you?”

“I’m your new employer, Tom Savage. You, ah, don’t remember anything from last night, do you?”

“No. Where the,” Boris let out a long string of profanity, “am I?”

“New Galveston. This is the Phaethonian, the very best hotel on the planet. I have hired you to be the pilot for my new ship, the *Piker*.”

Boris stared at him for a moment with bloodshot eyes.

“You bought the *Piker*?”

“I did.”

“Then you got scammed. The power’s been goin’ out of that tub for months. I doubt it’ll even make another voyage without dying.”

“I’m in the power business. Phaethon Solar Corp. We have replaced the Class Eight powering *Piker*. We intend to use the ship to transport more power packs from our facility in the Skoni Desert back to New Galveston, then overland across the continent. And you are going to pilot the ship that is key to it all.”

“I am, am I?”

Tom nodded, smiling.

“And how much are you payin’ me to pilot the *Piker* for you?”

“Your salary is one thousand a month. That’s far more than the odd jobs you’ve been picking up in League City around the Projects.”

Boris blinked. But if he was surprised Tom knew about his work habits, he showed nothing else to let on.

Instead, he sighed and looked down at the floor.

“When am I leavin’?”

“Tonight. We’ve got a handful of items to take back to Anatolia. Then you’ll load the hull with Class Eight power packs and return here, with one stop near Waller.”

“There ain’t no dock on Anatolia. Ain’t much there to dock there *for*, anyways. Not with a big cargo tub like the *Piker*.”

Tom smiled.

“Coordinates for the dock off the Anatolian coast have been preprogrammed into the ship. You’ll just need to keep an eye on things and take over if anything happens.”

Boris sighed again and glanced over again at the dresser. Now fully awake, he noticed the clean clothes folded neatly there, and a toiletry set complete with a beard trimmer, soap, shampoo and other items.

He looked back at Tom and met him in the eye.

“I’ll need half my first month’s pay up front.”

Tom nodded.

“Okay. Fair enough.”

Tom reached into his front pocket and pulled out five 100-credit tokens, handing them over to a surprised Boris.

Then he pulled a holosheet out of his implant, twisted it in the air so it faced the older man, and nudged it gently toward him.

“I’ll need you to sign for it.”

Boris nodded and tapped the highlighted square, which recorded his fingerprint. Tom pulled the sheet back into his implant, making a squeezing motion with his fingers.

“Alrighty. Lunch is available in the hotel cafeteria. The company is paying for it, along with the hotel room. I suggest you head down there after you clean up. A van will be waiting at the front door to bring you to the *Piker* whenever you’re ready.”

Boris nodded. He still had a look on his face showing a mixture of amusement and disbelief.

Tom said, “I’ll meet you there,” and he stepped away from the door.

Half an hour later, Boris left the room freshly showered and wearing clean clothes. He left the old ones behind, figuring the maids would have them burned. They stank.

He found the cafeteria deserted, but a waiter seemed to be expecting him. Boris ordered the most expensive item on the menu, a “surf and turf” option with lobster tails and prime rib.

He also asked for a bottle of champagne, but the waiter informed him that regrettably the restaurant had no wine or champagne in stock. In fact, they had no alcohol at all.

“You’re lyin’,” Boris said point blank to the man.

The waiter remained polite but insisted there were no drinks to be had at this time.

Boris finished the meal in a sour mood.

When he walked outside the hotel’s front door, he found a passenger van waiting with a bot driver who greeted him by name.

As they drove away, Boris said, “I need to make a stop along the way to pick up supplies for the voyage.”

“Certainly, sir.”

It took him a while to find the street he wanted, but New Galveston was not that large of a city. He had the driver park and remain with the vehicle.

Boris headed straight for a liquor store.

Half an hour later the van pulled up to the pier alongside the *Piker*. Boris enlisted the bot’s assistance in moving 15 cases of vodka from the van into the ship through the cavernous opening alongside the pier leading directly into the hold.

Tom popped into existence beside the ship and watched the bot driver carrying the last case in. He smiled. Then he looked over his shoulder at a distant line of trucks leaving the streets of New Galveston and heading for the pier.

Boris stepped out at that moment and saw Tom.

He approached the van and checked to make sure no more cases of liquor remained inside. A slight look of disappointment crossed his face.

Tom smiled again and nodded at the approaching vehicles.

“You’re going to take some vehicles over to Anatolia for us. We’ll have some new Class Eights over there, ready for you to bring back. So, that’ll be your first round trip. Feel free to stay in the hotel on us between trips.”

Boris nodded. He did not curse, and Tom noted that he seemed okay with the idea of leaving the world behind for a couple weeks or so.

The old sailor glanced over at the gaping doorway where the liquor cases were stacked.

Tom said, “You okay with handling this big of a ship? You can manage it if the drone controls go out, right?”

Boris snorted.

“This ship ain’t big. I mean, she’s the biggest thing on the Phaethonian seas, for sure. But this is just a wee little boat compared to some of the super cruisers I’ve sailed before. Yeah, I can handle her.”

The trucks approached at this point, bot drivers guiding them onto the pier.

Tom said, “You want to tell them where to park those things in the hold? A few bots will be going with you. You can keep them in standby mode unless you need them for something.”

Boris nodded and moved back inside the ship, waving at the first driver to follow him.

Half an hour later, *Piker* eased away from her home berth and sailed into open waters.

8.19

Tom popped into place outside the farmhouse, startling a handful of chickens nearby. They were about half grown, still a couple months shy of laying eggs.

He turned up the collar on his coat and shivered a bit in the cold.

“What is it? Four or five degrees? I’m not a big fan of winter.”

Robert the Rooster came running, ready to launch into an avian ground attack at the sudden intruder. He slowed to a stop when he recognized Tom.

They had made an uneasy truce over the last few weeks. Robert had apparently concluded that people living in the house, which seemed to be a larger chicken coop to him, were perhaps alright. He no longer tried to attack Tom or Gwen when they drew near.

Regardless, Tom still sent Timmy in whenever something needed to be dealt with along poultry lines. That included restocking food and water in the CC 1000, the automated protective chicken coop that moved around on its own periodically.

Today, Tom noticed, it had repositioned itself between the back porch and the garden. Tom’s usual spot for Lisa to port him in remained nearby. He would likely be alarming the chickens for the foreseeable future, he thought, until the coop moved itself again.

In the distance Tom saw Timmy, the old Republican battle bot that he grew up with, walking through the garden with a canvas bag strapped over his thick metal shoulder.

Tom took a wide circuitous route around the CC 1000 and approached the garden from the far side. He reached down for the controls of the thermo and forcefield barriers surrounding the hectare-sized plot, and turned them off.

Timmy, now at the end of a row, tilted his tall rectangular “head,” a blank sensor, toward Tom as the young man walked up.

“Watcha got for us today, big guy?”

The robot pulled the canvas bag off his shoulder and wordlessly handed it over to Tom.

Tom cracked it open and looked inside.

“Beans and carrots. Alright! I’ll add this to our lunch, thanks.”

Tom looked over at the chickens pecking the soil behind his house.

“I think in another couple months, we’ll start getting some eggs, too. We’ll probably let Haley sell what we don’t eat at the market. You can go inside the CC 1000 and retrieve the eggs. I think Robert has learned to pretty much leave you alone.”

“Affirmative.”

“Good, good. Okay, I’m gonna take these in for lunch. Or, maybe supper.”

He reached up and patted the top of Timmy’s metallic arm affectionately. Then he turned and followed his steps back the long way to the porch.

He entered the farmhouse through the back door, meeting Gwen in the kitchen.

“I come bearing gifts,” Tom said, dumping the contents of the canvas bag out on the kitchen table.

“Hm. I think I prefer eating boxed meals. I don’t want to prepare any of that.”

Tom smiled at his wife, who he decided was definitely not the domestic type.

“Well, if you want, we can pop into League City and go out to eat at a restaurant.”

“Nah. There’s no place for Lisa to teleport us safely in daylight, except the warehouse. Then we’d have to drive somewhere. Here, I’ll do this . . .”

She picked up a couple carrots and moved to the sink, washing them off. Then she pulled a vegetable peeler out of a drawer and quickly skimmed off the outer layer of a couple carrots. Finally, she cut both ends off, tossing the greens and the tips into the trash.

She put both prepared carrots on disposable plates and brought them back to the table. Then she grabbed a couple of boxed meals and set them down next to the plates.

“Ta-dah! Our first home-cooked meal together.”

Tom smiled and picked up his carrot to take a bite. He crunched on it a while before swallowing.

“Not bad.”

“I know, right?” Gwen said while chewing on her own bite of carrot. “Don’t get used to it. This is probably the most I’ll ever cook.”

Tom smiled at her and shrugged.

“Fine by me. I think there was a domestic bot in that batch that Haley picked up from the smuggler. Maybe we’ll bring her out here to cook for us.”

“Or . . . we can keep enjoying boxed meals. How’s your poshbird?”

“Excellent as usual. My compliments to the chef.”

Tom told her about his day so far while they ate together.

Gwen remained skeptical that Boris would work out for them.

“On this initial voyage, we’ve got a dozen bots on the ship with him,” Tom said. “They’re keeping an eye on things, with orders to interfere if he tries to sabotage anything, on purpose or unwittingly. If Lisa loses control of the *Piker*, any one of the bots can step in and pilot it home for us.”

“Which really makes a human unnecessary. Look at how Wink and Jinxie’s ship can handle hypertime with your father’s bot pilot onboard.”

Tom nodded.

“True. We don’t really need him. But . . . he needs a job. He needs us. Maybe doing the thing that he used to love will steer him away from an early death.”

“I think he dearly loves to drink.”

“Which will also lead to an early grave. Let’s give him a shot. If he’s irredeemable, we can reassess whether we need another human pilot slash captain for our cargo vessel.”

The cat jumped up into Gwen’s lap as she took another bite.

“Mr. Biddles and I had a great time out at the SCUs. Everything is in good shape out there, and he did not roam very far.”

“Good. So long as the sand dragons stay in place at their winter resting grounds, I think you have very little to worry about for Mr. Biddles’s sake. The snakes aren’t very active in this cold weather, either.”

Gwen shuddered as she ate more of her carrot.

Soon, they both finished their box meals.

“I’ll do the dishes!” Gwen announced, standing up.

She grabbed everything and tossed it into the garbage receptacle.

“All done.”

Tom smiled at her.

“Well, I suppose I had better get back to the office.”

“Oh, no. You’re not going anywhere this afternoon.”

“I’m not?”

“Nope. I’m tired of being out here on the farm all alone. You . . .”

She pushed back her chair and stood up.

“Are . . .”

She walked around the table to his side and sat down in his lap, throwing her arms around his neck.

“Staying right here with me.”

He kissed her long and hard.

When they came up for air, he smiled at her.

“Okay.”

8.20

Casper Slodovich polished glassware behind the bar at Tay-hoe's.

He was a big man, showing all the outward signs by age and attitude of his service in the League Expeditionary and Army Forces. But at the moment he just looked like another worker. Anyone who did not know otherwise might mistake him for a common bartender instead of the owner of the place.

Anyone who did not know would not realize Casper was known far and wide throughout the Southside Projects as "Overlord." Now that Glyph was dead, and the X's and O's second-in-command Anton Berris remained off-world, Casper held the most powerful position in the group of anarchists who had migrated to Phaethon.

He intended to continue enriching himself at the expense of everyone here, too.

"How did Ferros do last night?" he asked the other bartender, the real one, standing beside him.

This grizzled League veteran, an older man with a shaved head and a three-day beard, said, "He lost another five hundred or so at the tables."

Casper nodded, a thin smile on his lips.

“When he comes in tonight, on his first losing hand, we’ll make a move for his daughter. The teen. She’ll be a good addition.”

His bartender nodded, smiling with a much wider grin.

Extreme poverty and crushing debt remained the primary ways Casper recruited for prostitutes. He either convinced a family to submit their daughter to his bordello in exchange for eliminating what they owed him, or he negotiated with a woman directly. He excelled in finding ways to induce women into bondage.

Casper kept an eye on every family in the Projects, watching the girls while tracking the vices of their parents. At opportune moments, he would strike deals they often found difficult to refuse. Thus, gambling debts were a big driver in bordello recruitment. Since the gaming tables in the back of Tay-hoe’s were rigged, Casper was guaranteed a steady stream of new young girls, often handed over to him by their own parents.

His mind shifted to others recently trapped by his gambling operation.

“How’s the Volkov situation? I still don’t understand how he won on that last roll.”

“I got a theory on that. The dice are loaded, right? Little molecules inside the cubes shift around to make them land a certain way.”

Casper gave a quick glance around the room. Only two patrons were present this early in the afternoon, though, and they sat out of earshot.

“Don’t say stuff like that out loud, Billy.”

“Sorry. Anyways, I think BV was so drunk, he tossed the dice in a funny way. That’s how that one showed up as a ‘six.’”

Casper nodded. He placed a clean glass back on the rack.

“He’s been lucky before. It’s a good thing more people don’t get lucky like that when they’re drunk. Have the men you put out there to intercept him last night reported back?”

Billy shook his head.

“If they pocketed his winnings, I’ll be coming after them myself,” Casper said.

His tone never changed, nor did the expression on his face, which made the warning sound all the more ominous.

Billy raised both hands.

“I’m not sure what happened. They were supposed to come back here after the deed. I’m hoping that at least BV has been taken off the roster, if nothing else.”

Casper nodded, apparently satisfied with the answer.

“Taken off the roster” was code for killing someone. The roster dated back to when they first loaded up all these people and migrated to Phaethon a couple years ago.

As if discussing the two men conjured one of them, the door opened and a young tough walked in wearing an oily black jacket.

Both the older fellows manning the bar stopped to stare at the newcomer. He wore a bandage on his chin and his face looked swollen.

He stopped at the bar, eyes shifting between the two. Finally, he focused on Casper, evidently deciding this man bore more importance than the one who assigned him the task.

“Dimi ain’t with me, Overlord.”

Casper nodded once. He did not really care if the man’s partner lived or not. All he really cared about centered on retrieving the tokens that Boris “accidentally” won last night at the gaming tables.

And killing Boris, who irritated him.

“What happened?”

“Night Shadow got the jump on us. She took me out with one punch. Wotta sock! The charity clinic don’t got no nanobots, so they patched me up best they could. I’m gonna be sore for a while.”

Casper processed this information and decided he wanted to know more.

“What happened to Dimi?”

The young man shrugged, his black-clad shoulders rolling up and back down.

“He’s still at the clinic. She worked him over more than me. He must not have gone down with one blow.”

He said this last part with a wistful tone in his voice, and a hint of jealousy for his friend, who apparently had taken a much worse beating from the vigilante.

“This is most important. Look at me.”

The young man’s eyes came up to meet the Overlord’s. Blood drained from his face, making the black jacket stand out even more.

“Where is Boris Volkov and the money he had on him? You were supposed to dispose of him and bring me the credits from Tay-hoe’s that he took. Where is the money? What happened to Volkov?”

The young man blanched even more, if that were possible. His cheeks looked almost as white as a sheet.

“Overlord, I don’t know. We was both waylaid by that chick in black. She delivers a powerful punch, I’m tellin’ you. She knocked us both out. I woke up first and I didn’t see nothin’. There was no sign of Night Shadow, and no sign of Boris at the clinic. I came straight here.”

Casper sighed, his only expression of disappointment.

“He’s probably still sleeping off all the vodka shots he downed last night. I’ll stop by his place on my rounds and take care of the job we paid you to do.”

The young man gulped, audibly.

“Maybe, if Boris hasn’t spent all that money on booze already, I might even get some of it back.”

“If he did load up on vodka,” Billy said with a chuckle, “maybe you can use it to restock the bar.”

Casper nodded thoughtfully.

“That’s not a bad idea. He won’t be needing it, where I’m sending him.”

8.21

Casper made the rounds of the Southside Projects, a collection of several buildings hastily erected with few amenities.

Most had recently had their power packs replaced. Casper decided the Courthouse did not want to deal with angry Southsiders, especially after the riot trashing the Commercial District recently. Thus, they catered to the community, even when the community acted out against the workers hired by the city.

As for the riot, that, he decided, had been a waste of resources. Glyph, that crazy old goat, riled up his followers and led them on a rampage. But merchants were always protective of their shops. Out here on a frontier planet, perhaps even more so.

The League had stricter controls over firearms, seeking to keep their population under stricter rules. The Republic encouraged responsible firearm ownership. But out here on a new planet, as yet unaligned with one of the governmental systems, almost everyone had a gun.

It had been particularly foolish, Casper thought, to make a move against the merchants before the X's and O's were ready. The loss in population directly affected Casper's monetary health. He had yet to recover the nightly income at the bar, and gaming revenue as well as prostitution income remained down as well.

The brash young men willing to storm a shop were also the ones willing to spend on women, booze and gambling. A large percentage of them died that night.

His prior income levels would perhaps never recover, Casper thought. Because no one outside the Projects frequented Tay-hoes. He had no source of new customers.

Up until now, that had never been a problem.

Casper stopped and checked in with the doorman of Building 341. These guards were tasked with keeping track of everyone going in and out, and keeping their eyes open.

He learned the Alvarados had a new baby boy, delivered at the charity clinic last night. Their other seven kids were crammed into the apartment alone. Four of those kids worked, running rickshaws and serving as gophers for merchants, so the family had more income than most in the building. But right now, both mother and father remained in the clinic, focused on the new baby.

It was information like that Casper craved. Two of the Alvarado daughters were approaching their teens, and would make good money in Casper's bordello. He charged a premium for time with younger girls.

But the work ethic of the Alvarado family played against him. With both the parents and four kids bringing in money, combined with the fact that no one drank alcohol, *and* the father was not interested in gambling, meant that Casper had no way to get his hooks into them.

Still, the information regarding their new baby was welcome. Casper would keep the nugget in mind going forward. Maybe he could use it somehow.

He moved on to the next building.

Eventually he came to the building he knew Boris Volkov lived in. After exchanging a few words with the doorman, he took the building's master key from the man and walked inside.

The fast and flimsy project buildings were not even wired for modern doors. In some ways it was like stepping back in time, Casper thought. The

doors opened on hinges and were secured by metal locks. Each doorman kept a master key, and Casper often took advantage of their access privileges, especially where women were concerned.

Or, when someone owed him money.

He made his way to Boris's room and unlocked the door before swinging it open.

Expecting to see a drunkard's mess, he was surprised to find the efficiency apartment neat and relatively clean. The only nod to Boris's addiction was a pyramid-shaped stack of empty vodka bottles in one corner.

Most important, no one was here. A quick glance showed there was no good place to hide. Casper did not even bother to look under the bed or dig through the closet.

He sighed and closed the door.

Boris was not home. This was a mystery.

The two men sent to take Boris off the roster and retrieve his winnings from Tay-hoe's were waylaid by that pesky Night Shadow.

For the most part, the masked vigilante with the power boosts had stayed out of the Southside Projects. Casper did not bother worrying about things that did not concern him. If a woman wanted to dress up in black tights and fight crime at night, that was fine by him . . . so long as she stayed out of his territory.

Now, evidently, she had beaten up a couple of his guys. And it seemed she had saved Boris from an ignoble death on the street, at least for now.

But the question remained, where was Boris? What happened to him? And how did that crime fighter spirit him out of the Projects with no one seeing?

He lingered in the hallway for a moment, considering these questions.

Then, mentally shrugging, he made his way back down to the apartment building's front door and the guard.

Giving the man back his master key, Casper said, “I want to find Boris Volkov. Keep an eye out for him. Tell all the other doormen the same. If you see BV, let me know right away.”

The guard nodded and assured him that should Boris ever show his face around here again, Overlord would be the first to know. All the guards would be on the lookout for him. There would be nowhere in the Projects BV could hide for long.

Casper nodded, and continued on his rounds, feeling mildly annoyed at his inability to find Boris.

One other report concerned him. Apparently, four families had recently left the Projects.

He knew them. None of the husbands or wives had been particularly profitable for Tay-hoe’s. None of them drank excessively or gambled outside the occasional fun night. They were all hard workers too, earning an honest living.

Why had they left?

They found a new employer, evidently. The same van had been used to pick them all up. Everyone moved out, including the kids.

But with all these details his doormen were able to provide, no one had thought to figure out which company was poaching people from the Projects.

Obviously, they were giving the families new places to live somewhere. Presumably, a lucrative salary would follow . . .

“I’m losing people,” Casper muttered to himself as he made his way back to Tay-hoe’s.

And losing people, he thought but did not say out loud, meant less money for him to collect off their backs.

8.22

A dozen horses crested a rocky ridge and their riders looked down on the highway snaking through the valley below.

The men had cowboy hats on, blocking the glare from the shrouded sun, and they all wore sweat-stained shirts. They had ridden long and hard to get to this point, out in the middle of nowhere.

“This is it, Boss. When I rode with the Spit and Polish Gang, I recollect old Paul hisself designin’ the trap. He set up improvised explosives at the curve over yonder.”

The cowpoke speaking pointed a gloved hand down where the road passed a rocky bend.

“The idea was, a rockslide would block the road. Then the gang could ride down and rob whoever we was tryin’ to stop. It was a good plan.”

Boswell “Boss” Hogan nodded as he stared down at the road laid out like a holo map below them.

An older man approaching 60, he maintained a voracious appetite. And it showed. His horse strained under the added weight Hogan’s gluttony provided.

When he spoke, his voice sounded surprisingly high-pitched, not matching his massive frame at all.

“So, this here is the last known whereabouts of Spit Farlowe and Paul Humphreys and their boys, ay?”

The cowpoke nodded, eager to please.

“Yessir. They stayed at Margie’s Roadhouse about three klicks from here and talked about comin’ out to this ambush spot again, campin’ and waitin’ for somethin’ to show up. Then they could jump it and maybe score a hit.”

“You see now, that there is the problem with a smalltime gang like Spit rounded up.”

The other men riding near Hogan smiled. Many had been with him since arriving on this planet. They leaned back in their saddles, clearly expecting a speech.

“He got tunnel vision. He was too narrow-minded to branch out and think of other things. A man can waylay merchants all he wants along these roads between the towns. But eventually one of two things is gonna happen. Ain’t that right, toadies?”

The men chuckled at Boss Hogan’s affectionate appellation for them. Some of them nodded.

Hogan turned back to the cowpoke.

“Eventually, folks at the Courthouse is gonna get tired of hearin’ reports about bandits on the roads. They’ll organize and deputize and send a force out huntin’ down the outlaws. Now, I understand that Spit and Polish were rather adept at movin’ around and avoidin’ that sort of outcome. But eventually, attackin’ merchants on the road was gonna backfire on him. Somebody would have a surprise for him, or maybe the Courthouse deputies set a trap or somethin’ for *him*. Anyhow, that’s just one thing, the most likely thing.”

Boss Hogan glanced around to make sure everyone in his retinue paid attention. All eyes remained fixed on him, so he continued.

“The other thing, and this has happened, and I reckon it contributed to the first thing. The other thing is, merchant travel has died out. Ain’t that right, toadies? Ain’t that what we been seein’, all over the continent?”

Several of the men nodded, hats bobbing up and down.

“That’s right. And ol’ Spit, he didn’t change with the times. We is under an embargo, boys. And an embargo means no new stuff comin’ in, unless a smuggler makes it through. And they’re precious few. So, Spit was out here starvin’. And me, I don’t like starvin’.”

He rubbed his fat belly, and several men chuckled politely.

“Now, what do y’all reckon happened to our friends Spit and Paul and their boys? Anybody got any ideas? Y’all ain’t heard from them since?”

This last question was directed at the cowpoke who brought the gang out to this spot. He shook his head.

“It appears to me,” one young man on a horse close to Hogan said, “that there ain’t no rocks at that bend in the road. In fact, from up here you can see what looks like some scorch marks. I would say the trap has already been sprung, Boss.”

Hogan looked back at the cowpoke.

“Have they triggered that avalanche lately?”

“No sir, Boss. At least, not since I been out here with them. And I didn’t hear no talk about it at the roadhouse, either. One of them in Spit’s gang would surely have said somethin’ about it. They woulda had to find a new place with fresh rocks to set up another trap if this one had already been triggered.”

“Well now, that makes sense. I think you’re right Egger. I think the trap has been sprung. But where did all them rocks go? If the road was cleared, they just would have shoved them off to one side, am I right?”

The men stared down at the road, clear of debris, and the land on either side of it, also clear of debris.

The cowpoke cleared his throat, nervously.

He pointed to a spot in front of and below them on the slope of the hill leading down to the road.

“Uh, Boss Hogan . . . I don’t recollect that particular pile of rocks bein’ there last time I was out here.”

Egger clicked his tongue and gently urged his horse down the slope.

When he drew closer to the pile, he looked things over carefully. Then he glanced back up the hill where Boss Hogan and the others waited.

“Got scorch marks on some of these, Boss. Just like over there.”

He nodded his head back in the direction of the cliff above the curve in the road below them.

Hogan took his hat off and ran his fingers through coarse dark hair.

“How in the world would they get all the rocks from down yonder up here, and pile ’em up like that?”

“I dunno,” Egger called back up to him. “But I’ll tell you this, Boss. That there would be a good hidin’ place to stash the bodies of an entire six- or seven-man gang. You could put all the men and all their horses under that pile, and no one would ever find them. Who’s gonna move several tons of rocks lookin’ for ’em?”

Boss Hogan nodded, agreeing with his toady’s assessment.

He put his hat on and stared at the new pile of rocks, then back down at the road below.

“Yeah, but . . . how’d they do it? Whoever ‘they’ was? That’s a lotta rocks, boys.”

For that, no one had an answer.

They stared at the scenery for a while longer before heading back to the roadhouse.

8.23

Margie's Roadhouse stood in the small village of Sweeny, off the beaten trail.

No one had any reason to frequent the settlement unless they lived nearby. Consequently, no one had any real reason to visit Margie's. Somehow, the widow managed to earn a living for herself, though. One of the reasons was outlaw gangs tended to favor the isolated settlement, and thus they frequented Margie's place, the only pub around.

Serving outlaws proved lucrative for Margie Aubert. Sometimes, like now, she recruited some of the other women of Sweeny to help her serve everyone. More than a hundred men crowded her ramshackle pub, talking and drinking and eating. Every spare hand in and around Sweeny pitched in to help Margie serve them all.

"I'm tellin' ya, somethin's goin' on," one old rogue said, pushing a black velvet hat back on his head.

He drank at a table with seven other outlaw gang leaders. Boss Hogan sat at the head of the table, taking up the space of three men. He had scooted two chairs together to support his weight.

"Well, I'll tell ya what's goin' on," another outlaw leader said.

Unlike many of the others, he wore a white hat. He put down his mug of beer to talk.

“It’s the embargo. There’s no new stuff to move around.”

“The embargo, the embargo, the embargo,” a third man said. This fellow wore no hat at all. In contrast to Boss Hogan, he looked tall and rail thin.

“Ever’body blames ever’thing on the embargo. But I’m tellin’ you boys, it’s the Courthouse that’s the source of our troubles.”

This brought nods and grunts of agreement, including from the white hat who first blamed the embargo.

“Why, just last week, or was it two weeks ago? I heard a smuggler got through and landed out at the spaceport. Within an hour all his cargo was auctioned off. All your local merchants around the bazaar, they got every single thing off that ship. You wanna know where the loot is? You wanna know where the money is? League City. And the Courthouse . . . they’re the biggest racket of all on this whole darn planet. They control everything. *Everything*. You want more goods flowin’ down the road? Then you need to address the problem in League City first.”

“Well, now. That’s just a little difficult, ain’t it?” the man wearing the black hat said. “I mean, the Courthouse . . . how exactly would you go about dealin’ with them? They got guns, they got manpower. The building itself can be locked up tighter than a drum, which is what I heard happened during the riots not long ago.”

This brought silence to the table, even as other men drank and ate all around them.

“Well . . . I’ll say this,” Hogan said, glancing in the eyes of everyone present. “If someone were to capture the Courthouse, they’d own the whole planet. They’d get orbital control. They’d get the Sheriff’s office. They’d have Hizzoner’s office. They’d have all the records for all the land grants. They’d pretty much be in charge of the whole planet.”

“You know, I never thought of that,” the man in the white hat said, his eyes growing round. “But you’re right, Hogan. If someone were to capture the Courthouse, it’d be game over. They’d have all the resources on Phaethon.”

“Not all,” the thin hatless man said. “The bank is across the street. Get ahold of that, and then you’d have everything.”

“The bank ain’t all that,” Hogan said, waving aside those concerns. “I heard it was robbed not long ago. And if someone has robbed it successfully in the past, we can always rob it again later. No, the trick is grabbin’ the Courthouse. But I’m gonna tell ya, boys, it ain’t gonna be easy to pull off a stunt like that.”

He looked around at the rowdy men in the roadhouse. One of them pinched Margie’s bottom as she walked by. She turned around and poured a pitcher of beer on his lap. The men near him howled in laughter.

“And I don’t think we can do it with all our gangs, either. We need more men to pull off somethin’ like that. A lot more. The bank or the Courthouse. Or both.”

The table lapsed into silence again.

The thin man cleared his throat, drawing all eyes to him.

“There is a source of, shall we say, like minded people livin’ in League City. There was a man named Gliph who brought in thousands of followers.”

“I heard of him,” Hogan said. “The leader of the X’s and O’s. A bunch of anarchists.”

Black Hat sneered derisively. White Hat said nothing, but he narrowed his eyes.

The thin man continued.

“Yes. He was plannin’ on takin’ over the planet but that did not work out. First thing when they got here, the Courthouse put his people in the Projects. Mostly, they been there ever since. They kept Hizzoner in office during the election. Anyhow, Gliph and his second have left. His second went off world, I guess to round up more recruits. Gliph hisself went to Anatolia and hasn’t been heard or seen since. Rumor has it, he ain’t *gonna* be heard or seen from ever again, nor any that he took with him on that trip. The people of Little York took care of them.”

Everyone at the table grimaced.

“I wouldn’t want to run a gang on Anatolia,” one of the other leaders said softly. “Used to be they had the Fae Phalanx patrolling their shores. But even without those lesbos, there ain’t much out there but desert sand. That’s where the haze comes from, you know. The heart of Anatolia.”

Everyone nodded.

“Well, it looks like maybe we could talk to whoever is left in League City associated with the X’s and O’s,” Hogan said. “If we could strike up an alliance, we just might could pull somethin’ off. Somethin’ spectacular. We could let the anarchists raid the Courthouse if they wanted, and maybe we could take the bank and . . . you know, boys, there is a whole lot of merchants in League City. And if they’re not gonna transport things along the roads for us to steal, maybe we could go pay them a visit on their home turf.”

Around them, the men and their gangs laughed and drank and ate.

The leaders around the table all nodded, thoughtfully.

“Which would you go for?” the thin man said. “The bank or the Courthouse?”

Boss Hogan smiled.

He said, “I’d go for the one that got me the most money after it’s all over with.”

8.24

Festivities out in the park on the edge of town were muted these days. Not as many passengers traveled to and fro, meaning not as many customers for the booths set up out on the grass.

This designated landing area for sky train cars retained a delegation of merchants, though. Just in case . . .

Three cars descended, having separated from Cloud Nine far above. Those watching noted with interest the train's stable car descended along with one for passengers and another for baggage.

The three cars landed smoothly and the doors opened along their sides with a hiss.

Several men in cowboy hats stepped out of the passenger car, including one very big fellow. The car seemed to sigh in relief as his weight transferred off the platform and onto the grass.

One of the cowboys moved to the stable car to fetch the men's horses. The big man saw a fairground attendant and headed toward him to ask some questions.

Moments later, Boss Hogan knew all that he needed to know. Stables were nearby where they could keep the horses. Yes, the Projects were right over there. In fact, two of their buildings faced the fairgrounds.

Yes, the attendant admitted softly, there was indeed a whorehouse inside the Projects. They didn't see many outsiders, but he heard on good authority the girls went on a sliding scale according to their youth and looks, from about ten credits an hour on up.

"That's good to know," Hogan said, slapping the smaller man on the back. "Very good to know. Thankee kindly."

He nodded to the men as they made their way to the stables. Moments later, horses taken care of with three days' board prepaid, the cowboys made their way into the big city.

They immediately came under scrutiny, the doormen taking note of their presence.

Hogan nodded in appreciation at the eyes and ears network throughout the Projects, at least those parts of it he could see.

"This is how you'd run a municipal gang," he said to his toadies as they walked along the sidewalk. "If, that is, you had everyone concentrated in one area. Nice work."

They went three blocks in before finding the building Hogan sought. Following the instructions from the park attendant, he headed down some basement steps.

"Not much out here to let you know what's inside, huh boys?"

His unease ratcheted up as he walked down the stairs. Boss Hogan was a big man, wide of girth, and the tight quarters of the stairwell meant he could not turn around easily.

But he had a gun, a good League milsurp blaster, and he felt confident that no one would try and off him before listening to what he had to say. So he continued down the inky stairwell, quickly losing the ambient light from the street above.

They found a hallway, also dim. Sounds drifted from a doorway in the middle of the building. Hogan moved down the corridor steadily, all of his men right behind him.

“Perhaps this ain’t the wisest move on my part, boys. I shoulda let you toadies go on ahead of me.”

Light chuckles greeted this remark.

“On the other hand, I is bigger than all of youse boys. So if somebody started shootin’, I’d still get shot.”

At the door with the noise of a public house behind it, Hogan tried the latch. It was open, and swung inward.

All chatter inside stopped at the sight of the big man.

He squeezed his way through the door, showing surprising grace and agility for such an overweight person.

Behind him, half a dozen toadies followed, including Egger.

They were all armed, and even though they felt out of place, no one showed any concern for their well-being. All were practiced gunfighters, after all.

Two men stood behind the bar, obvious war veterans. The kind who did not easily give up violence as a way of life just because hostilities officially ended a couple decades ago. They locked eyes with Hogan as he approached.

Hogan looked them both over and made a guess.

“Which one of youse is the one known as Overlord?”

Dead silence now flooded the bar. No one said a word.

Finally, Casper finished wiping the inside of a glass, making the cloth squeak. He slowly put the glass back in a rack and locked eyes with Boss Hogan.

“I am. What can I do for you?”

Hogan smiled and moved forward. He looked at the barstool and decided the contraption might not hold his weight. He leaned up against the bar instead, making the wood creak under the strain.

“Well, now. I realize you mostly serve locals. But my boys here would shore like a woman. Out where we come from, there ain’t many women to speak of. And then maybe you and me can talk about a little proposition. I do represent some other folks and we’d like to do a little business with you, if youse are willin’.”

A subtle change came over Casper’s face. It was not too pronounced, but Hogan noticed it.

The veteran nodded and turned to the other man.

“Have Min set them up. Get them the good girls.”

Billy nodded and walked out from behind the bar.

“If you gents will follow me . . .”

He walked to the back of the bar where the door opened to the gambling den. The toadies followed. Egger stopped and raised his eyebrows at Hogan, who shooed him on with a wave of the hand.

“Go on, go on. Have some fun. I’ll be alright talkin’ with Mr. Overlord here.”

Casper glared at a customer approaching the bar for another drink. The man got the message and returned to his table. Conversations picked back up in the large room, giving the two men a modicum a privacy.

“I hear the X’s and O’s are washed up on this here planet.”

Casper’s face relaxed, as if realizing what this might be about.

“We’ve taken some hits. But we’re in it for the long run.”

“Well, like I said, I got a proposition. What if we was to run a citywide assault on things together? I know you’re hurtin’ for fightin’ men, on account of so many merchants put your boys down durin’ that riot a while back. What if I were to tell you I can bring in two or three hundred men from outside the city?”

Casper nodded slowly.

“I’m listening.”

“What if we were to combine our forces? What do you want more than anything, Mr. Overlord? You want to overthrow the government on this little planet? You want to turn it into an anarchist utopia or some such? To do that, you’re gonna have to take the Courthouse. I can help you with that. I’ve got the men you lost, a similar number of seasoned gunfighters. And they can fight. Shoot, we been killin’ merchants on the roads and in the villages out there for a couple years now. Ain’t much difference between them and city vendors. All us horse thieves know how to fight, lemme tell you.”

Casper said nothing, his face downcast as he thought over things for a moment.

Hogan waited patiently, his eyes roaming the room. Or at least what he could see of it without turning his back on Casper. He lingered on a food plate someone had ordered at a table not far away.

Finally Casper looked up and met his eyes again.

“I’d be interested in any assistance you could offer, Mr . . .?”

“Hogan. Boss Hogan. I think we’ll enjoy doin’ business together, Mr. Overlord.”

He stuck out a massive hand, the size of a ham.

Casper took it, and they shook.

8.25

Two sky train cars descended out of the haze outside Little York, dropping like rocks until a hundred meters, then slowing down for a feather-soft landing.

When the doors slid open, Captain Isidore Montaigne stepped out and waved a hand at the field.

“Welcome to Little York, Doctor. I hope the trip has been a satisfactory one for you.”

“Indeed it has. An expensive one at that,” Tara Lewellen said as she stepped out of the car. “Fortunately, my university gave me a hefty expense budget. I had no idea I’d be spending so much on travel.”

“Well, anytime the Jet Stream can be of service, Dr. Lewellen, just have the local pub put in a call. Commlinks are in every town of any size, and sky trains can deviate from planned routes to pick up passengers or packages for an added fee.”

“Yes, so you have reminded me on more than one occasion. Thank you again.”

“Ah! Here come the elements in the next leg of your journey.”

Both turned as Tom and Gwen trotted up. Tom rode Lucas and Gwen had Bessie hitched to a small wagon. The couple pulled up close to the sky train cars and dismounted.

“Dr. Lewellen? I’m Tom Savage. I’ve got the farm Haley told you about. This is my wife, Gwen.”

They both shook hands with the woman.

Tom said, “Captain Montaigne, glad to see you again.”

“I am too, Sonny! Happy to give you a ride anytime!”

Montaigne turned back to Tara and said, “He’s one of my best customers! He’s turned into quite the traveling salesman. I saved him his first day on Phaethon, and he’s been traveling with me ever since.”

“Well, not today, I’m afraid. Instead, Dr. Lewellen is going to go for a ride with us. That is, if you’re up to it? We can stop at the pub over there for something to eat and drink before we go, if you like. It’s about 20 klicks out.”

“No, no. I’m more interested in seeing the sand dragons. Haley has told me a lot about them. Honestly, I can’t wait.”

“Alright, then. Let me get your luggage.”

While Tara and Gwen talked, Tom pulled out the scientist’s baggage and equipment. He did not have much to figure out, since her stuff comprised all the cargo in that car.

“It’s a good thing you brought a wagon, Sonny. I’m impressed with your forward thinking, there.”

Tom smiled, loading up suitcases. Captain Montaigne did nothing to help, talking while Tom did all the work.

But after several trips back and forth, Tom pulled out every travel crate and suitcase in the baggage car and loaded them on the wagon.

“Is there anything else, Dr. Lewellen? You didn’t forget anything upstairs, did you? We can ask Captain Montaigne to go fetch it for us if you did.”

“No, I made sure and got everything before we came down, thank you.”

Tom shook hands with Montaigne. The Captain waved at them as he boarded the passenger car and set the controls to return to the Jet Stream. The doors on both cars slid shut simultaneously, and they rose in the air.

Tom watched as they ascended, disappearing in the haze above.

He turned and smiled at the women on the wagon. They knew ahead of time thanks to Haley, and Lisa’s sensors aboard the Jet Stream, just how much equipment Dr. Lewellen had brought with her from Pearl. So they knew to bring a wagon to pick her up. But also, it had a padded seat so they could get both women home without bruising any bottoms.

At least we were able to port here, Tom thought as he guided Lucas to turn around and head back toward Main Street. That saved us half the trip.

Dr. Lewellen would remain oblivious as to their teleportation capabilities, at least for now.

Besides, he thought, letting her take the sky train out here gave us time to get ready for her visit.

Lucas clip-clopped ahead and Gwen clicked her tongue to encourage Bessie to follow. Soon, they passed between Ferguson’s Freehold and the long building to their left, coming out on Main Street between the two long standard retail buildings.

“Oh, my. It looks like the town is in some disrepair.”

“Oh, yeah,” Gwen said looking around at the broken windows and plywood covering some storefronts. “There was an incident a while back. A bad fight. You know how it is out on the frontier.”

The scientist’s face lost a bit of color.

“I do not, in fact, have a clue about frontier life. I had no idea it could be so . . . violent.”

“Oh, well . . . that was sort of an anomaly. It doesn’t usually get that bad. You’re perfectly safe with us. Well . . . as safe as you can be out here.”

Soon they passed Cajun Cal's corral and hit the open road north of town. Tom looked both ways before riding through the crossroads.

Off in the distance, in the field to their left, the little white church and parsonage seemed to sparkle in the ambient light.

"Oh, my! What a beautiful church."

"Yeah, that's where we got married."

"Wonderful! How long ago was that?"

"A couple months or so."

"Oh! So, you two are still newlyweds!"

Gwen's ears turned pink.

"We're finding our way, still. But so far it's been a lot of fun."

"Well, congratulations. I never tied the knot. Never found somebody. Work has taken precedence, don't you know."

"Mm."

"Have you ever worked?"

The question caught Gwen off guard.

"Uh . . . when I came out here, I joined a ranger outfit. We got paid, but I'd hardly call that work. It was mostly camping out under the stars, riding around and shooting bad guys. When I met Tom, well . . . he's an entrepreneur. And I guess now that makes me one too, because I'm helping him all the time. But in terms of a trad job? A nine-to-five? Nope. Never."

Tara blinked as she took in this stream of information.

"My. What interesting lives you all lead out here."

"You think so? Tell me about what you do back on Pearl. We've got a ways to go before we get to the farm."

"Well, I run a department that studies exo-biological specimens. We are particularly interested in new discoveries that are 'non-variants.' This

means our subjects have no similarities with a known organism from Old Earth. Do you know how rare finding something like that is? On occasion, something that is extinct on earth shows up on a colonized planet. Primordia on Diego is like stepping back in time, but it's been studied exhaustively. Your sand dragons represent an excellent opportunity to explore something truly unique . . .”

Half an hour later, Gwen found herself regretting she asked the question, as the enthusiastic scientist continued gushing about her research and the field in general.

8.26

The horses crested the final ridge on the North Road and the Little River stretched out below them, a blue ribbon in the distance. Off to the left, Tara saw the sawmill. It stood silent at the moment, with copious mounds of sawdust surrounding it left over from lumber recently created for all the company houses in New Galveston.

“What is *that*?”

“That’s one of our woodworking projects,” Gwen said lightly. “Tell me more about your dissertation. You were saying there’s a way to measure pterodactyl eggs or something?”

“That’s right! I created a formula that proves, with statistical significance, that the size of a pterodactyl egg correlates almost exactly with the size of the hatched specimen.”

Gwen stared at her as Bessie pulled the wagon steadily forward.

“I’m sorry. It just seems like you’re more concerned with the statistical analysis of your dataset than the actual point of what you’re studying.”

Tara’s head rocked back, as if Gwen had verbally slapped her. It appeared she had not expected a statement like that from this . . . frontier girl.

“Well, you don’t understand. My chair was a real beast. And he was very concerned that the statistical analyses were performed properly. That mattered to him more than anything else. So, yes. You are right, I chose a topic that I could measure easily. And yes, it likely is something that didn’t really *need* to be studied. It stands to reason, after all, that there is a correlation between egg sizes and specimens. But we didn’t really know that for sure before studying it, so it *is* new knowledge. Besides, the important thing is that my committee approved the dissertation. Now, I get to do what I really want to do in my research. And that is . . . what’s wrong with those trees?”

The horses now passed Silas and Lola’s place. Stretching off into the lightly wooded area behind their house, stainless steel spigots were buried into the trunk of every third tree or so, one meter up.

“We tap the trees for sap. It makes very good syrup.”

“I see. Is that harmful to the trees?”

Gwen blinked, surprised that the slightly older woman had never heard of tapping trees before.

“Not at all. People have been doing it since ancient times. American Indians taught the Pilgrims how to do it.”

“Oh. Hm. Okaayyy . . .”

The scientist seemed unconvinced.

But now the horses headed down the hill and approached the bridge crossing the Little River. Beyond that, the farmhouse and stables waited.

Bessie and Lucas picked up the pace, anxious to return home and eat a heaping serving of oats.

Tom and Gwen glanced ahead, looking around nervously. But Timmy remained safely tucked away in the barn and out of sight. It would not do for their visitor to see a Republican battle bot doing chores on the farm.

The chicken coop, too, remained behind the house. So the scene looked “clean” as they approached. The only thing out of sorts was the old red

truck parked out front.

As they drew up to the house, Silas and Lola climbed out of the vehicle.

Tom's eyes narrowed.

Both their shirts were untucked, and Silas tried to surreptitiously zip up his jeans.

"Yeah, I know what they've been doing in that truck," Tom murmured under his breath.

"Howdy! Y'all are back already?"

"We are so glad to meet you," Lola said, walking around the truck and approaching the wagon.

Tom thought Lola shifted into hospitality mode far more smoothly than her husband.

"Thank you. I am Dr. Tara Lewellen. And I am here to study sand dragons."

"Well, you came to the right place, Doc." Silas said with a smile. "We got more of them rascals than we know what to do with. At least their hides are good for somethin'."

Tara's face dropped.

"Did you say, 'hides?'"

"Yes, ma'am. They're blaster proof! Darnedest thing. You skin one of them sons o' guns, and you can make eight or ten vests that'll stop a bolt cold. I'll be happy to show ya sometime. Of course, not with me wearin' the vest, you understand."

He chuckled at his own joke.

Tara stared at him with a look crossing between outrage and incredulity.

"Read the room, Silas," Tom said, reaching up to offer the scientist his hand. "The good doctor doesn't want to hear about anyone skinning her research subjects."

“Thank you, yes. I would hope no harm comes to those wonderful creatures. And you promised me that you have a hidden camera on their mating grounds? I simply must see that video.”

Tom gave Silas a blank look as he helped Tara climb down from the wagon.

Silas’s face dropped as he realized he may have said too much.

He glanced at Lola, who frowned at him, and he seemed to reassess.

He *definitely* said too much.

“Come inside,” Gwen said, “and I’ll get us all something to drink.”

“Oh, just water for me. I try not to pollute my body with anything else.”

Tom caught Gwen’s eye roll. Fortunately, Tara did not see it as Gwen headed inside.

“Well, the luggage can wait. Let’s let you see our holo. It’s in the living room.”

“Yes, I’m really curious. I know that my expectations are almost certainly unrealistic, but when I heard you had a camera trained on their winter mating grounds that provides a live feed, well, my heart went into palpitations. We were not even aware they had a mating ground. There’s so much to be learned out here!”

She kept talking as they mounted the steps. Tom held the front door open for her.

“I mean, if anything we . . . OH MY WORD!”

Tara stopped and stared at a life-sized version of Big Ugly standing in front of her.

Tom couldn’t help but chuckle softly.

“Don’t worry. It’s just a holo. See? We can step right through him.”

He gently guided the older woman by the arm and led her through the holo.

“But it’s so realistic! You must be using a very expensive camera . . .”

“Well, yeah. And we’ve been recording for a while now. We’ve got exabytes of data that you are welcome to. Basically, it’s a non-stop version of this . . .” he waved around the room at the rich three-dimensional landscape filled with sand dragons large and small, “going all day and all night.”

8.27

“**Y**ou know, the scientist from Pearl can stay at our place, if you two lovebirds would like some privacy.”

Jinxie made the offer with a smile on an end-of-day group call between the top people at Phaethon Solar. Besides Jinxie and Gwen, Tom, Wink, Silas, Lola, and Haley listened in.

Two days had passed since Dr. Tara Lewellen arrived at the Savage homestead.

“Thanks, Jinx. Tom and I have been saying goodnight to her and then having Lisa port us to the Phaethonian the last couple days. The rooms there are nicer, anyway. No offense to anything the MicaBots built.”

“Yeah, there’s a little more privacy over here,” Tom said. “We kept a suite off the office area for personal use, specifically for times like this or when family came back to visit again. For right now, we just use the hotel and port back and forth every morning and evening. Lisa keeps an eye on the scientist and she’s supposed to let us know if Dr. Lewellen knocks on our bedroom door during the night or something.”

“Besides,” Gwen added, “I don’t know that we *can* move her away from the living room right now. She’s sleeping on the couch. She’s spending every waking moment, and her sleeping ones too, with those sand dragons. Even

if we offered to move the holo somewhere else, I don't think she'd want to leave it alone for a minute."

"She hasn't been attacked by one yet," Silas said. "Her tune may change if and when that day comes."

Tom said, "That's true. Then she may join the rest of us in forming a deep and abiding hatred for those things. Especially Big Ugly."

"I don't hate him," Gwen said. "But I darn sure respect him and all the other sand dragons. They're not something you want to tangle with. You saw what was left of those Ever Riders and their horses during the last sandstorm."

"Right. Hopefully the good doctor will be content with remote observation, at least for now. Winter will be over before you know it, though, and I bet all those lizards will leave the oasis and spread back out across the desert. That means Big Ugly will come home, and my guess is she'll try to get some up close and personal time with him."

Haley chimed in from Warehouse 14 in League City.

"She seems very intelligent. Let's just hope she has some common sense, too."

-+-

The newest addition to Tom and Gwen's stable of horses was Dunmire. Now two months old, the young colt had learned to gallop, and he loved it.

He streaked down the field alongside the river, grass cut short for hay months ago. His tail streamed behind him in the brisk evening air.

In the distance, far behind, the lights to the farmhouse grew faint.

Dunmire stopped and looked back toward the stables as ambient light ebbed with the setting sun behind the ever-present haze.

He trotted back toward the house, going slower now with the fading light.

At last the stables came into the young horse's view. And there waiting for him stood Timmy, the old Republican battle bot.

Timmy towered over the colt, but his hand rested on the gate to the corral, ready to let Dunmire inside.

The colt stopped and stared at the gleaming metal bot.

He snorted and darted past the gate and the bot in a burst of sudden speed.

Originally, Timmy had been programmed for the battlefield tactics LEAF soldiers might use against him, granting him lightning-fast reflexes and the ability to make decisions on the fly in combat.

This programming proved surprisingly adaptable when dealing with naughty colts.

Timmy shifted into high speed, blurring after the errant equine as Dunmire cut between the stables and the house. By the time they reached the back porch, he caught up with Dunmire and reached out to grab the halter.

The bot put on the brakes, slowing down immediately and thrumming the ground with his feet. Dunmire had no choice but to stop galloping. He slowed down to a safe and steady walk, then stopped.

Timmy led the colt back to the gate. Dunmire tried rearing his head a couple times, experimenting to see if he could escape the grip of those metallic fingers. But he could not.

Timmy led Dunmire through the gate and inside the stables. Moments later, he walked back out the corral.

The battle bot prepared to take up his usual overnight guard watch position between the house and the river, when he heard the back door to the house open.

"What was that noise?" Tara Lewellen said, her voice carrying into the early evening.

The CC 1000, as if in response, began to lower its gate for the night.

Robert the Rooster heard Tara as he nudged the last chick inside. He looked over at the porch and decided this person might pose a threat.

Tara walked down the steps, hearing the sounds of the chicken coop closing. She squinted in the dim light.

“Hello?”

A metallic blur whisked by the house as Timmy picked up Robert and ran behind the barn at high speed.

“What was that?”

Behind the barn, the bot stood with his back up against the wood.

In one arm he held Robert, who furiously pecked at him.

Very gently, Timmy took his thumb and forefinger of his free hand and clamped them around Robert’s beak.

The rooster glared bloody murder up at the bot’s blank rectangular “face.”

“Hello? Is anybody there?”

Tara walked out between the house and the CC 1000 as the last rays of light left the hazy sky.

Timmy’s “face” tilted slightly, his sensor marking her position. If she tried to come around behind the barn, he would no longer be there. And he would take Robert with him, so the murderous bird would not attack her.

But, seeing nothing to match all the noises she heard, Tara gave up. She made her way to the back porch, climbed the steps, and went inside.

Timmy’s “head” tilted back at the bird. Robert still glared up at him in the dark.

Carefully, the battle bot left the wall and made his way to the chicken coop, placing each metallic footstep softly on the ground so Tara would not hear him.

The CC 1000, recognizing Robert’s proximity outside, opened its door again.

Timmy removed his fingers from Robert's beak and gently tossed the rooster inside the coop.

Robert immediately burst into a series of loud, outraged crows, registering very high on the decibel scale. But the CC 1000's sound suppression unit had already turned on for the night. His murderous cacophony was almost entirely muffled as the door closed again.

Timmy tilted his "head" slightly toward the house, noting that Dr. Lewellen had retired to the couch in the living room, where she normally slept. Both Tom and Gwen had ported to the Phaethonian for the night.

Satisfied, Timmy quietly walked to the front of the property, between the house and the stables. Once out of earshot, he picked up speed and resumed his usual nocturnal post, his sensor facing the river.

8.28

Two more days passed, and a ship appeared off Anatolia's shores. If anyone were standing on the beach and looking out to sea, they would have found the *Piker* approaching on the horizon.

She had an uneventful passage across the Aqua Minor, that body of water separating the continents of Glagia and Anatolia. With a new Class Eight power pack, she skimmed through the water with no danger of depletion.

Onboard, a very surly Boris Volkov watched the approaching landmass from the bridge. He scowled ahead and wondered out loud how long he would have to suffer.

"I bet you all enjoyed watching your skipper puke."

The bots accompanying him on this voyage were all recent acquisitions for Phaethon Solar Corp., thanks to Haley's bidding on the Erstwhile's cargo. They had been fully retrofitted for use by Lisa, and she kept tabs on both the ship and its lone human commander the entire voyage.

She knew of his copious volumes of vodka, having bought out a liquor store's entire inventory in New Galveston before leaving.

She also knew of the violent retching he suffered after trying to down his first shot.

And the second shot, and the third, and so on for a full three-quarters of the bottle. The bots on board watched as he puked, and dutifully swabbed the decks afterward each time.

In frustration, after the last time, he threw what was left in the bottle overboard.

He took his anger out verbally on the bots.

“I’ve been poisoned! This ain’t natural! Which one of you flesh-covered tin cans did this to me?”

The bots made a few protestations.

“It is true we are humanoid, Captain. However we are not human. We have been . . .”

But Boris did not want to hear any explanations about how the bots had been carefully programmed to never presume they were human.

He wanted to know who poisoned him, and how.

Watching the rant on his desk holo back in New Galveston, Tom smiled.

“You ever gonna tell him?” Gwen said, sitting beside Tom behind the desk.

“Maybe someday. Give my thanks to your mom next time you talk to her, by the way. She really does have a lot of useful experience.”

Gwen nodded and said, “Disulfiram nanobots were a perfect solution for this situation. They replicate the old drug given to alcoholics to make them sick when they drink. Mom heard about it when the commander they hired to run black ops back in the day was an alchy, a guy by the name of Hamilton Wolf. His lover, or rather, the woman who fell in love with him and later married him, injected him with disulfiram nanobots while he was sleeping. Then she seduced him when he sobered up and stayed sober. By the time the bots left his system, they were in love and he had sworn off booze. He got to realize how much better his life could be without it.”

“I might have to sneak another shot into Volkov’s blood stream. It was easy to do it at the the hotel when he was passed out the night before sailing. If

he gets drunk again in a few months, I guess we'll give it another go. But as long as he's working for us, he'll be sober."

"Doesn't it seem kinda sneaky to pull something like on someone? I mean, even if it's for their own good?"

Tom shrugged and grinned at her.

"There's no rule against it."

"Even if there was a rule against it, you'd probably ignore it. Or find some way around it."

"You know me too well."

"I should hope so. We're married, now."

"What's that old ethics dilemma? There's a bus or something coming, and it's going to run over a pedestrian. You can stop the bus but by doing so you might kill some passengers. What do you do?"

"Easy. That pedestrian is toast."

Tom smiled at the flippant remark.

"In this case, you see an alcoholic and you can do something to save him. What do you do?"

"I see where you're going with this," Gwen said. "Yeah, it's sneaky. But you're gonna save him anyway. At some point you've got to let people have free will, though. If he wants to drink himself to death, he'll likely go on and do so."

Tom shrugged.

"He can have free will. He just can't drink any alcohol right now."

They turned and watched as the ship approached a newly constructed dock the MicaBots finished constructing the night before.

8.29

The *Piker* continued sailing toward the harbor.

A swarm of MicaBots faded from the buildings there, pulling back into the landscape and effectively disappearing.

The mechanical army ants had dredged the harbor, making it deeper in order to accommodate *Piker* and other cargo ships. They built three concrete piers, stretching out into the water. All the surrounding area had been paved, with brand new warehouses constructed for storage, along with maintenance buildings, supply sheds, and living quarters.

Force domes controls were in place, ready to go, and sensors for Lisa installed around the warehouses. Nothing would get inside the dock's perimeter without the AI's permission.

She had plans in place for a much larger force dome that could surround the entire harbor in the event of bad weather. When the equipment came in on the Pulsar, the MicaBots would install these final touches.

For right now, as far as anyone could tell, it looked like a complete harbor and docking facility, although one curiously void of people at the moment.

That changed when Wink and Jinxie popped into a warehouse as the *Piker* docked itself at the central pier. Wink opened the door for his girlfriend, and they walked out into the hazy light.

As soon as the ship stopped moving, bots jumped out of its hold and hurried over to tie it off. More bots began unloading things, some of them driving trucks out of the ship, down the pier, and to the warehouses. Soon, a line of trucks were parked outside.

The couple walked down the pier and stood out of the way, watching the unloading process continue.

At last, a grumpy Boris Volkov crossed out of the giant door on the side of the ship, his feet hitting the pier. He turned toward the couple watching and approached them.

“Mr. Volkov? Pleased to meet you. I’m Wink McKelway. This is my partner, Jinxie Malone.”

Boris ignored Wink’s outstretched hand.

“Do you have any idea why I get sick at the first drop of vodka hitting my tongue?”

Wink smiled uncertainly. Neither Tom nor Gwen had informed them about the surreptitious injection Tom gave Boris before the voyage.

“Uh . . . no. I don’t. Why do you get sick at the first drop of vodka?”

“I don’t know either! But I want to drink!”

Boris launched into a long colorful string of expletives, his face turning red under his white beard.

Wink and Jinxie pulled back, involuntarily. They leaned away from old sea salt’s profanity-laced tirade.

When he paused for breath, Boris seemed to come to himself once more. He looked around the pier.

The bots unloading the ship ignored him. A heavy load bot, yellow and cubic in build, trundled past them while carrying a large Class Eight power pack balanced on its shoulder.

“I’m sorry. I was just . . . expecting to be able to have a drink or two on this voyage. You know, during the down times. And I purchased some vodka to

take along with me. And . . . I haven't been able to get a single sip down my gullet without becoming violently sick. It ain't natural, I tell ya. I can't understand it and it's driving me nuts."

"I'm sorry you feel that way," Jinxie said, trading another glance with Wink. "We don't know what happened, either."

Both of their faces indicated they had a good idea who might know, but they stayed silent about that. Having worked with members of the Raleigh family for months now, they had both come to the conclusion that the richest family in the galaxy tended to win more often than not. And if the elder Raleigh or his son wanted something, they usually got it.

In this case, it looked like Tom wanted a sober human attendant for their sailing ship.

Wink said, "We do have a large load of Class Eights for you to take back to New Galveston. Would you like to stay for the night? We've got plenty of food in the guest quarters over there. Tom . . . Mr. Savage has said you are also welcome to take a drive inland with us and explore the town of Little York if you want to. There's food available at the pub there . . . and drink, I guess, if you can handle it."

Boris's face and the top of his head lit up in an angry red shade. For a moment, it looked like he might launch into another verbal fit.

But it subsided quickly. The older man seemed to deflate.

"No, that won't be necessary. I would like to spend one night on land, though. I will head back tomorrow, if that is alright with the company."

"It's alright by us," Wink said. "The house over there, the first one, is yours while you're here. You'll find it fully stocked with food, mostly boxed food that will heat up when you open it. One of the domestic bots will take care of cleaning the place for you."

"Thank you. Please have one of them bring my things over there."

Boris walked off toward the house, head hanging low.

He stopped after a few meters and turned back to face the young couple.

“Except for the vodka. They may as well leave that onboard. I can’t drink any of it.”

He turned again and headed down the pier, putting meters between them.

“He seems so sad,” Jinxie said softly.

Wink smiled.

“He’ll get over it. He’ll have to, if he wants to keep working here. He doesn’t need to be drinking on the job anyway.”

8.30

Over the course of several days, many riders left Margie's Roadhouse in Sweeny and made their way out to other settlements.

Distrustful of the government commlink installed at all the pubs, they eschewed using it unless communicating something vague and obscure to their friends and colleagues. Mostly these missives were along the lines of, "Be ready to meet our representative when he shows."

One young man by the name of Keener made his way to Westheimer, the farthest settlement from all the others. It took him four days of riding, and his horse looked tired as he rode into town after dark.

Keener was an orphan, and managed to immigrate to Phaethon on a work agreement two years ago, wherein a merchant paid his fare in return for an agreed-upon term of service.

But Keener decided he did not care to be a gopher in the vast outdoor bazaar attached to League City. His eyes constantly drifted to the farmers and merchants from afar who rode in and out of town every day. He longed to see the countryside on the back of a horse, like those freemen and women could.

One day when the merchant stepped away from his booth, Keener left the booth, too. He walked into the agricultural area and wandered around, gazing at all the farm implements and machinery.

Finally, on the very edge of the bazaar, he came to a long hitching post where visitors riding into town could tie their horses.

He carefully looked around in all directions to make sure no one watched him, then he untied one of the steeds on the end.

Keener had never been on a horse before. He did not know what he was doing. He found out later that he climbed up on the wrong side. Worse, he found himself facing backward when he managed to scramble into the saddle.

Awkwardly, he turned around. Once his feet found the stirrups, he had to figure out how to back the horse away from the rail and turn around.

Fortunately for him, the old mare he stole was a kind and gentle soul, one who was not prone to bucking off inexperienced horse thieves.

She knew what to do, and she had a general idea of where the boy wanted to go. So she turned around and clip-clopped back down the road out of town. Together, they left League City in the dust.

That was two years ago. Now 15 years old, Keener still had the gentle old mare. He tried to take care of her the best he could, making sure she always had water and something to eat. He learned how to saddle her and how to brush her down after rides.

After wandering around a few weeks, picking up odd jobs to pay for food, Keener was jumped by the Wayfarers, a gang operating outside Sweeny off a long stretch of deserted highway.

He sat on his horse with his hands up while the gang poked through his saddlebags. Much to their disgust, he had nothing whatsoever of any value. No tokens. No food. Even his horse looked old and spent. They realized they couldn't even ransom him once he told them he was a work-term runaway.

And that's how he became a member of the Wayfarers.

His life turned exciting, far more so than the one he had as a merchant's assistant. Now, he helped rob merchants on the road.

They didn't make much, but he got a fair share of the spoils. Mostly the Wayfarers received merchandise shipped overland on the cheap but resold far from League City for obscene profits.

Some of the goods were useful, like a load of blankets and pillows the gang swiped one time. Other stuff was useless, like the wagonload of doors they plundered a few months back. But it was always interesting. Keener felt like he was living the life he was born to live. One of adventure!

Now, as the junior-most member of the Wayfarers, the leader of the gang sent him on a mission. He was to deliver a message to the leader of the Robber Barons, as they called themselves, a large outlaw group terrorizing the small towns and wilderness area around Westheimer, the most distant, far-flung settlement on Glagia.

The gang would be alerted to his coming, the leader told him. But the message needed to stay off the com and delivered face-to-face somewhere outside the city.

Now, as he made his way to the closest pub to the stables in Westheimer, he would finally get a chance to pass along his message.

Keener pushed open a pair of old-style saloon doors. The pub had a huge potbelly stove in the center, warming the place despite its open-air atmosphere.

Everyone turned to look as he came in. Some raised their eyebrows at the sight of kid walking through the door, but nobody said anything. Technically, he was an adult. And there were all kinds of people out here on the edge of the frontier.

He walked up to the bar.

The barkeep, a portly older man with a handlebar mustache, moved closer to him.

“What'll it be?”

“Beer.”

The barkeep nodded, the ends of his mustache dipping up and down.

“Half credit.”

Keener reached into a pocket and pulled out a token. He slid it across the bar, and the man made it disappear.

He left and returned a moment later with a frosted mug of golden liquid.

Keener took a sip and tried to hide a gag as he drank it.

The barkeep noticed and smirked softly.

Keener wiped his lips and said, “I’m also looking to make contact with the Robber Barons. I come bearing a message from Boss Hogan.”

The older man’s expression changed completely. Now he took the boy seriously.

“Wait here a minute. Finish your beer.”

He walked out from behind the bar and went outside. Keener watched him go.

Keener shrugged and took another tiny sip of the beer.

He made a face.

“Ugh!”

The doors swung open and the barkeep returned, this time with a cowboy in tow. They both marched up to Keener’s stool.

The cowboy stood taller. He had a big nose and a pointy chin.

He stuck his hand out and said, “Fain.”

“Keener.”

“You got a message for us?”

“I’m supposed to deliver it personally to your leader.”

Fain looked him in the eye for a moment, as if measuring him up.

“Alright. Come along. We been expectin’ you. But you pull any funny stuff, and you’ll be sorry.”

Keener nodded and hopped off the bar stool, happy to leave the nasty beer behind.

An hour later, Fain led him into the Robber Barons' hideout, a network of caves in the mountains outside town. Several men came out to meet them as they rode up.

Keener looked around and noted snipers in rocky crannies up above.

He gulped, but kept going. He had given Boss Hogan his word. And unlike the merchant, his first boss on this planet, Keener had no intention of dishonoring this one.

A man stepped away from the small crowd of outlaws, bearing the look of authority. About 50, he looked strong and fit, his skin weathered from time outdoors.

“You from Hogan's outfit?”

Keener nodded.

“Well, we're all ears. What's his message that he's so all fired up to give us?”

Keener cleared his throat and said, “Boss Hogan says . . . now is the time for us to take League City. If you want to get rich, take a sky train and meet us there in two days.”

8.31

Four sky train cars descended to the fairgrounds outside League City. When the doors slid open, two dozen cowpokes shuffled out of the passenger car before heading to the baggage and stable cars to retrieve luggage and horses.

People took note of this influx of men from out of town. This marked another load of visitors coming in during a time of reduced travel. When asked about it, the men invariably replied with a variation on the same thing.

“We’re lookin’ for work.”

“Dang embargo is puttin’ a stranglehold on everything.”

“I need a job. D’ya know anyone?”

Some who noticed the influx, and the answers to those questions, began discussing it in bars and barbershops throughout the city.

The economy, these armchair economists said, seemed to be deteriorating. Those sitting around tables or bars agreed.

Word trickled to Ash that times were tough. He heard it from a waiter at Arthurus, which had become one of his and Haley’s favorite spots for lunch and dinner.

“Really?” Ash said, looking around at the packed restaurant. “This place seems to have fully recovered from the Southside Riots a while back. You’re not hurting for business here.”

“Oh, it’s not here in League City, Mr. Thallus,” the waiter assured him. “It’s out in the country. I hear every other town out there has been hit hard.”

Ash traded a glance with Haley, who shrugged.

“Have you seen a dropoff in the farm’s business?” he said once the waiter left their table.

“No. But then, as far as produce goes, I’m selling everything here at the bazaar. So, if he’s right, and the effects of the embargo are being felt everywhere else, I wouldn’t notice it. But I don’t think he’s right.”

“You don’t? Why not?”

“For one thing, a lot of the business in the bazaar comes from out-of-towners. If things were really bad out there, I think we’d feel it. I think the agriculture sellers would really feel it. But we’re not seeing that. People are still buying our stuff, Ash. I’m sure the embargo hurts, but it’s not hurting that much.”

“Hm. But that guy seems convinced it’s bad out there. I wonder why.”

He found out why the following day. Another place they frequented, Cooper’s Bar closer to Courthouse Square, was filled with cowboys from out of town. They were rude to the waitstaff and other guests. Several of them leered at Haley when she walked in holding Ash’s hand.

The couple turned around and walked out. There were not many places left to sit, anyway.

They stood outside on the sidewalk, trying to decide on another place to visit, when a fellow patron walked out.

Ash stopped him and said, “Hey, what’s going on in there? What are all these cowboys doing in there?”

“Haven’t you heard? It’s hell out there on the range. Every cow kicker in these parts has headed to town looking for work.”

“Well, there’s your second source,” Haley said as the man walked away. “But I still don’t buy it. I would have heard about it if there was a depression or recession or something like that going on.”

“Maybe so. Maybe so.”

-+-

Later that afternoon, Ash left his office on Commerce Boulevard and crossed Courthouse Square on foot, heading back to his flat on the periphery of the Southside Projects.

Out on the street, he noted with considerable interest a flood of men in cowboy gear, all heading south on foot. They seemed to be leaving the Commerce District and heading to the bad part of town.

Curious, he walked along with them a ways, passing up his apartment building in the process.

Cowboys flooded the sidewalks, talking, walking, all in seemingly good spirits.

Ash felt out of place as they crossed the line into the Southsiders’ territory. Looking down, he found a cowboy passed out near a garbage canister, his head lolling hatless to one side.

Ash noted the hat in question lay on the sidewalk nearby. In one smooth motion without breaking his stride, Ash reached down and scooped up the hat, placing it on his head.

Not a perfect fit, he thought. But it’ll do. If no one notices I’m not wearing boots, I might actually fit in . . .

He followed the crowd. The cowboys were more numerous here in the Projects than anywhere else he had seen in the city. They all milled around on the streets, talking. Some were drinking, producing flasks and tossing them back. But the crowd still moved forward.

Ash went along with them, trying to blend in. There were so many people out in the street, the doormen took no notice of him.

A crowd gathered at the basement entrance to one of the last buildings. He watched several men go down the steps. This seemed to be the focal point for the mass of humanity, a loadstone drawing in hordes of cowpokes.

Streetlights flickered on as night fell across the city while Ash joined the crowd. He fell into line and went down the steps.

-+-

Lisa opened up a com.

“Haley?”

“Yes, Lisa?”

“Ashley Thallus has fallen out of sensor range.”

“Fallen out of . . . where did he go?”

“He is in a basement for which I do not yet have a sensor, in the Southside Projects.”

Haley sighed.

“Great. He’s probably pursuing a story. Okay, let me get dressed. Somebody’s gotta keep an eye on him.”

Moments later, Night Shadow appeared on a rooftop across the street from the entrance to Tay-hoe’s with a *pop!* She edged closer to the ledge and looked down, invisible to those below while she stayed in the darkness above the streetlamps.

“So, he went in there?”

“Yes.”

“How am I gonna get in there without being seen? And you can’t teleport me in, right?”

“That is correct. This building has not had its power pack replaced by Phaethon Solar Corp. As a result, we have not yet had the opportunity to install one of my sensors in the basement.”

“Hm. Well, that’s a problem. I can’t just go down there as Night Shadow and start kicking butt. There’s way too many people around.”

Haley watched the crowd below. She saw a girl walk out of another apartment and head for the basement entrance. She wore a red bikini top, cutoff shorts and high heels.

The men let out wolf whistles as she walked to the door, making room to let her through.

From up on the roof, Haley heard her call out, “Come see me, boys! Visit the gaming tables and look me up!”

She headed down the stairs, disappearing from sight.

“That gives me an idea,” Haley said. “Lisa, port me home.”

She disappeared from the rooftop with another *pop!*

8.32

Haley reappeared moments later in the nearest alley. She did not have much in the way of “sleazy” apparel, but she did have a bikini, some shorts, and a pair of high heels.

Peeling out of her Night Shadow garb left her feeling vulnerable. The sand dragon under-armor felt especially comforting, and she hated to let them go.

On the other hand, the need she felt to go check on Ash outweighed the security of her Night Shadow outfit.

She found an old LE-42 among the many confiscated weapons she had taken from bad guys over the last few months stashed in a closet at the warehouse. The thin gun was perfect for concealment. She stuck it in a waist pouch, along with a mini sensor for Lisa and a handful of other items she thought might prove useful.

She topped everything off with a cute cap that covered the pointy tips of her enhanced ears. It matched the bikini top.

Once she appeared in the darkness of the closest alleyway in the Projects, she tuned her night sight and walked around the trash, heading quickly for the street.

“Has he left there, Lisa?”

“Not yet,” the AI responded in her implant.

Haley picked up her pace, cursing at the discomfort provided by the black stiletto heels.

Moments later she walked out into the streetlights, into a huge crowd of men. Whistles and catcalls erupted in the crowd when they saw her.

“Hey, baby! How ’bouts a spin? You wanna ride with this cowboy?”

“Meet me at the gaming tables, big boy.”

This, as she had observed, was the right thing to say. They left her alone after that.

Haley made her way to the entrance and went down the steps.

At the bottom, a guard sat on a stool. She stood there for a moment in front of him. He finally looked up from her chest to her eyes.

“Hey. I ain’t never seen you here before. Who are you?”

“I’m new. Let me get to the tables.”

He shrugged and let her pass, then he turned and watched her from behind as she walked down the hall.

“Are you still reading me, Lisa?”

“I am indeed, Haley.”

“Good.”

A door in the middle of the hall on the right had considerable noise coming from behind it. The door on the left, she presumed, housed the building’s power pack. Whenever they replaced it, Lisa would get a nice new sensor right in the middle of the basement, she thought.

The door to her right opened before she could grab the latch, and the noise in the hall increased exponentially. A cowboy smiled at her and squeezed past her.

Inside, she found a bar that was packed to the gills with more cowboys.

Haley took in the area from out in the hall for a moment as she stood in the doorway. She realized the public area stretched back to the street. A doorway on the bar side presumably led to the other side of the building.

Haley squeezed in and looked around for Ash.

Hundreds of people pressed into the public space. It smelled like sweat, old leather and horses all mixed with the fumes of alcohol.

The bar did a booming business, with two men slinging out drinks and collecting tokens as fast as they could.

Haley felt crushed, and claustrophobia threatened to smother her for a moment.

Then she adjusted by pretending to observe herself from a distance.

What would it look like, she thought, to see herself pressed into this crowd?

Now mentally detached from the situation, she began making the rounds of the room, looking for Ash.

After four meters, she felt bruises forming from all the pinches, pokes and copped feels she suffered through.

“Is this really worth it?” she said, her voice smothered under the crowd noise.

“Stay the course. I am almost finished scanning the room for him. Please go forward another five paces.”

Haley moved again, squeezing between two cowpokes. One of them noticed and started chuckling.

“How much?” he shouted in her ear above the din.

“Meet me at the tables!”

“I’m headed that way now!”

The man moved off toward the back wall. Haley saw the door open, with more people behind it. She continued in the direction Lisa gave her.

A moment later, the AI spoke through her implant again.

“He is not in this room. I suggest you go into the next one.”

With a sigh of relief, Haley turned toward the far door. She pushed her way through the crowd, accidentally spilling one cowboy’s beer.

He yelled in frustration, then he turned around and saw Haley’s bikini top.

The yelling stop and she eased past him.

At last, she made it to the door in question. Opening it, she found a gambling den spread out before her.

“So, these are ‘the tables.’ Interesting.”

The crowd, especially in comparison to the bar, seemed much lighter here, and quieter as she closed the door. The men, and a few women from the neighborhood, focused more on tokens and the gaming action than on their drinks.

Mingling with the crowd were several young women, all scantily dressed like her. Bikini tops were common, as well as sheer and midriff-baring outfits that accentuated their bodies.

A roar went up at one of the tables where a group of cowpokes rolled some dice.

“Seven!” the boxman yelled.

The stickman maneuvered a huge pile of tokens toward the winner, a young man with his hat pushed back and two slender hookers holding on to either arm.

His buddies gave him pats on the back. The girls pleaded with him to go to their rooms now. With shouts of encouragement from his buddies, he gathered up all the tokens and let them lead him away.

Haley watched as they disappeared through yet another door on the other side of the room.

“So, the basement has three parts, at least on this side. Are you getting all this, Lisa?”

The chatter continued in the room, following the pace of the games. A roulette wheel clattered off to one side. Elsewhere, poker players anteed up, eyes glued to their holocards.

“Lisa? Dang, I must be in too deep under the concrete or something.”

She moved closer to the craps table, where a new round began. The cowpoke’s buddies were intent on winning big so they could follow in his footsteps. A couple of hookers drifted near, just to see if anyone would indeed win big. No one gave Haley a second glance as she closed in on the other side of the table.

She looked down and noticed one man standing nearby was not wearing boots.

She drew closer and noticed his hand subtly reaching over next to the boxman. He casually covered a pair of red dice, his palm remaining motionless for a second. Then he pulled them closer and put the dice in his pocket.

Haley recognized him now. She had never seen him in a cowboy hat before.

“Ashley?”

Ash looked down at her, startled.

“Haley? What are you doing here?”

“What are *you* doing here? And what are you doing stealing dice?”

The door to the bar slammed open, and a big man walked through.

“All leaders on me,” Casper said with a yell. “We’re movin’ out in ten minutes.”

8.33

The room grew more crowded as men streamed in from the bar, crowding the gambling tables. Most of the games stopped. Dice no longer rolled down the velvet and holocards winked out. Everyone grabbed their tokens so their money would not walk away.

Ash and Haley moved back against the wall, crushed by the influx of new people.

Haley kept an eye on the door they entered, now being used by so many more people. Her claustrophobia rose like bile in her throat and she struggled for a moment to fight it down.

One other door, she noticed, stood on the other side of the gambling den. That was the one evidently leading to the bedrooms where prostitutes plied their trade.

She wondered, briefly, if Lisa could get a read on them over there. It was closer to the other side of the building, if her estimations of the basement floorplan were correct. There might even be an alternative exit over there, she thought.

Before she could continue that line of reasoning, one of the men from the bar yelled for everyone's attention. He looked like a grizzled veteran, one who had not yet let go of the war, despite it being two decades in the past.

He kept his hair short, in the military style, even though he had long since aged out of the military brackets.

“I know most of you. If you’re the leader of your respective group, I’ve met you. If you’re a second in command or whatever, maybe I haven’t met you yet. My name is Casper Slodovich. My full name is Casper Epsilon-Slodovich.”

Haley felt a stirring around the room as Casper pronounced his hyphenated name.

Stating it like that was an indication he was a League loyalist, his birth recorded in the old League administrative planet’s records. Epsilon drew intense fighting twice during the war. Today it remained aligned with the Republic, its citizens having voted to leave the League, much to the loyalists’ astonishment.

To mention it as part of one’s name indicated a host of unsaid things.

Things like a desire to return to the glory days of the League, when it was strong and had a much larger navy than the Republic. Its Captains were haughty and proud and dismissive of the fighting prowess of their enemies in those days.

Things like a yearning for the oppressiveness of the old State Security and Intelligence apparatus, the secret police who crushed all thought of sedition. People were kept in line, disappearing in the night when they expressed discontent in public. A fearful society was not a critical society, and to hyphenate one’s name indicated a preference for living that way, in an “orderly” society in which governmental dissent was heavily punished.

It also left unsaid things like a wistful longing for the peak of Lead Tetrarch Julius Thrall’s rule, when he controlled vast swaths of space, including millions of people on dozens of planets. In those days, the League was a force in the galaxy to be reckoned with. It was the dominant force.

All these things washed through Haley’s head as she watched the old soldier speaking. She glanced around at the men in the room, in their cowboy hats and boots. Some of them got it, too. Maybe not all of them. The younger men in the room had no direct memories of the war. Haley

didn't, either. But she knew enough about what happened to know that *no one* should long for the bygone glory days of the League.

"For years you have been robbing farmers and merchants. Well, I say years. Maybe two, three at most. But as goods have moved around on land, you have managed to grab some. And that's nice. Now you've got an opportunity to go where the merchants are, here in this city. But it's not going to be easy."

Now he had their attention. Everyone liked the idea of more money. And this was the promise that lured them all here.

"I have to tell you that *my* leader was focused on politics. And he spent his political capital, his human capital, on a series of riots against the merchants of League City a while back. Maybe you heard something about that. It turns out the merchants are well-armed. They don't take kindly to gangs trying to overrun their district."

This sobering thought wiped the smiles from many faces. Evidently, a lot of the men present had indeed heard of the Southside Riots, or maybe they knew about the mass graves outside town with hundreds of relatively fresh bodies buried there.

"No one said it's going to be easy. This is not easy pickings like you may have been used to. I'm sure robbing some wagon train on the road was akin to taking candy from a baby."

Light chuckles drifted up around the room. A few men shook their heads. Apparently, these were outlaws who *had* tried robbing a merchant's wagon train on the road, Haley thought.

And they did not look like they had been very successful at it, judging by the expressions on some of their faces.

"However," Casper continued, "if you stick with the plan I'm going to outline for you, you will find a lot more lucre available for the picking than a direct assault on the merchant district."

"And how is that?" a very heavy, grossly overweight man standing near Casper said.

“I’m glad you asked, Mr. Hogan. If we were to raid the Merchant District, each shop is filled with goods . . . but not as much money as you might think.”

Casper paused. He had the attention of everyone in the room, since he spoke about their favorite topic.

“You’re going to spend all that time and effort on diffused rewards. The shops are all spread out. And each merchant will rush to the defense of their capital castle. It’s their livelihood. They will literally be willing to die, in many cases, to protect their storefronts. And like I said, they are very well armed. This is not the League. Everyone has a gun. Everyone has *several* guns. And they all know how to use them. Even their wives and children will shoot back at you.”

Around the room, men nodded. They knew this fact, Haley thought, from hard experience if they had attacked merchants on the road.

“So what are you proposin’?” Hogan said, speaking for the group. “If it’s so hard to attack the merchants, what is it you called us all here to do, Mr. Slodovich?”

The older man smiled at Hogan, then at the other men staring back at him in the room. Haley wondered if this conversation had been rehearsed beforehand. Hogan seemed to know the answer already, by the look on his face.

“Where do you think all the merchants take their money to, at the end of the day? The bank is the one spot in the city where all the money from all the shops and all the stalls out in the bazaar eventually goes to.”

“You want us to rob a bank? Are you crazy? That place is a fortress!”

“I’ve robbed it myself. Successfully, I might add.”

Casper reached into a back pocket and pulled out a bag. He used both hands to spread it wide. Written across it in thick black letters, everyone could read, “First Galactic Bank - League City.”

A murmur of surprise went up in the room. Hogan smiled at the men. Yes, Haley thought. This looked rehearsed.

She heard somebody standing near her whisper, “I heard about that heist!”

Haley’s eyes narrowed.

This was the guy who got away, she thought.

Her claustrophobia disappeared, replaced by a deep dislike for the old soldier standing at the center of the room.

8.34

The crowd streamed out the single exit from the basement, men pushing through. Casper had succeeded in riling them up, convincing them they could take the bank.

Haley and Ash moved along with the stream of humanity as it headed out, like a leaf floating with a current. They caught snippets of conversation as everyone made for the exit. The tone of the chatter remained resolutely upbeat.

“If he can do it with four men, we can get in there with four hundred or so.”

“I heard they’re startin’ to take in gold from miners now. That place is prob’ly loaded.”

“How you reckon the spoils will be divided? They’s a lotta people here.”

“I reckon whoever gets to that vault first gets *all* the spoils. That’s what I’m plannin’ on doin’.”

In the bar, the crowd picked up volume as the leaders gathered their men drinking at the tables. Together they pushed out the door leading to Tay-hoe’s into the basement hallway, and headed up the outside steps.

Out in the streets, men poured out of the stairwell and onto the sidewalk as Tay-hoe’s disgorged the crowd. They milled around in the street, the open

area large enough for everyone to spread out. Gang leaders and their seconds called out for their men, forming clusters that steadily grew larger as more men exited the building.

Some gangs were small, with five or six men. Others were huge, with dozens of outlaws. A few men wandered around, looking for their comrades. Some were too drunk to realize what was going on, stumbling around aimlessly.

At last, Haley and Ash climbed the outside stairs and came up to the sidewalk, holding hands so they would not get separated in the press of the crowd.

Haley pulled Ash to the side of the building, relatively free of people since the majority congregated in the street.

“Come on,” she said. “We’ve got to get to an alley.”

Ash pushed the stolen cowboy hat up higher on his head and followed her, still holding hands.

She headed south, aiming for the last alley before the buildings stopped. In the distance, in the dark, the fairgrounds beckoned, seeming to offer relative safety.

They stayed close to the wall and moved quick.

“Hey!”

Their momentum halted abruptly. One beefy cowboy reached out and grabbed Haley’s upper arm.

“Where you goin’ so fast, darlin’? You need to stay here with me!”

“Let go.”

“What’s the rush? A little filly like you shouldn’t be runnin’ off like that. The bedrooms is the other way, ain’t they?”

He pulled her in, his mass overwhelming hers as he sidled up closer to her.

Ash opened his mouth to say something, although the cowboy towered over them both.

With her free hand, Haley unzipped the pouch strapped around her waist. She pulled out a black disk and pressed its center. Then she reached up and dropped it down the front of the big man's shirt.

"Have fun."

"What?"

She turned to Ash and said, "Hold your ears."

He dutifully copied her, clasp ing both hands over his ears. She turned away to face the building's wall. He did too.

A muffled explosion erupted under the man's shirt as the flashbang went off. He screamed from sudden burns, thrown back into the street as his shirt burst into flames.

All the attention from the cowboys and others out in the street turned toward him. A few men laughed as their buddy screamed, rolling on the pavement to put the flames out.

A few eyes lingered on the man and woman near the center of the storm.

"Hey, which ho is that? I ain't never seen her before."

"Dunno. She must be new."

Eyes drifted over to Ash as their victim lay sobbing in the street, the flames finally extinguished.

"He ain't got no boots on."

Everyone looked where the outlaw pointed, down at Ash's feet. A pair of loafers looked woefully out of place.

"Where's your boots, boy?"

Ash tilted his hat up and smiled at all the angry outlaw faces staring back at him.

"Well, now . . . would you believe I lost them at the gaming tables?"

A few men blinked.

One of them stepped out of the crowd though, his fists clenched.

“You ain’t from around here. You ain’t one of us. Get him, boys!”

A surge of men pressed forward, all focused on Ash. A couple of them leered at Haley, now a secondary target.

“Same deal,” she said, pulling another disk out of her pouch.

She spun it like a top, arcing it over the heads of the men rushing for them.

“Watch out!”

Haley and Ash ducked and held their ears again.

KWABUMPH!

Screams erupted after this flashbang exploded out on the sidewalk, knocking down the closest men and blinding others.

“Come on!”

Haley grabbed Ash and ran south.

But all the hullabaloo drew even more attention. Hundreds of men rushed over to see what was going on.

8.35

Haley and Ash eased away from the crowd as best they could, still holding hands.

Scores of outlaws nearby glared at them as they backed off, hugging the wall along the sidewalk. A few of the cowboys took a couple steps forward, threateningly.

The man who Haley dropped a flashbang grenade down his shirt stopped screaming. Now he whimpered in a quivering pile of burned flesh out on the street. The acrid aroma of burned human skin wafted off him. Several people had thrown jackets on him to smother the flames. But most kept their distance, and he suffered alone, face down in the street.

The couple took another step back, edging away from the crowd.

Someone yelled, “Get ’em!” and the men surged forward in an angry rush.

Haley and Ash broke into a run. A throng of cowboys chased after them.

“Into the alley!”

“What? Are you crazy, Haley?”

“Just do it!”

Ash turned, pulling her along behind him. A flood of screaming cowboys rushed after them, piling into the darkness, calling for their heads. The couple ran full tilt.

Haley stopped in the middle of the alley. Ash did too, catching his breath. The men pushed forward behind them, although they hesitated in the darkness. No streetlights filtered through this deep between the buildings.

Haley reached into her pack once more and pulled out another disk.

“This one’s slightly different,” she said to Ash before tossing it at the cowboys.

The disk sailed over the heads of the men in front, landing in the middle of the throng.

“Don’t look!”

She averted her eyes in time. Ash squeezed his shut and held his ears again.

But this time instead of an explosion of sound, the light of a sun split open the darkness.

For a brief second every nook and cranny, every crease and crevice in the alley bathed in bright, blinding light. The enormous flash startled even the men facing away from it.

The bopper blinded those closest to it. They screamed, covering their faces too late.

At last, Haley pulled out her gun, the little LE-42. She squeezed off several rounds, knocking down stunned cowboys. The narrow bolts did little mortal damage, but the blinded men screamed in pain and horror under fire.

Everyone scrambled for their sidearms. They couldn’t see to shoot, but that did not stop them from trying.

But a series of clicks answered her shots. The bopper had knocked out all things electronic in a wide radius.

Haley stood outside that radius. She kept firing, the little gun doing yeoman’s work.

More men pushed in from the street, pressing the mass of cowboys in front deeper into the alley.

Haley's eyes grew wide.

She said, "Here, take this," and handed the gun to Ash.

"What? What are you doing?"

"Stay here! I'm gonna get help!"

She ran down the alley, disappearing in the dark.

"What the . . ."

"Hey!"

Ash turned and reflexively squeezed the trigger as the nearest cowboy raced at him, arms raised.

Thoop!

The man stopped in his tracks, blood squirting out of one eye. He stumbled, face down, and slid to a halt at Ash's feet, his momentum spent.

"Oh . . . I . . . I've never shot anybody before . . . Sorry?"

The men behind the cowboy screamed and surged forward. Their guns were useless, but they were overcome in rage. They roared and rushed forward toward the sound of Ash's voice.

He squeezed the trigger as fast he could pull it.

Thoop! Thoop! Thoopah!

Bolts splattered into the men, cutting holes in their arms, shoulders and chests. But still they came forward.

Masonry fell from above, slamming into the crowd. They looked up, startled, though they still could not see very well.

The building's façade seem to be pulling away, several stories up, and raining down on them.

Then a figure dressed all in black appeared above them with a loud *pop!*

She dropped down in the middle of the crowd, knocking over three men as she lanced, her force bracers whining.

One name rippled through the crowd. Most of these men were out-of-towners, but they knew who this had to be.

“Night Shadow.”

“Night Shadow!”

“*Night Shadow!*”

Haley slammed her brass knuckles into one man’s belly so hard, his feet left the ground. He flew backward, knocking over two men behind him.

She turned and made a sweeping kick, toppling two more.

She turned again and used her force bracers to slam the heads of two men charging her back. The skulls cracked, blood squirting everywhere.

Haley never stopped moving in a constant dance of death and destruction, slapping, kicking and hitting. Her force bracers whined again and the closest man to her screamed, pulling away before she could hit him.

She activated her personal tractor beam and yanked him back in range before delivering a vicious blow to the back of his head.

Several people tried to shoot her, heedless of the damage to the men around her that their shots might cause. But the bopper had taken everything out in the alley.

Ash backed away from the fight. He couldn’t see well in the darkness, but he checked his implant, making sure the recording feature remained on.

He watched the fight intently, tracking Night Shadow in the dark as best he could.

Another man screamed and flew backward, blood squirting.

Ash recorded it all.

8.36

More men pressed into the alley, looking for a fight.

They squeezed in tighter, shoulder to shoulder, pushing forward and shoving those blocking their way.

One woman dressed all in black held them back. Around her, cowboy after cowboy fell. Unconscious and bleeding men piled up around her in the dark.

Someone closer to the street, unaffected by the bopper, pulled out a gun and shot down the alley.

The bolt sailed high over everyone's heads, lighting up the dark passage between the two buildings with an eerie red afterglow.

Haley stopped, crouched, arms ready to swing.

Her masked face swung around as the bolt sailed down the alley . . . and flew over Ash, still watching her every move.

Her enhanced vision focused on his eyes, and she realized he was recording everything on his implant.

He still held the gun she gave him, the nearly useless LE-42 with its pitiful little bolt. The dead man he killed with it lay sprawled on the pavement in front of him.

They locked eyes for a brief second.

Boss Hogan's booming voice echoed down the alley from the street, bouncing off masonry.

"Come on! We ain't got time for this! Ever'body git to the bank!"

Slowly, reluctantly, the men in the queue lined up for a piece of Night Shadow pulled back.

Those closest to the street left first, taking their operable weapons with them.

Those closer to Haley sneered in the dim light.

"I coulda had her!"

"Sure you could. Come on, Boss needs us."

As the men still standing turned their back on her, their adrenaline and testosterone fading, she turned once again and locked eyes with Ash in the dim light.

"Hey! I want to talk to you. Can I have an interview? Just give me a minute!"

She turned and ran toward the nearest wall, activating her boots.

It took more work to run straight up the wall, but she pumped her legs, quickly scaling the side of the building.

He ran after her to the wall, looking up.

"Wait! Stop!"

She ignored him.

At the ledge, she hopped over and made it safely to the rooftop, which remained thankfully deserted.

She paused for a moment, hands on her knees to catch her breath. The sounds of a multitude drifted up from below.

Haley straightened and headed to the side of the roof facing the street. Peering over the ledge, she looked down. A mass of cowboy hats flowed down the street, all heading for Courthouse Square.

The men moved with assurance. The flow of people marched forward steadily.

“Lisa? We’ve got to do something. And we need to sound the alarm. I’m gonna need some help. Please tell Tom and Gwen what’s going on.”

-+-

Tom sat back in a leather chair at the Phaethonian, putting his feet up and finally taking a break after a long day overseeing the movement of materiel around the globe. He leaned back and clasped hands behind his head, smiling.

Gwen sat in their bed, a huge four-post outfit complete with a canopy top of sheer white cloth. She smiled back at him and made a patting motion on the mattress beside her.

Before he could respond, both their implants came alive with an incoming phone call.

“Tom? Gwen? It’s Haley. Something big is going down in League City!”

Gwen jumped up from the bed, ready for anything.

“What’s going on?”

“You got a visual?” Tom said, bringing his feet back down to the floor.

The holo above the desk fired up, showing the street below Haley as seen through her eyes.

“There’s this huge influx of outlaws. I think every cowboy gang from the surrounding countryside is here. Somebody got them all riled up here in the Projects, and now they’re headed to the bank to raze it.”

“What is it with outlaws and banks?” Gwen said, frowning.

“That’s where the money is,” Tom said with a grin. “Alright, yeah, that is way too many people for you to handle by yourself, Haley.”

“I know! That’s why I’m calling you two for help.”

“It’s too many for the three of us to handle,” Gwen said. “That’s too many for *all* of us to handle, Tom. Should we get those new bots in on it?”

“We’d probably lose half of them.”

“Should we bring Timmy in?”

“Maybe . . . but I think I’ve got another idea. Lisa, do you detect any heavy weapons in that crowd?”

“I sense 31 heavy rifles dispersed among the individuals present.”

“Well, that’s a considerable threat,” Gwen said. “Heavy rifles will get through sand dragon skin. You’re right, we’d definitely lose some of the bots.”

“Yeah, but I’ve got something that can withstand even that. And maybe we won’t have to reveal Timmy to the world just yet. Lisa? Port me to the star farm, please. Specifically, I need to get to the underground storage chambers. All the way down.”

8.37

Tom popped into existence deep underground in a natural cavern. Diodes silently blinked on, flooding the subterranean space with light.

Here, all kinds of things had accumulated that were not currently needed, including thousands of shovels, rakes and other garden tools formed from iron ore and leftover wood.

Tom weaved his way through piles of equipment and polyresin crates, making his way to the far wall. If he did not know any better, the smooth stone along this side of the cavern would arouse no suspicion.

But he knew. He helped design the hidden chamber.

Looking down, he found several black dots on the ground. He also knew there were tens of thousands of similar black dots scattered throughout the storage complex.

Unlike the first time he had been down here, Lisa now had a vast network of sensors kilometers underground throughout these tunnels and mineshafts. Her initial core resided down here too, buried somewhere safe and deep.

He touched the implant under his right ear.

“Lisa? Please ask Mica to take down the wall hiding our battle tank.”

“Will do, Thomas.”

Almost immediately the many black dots on the floor activated, as the dormant army ants came to life. They scurried over to the wall and went to work, pulling out pieces of rock.

Quickly, cracks appeared. Then stones began to seemingly yank themselves out of the wall. A closer look revealed the tiny bots behind it all, hard at work. They piled the wall's debris off to one side of the cavern.

Seconds later, a separate chamber appeared, and diodes in its ceiling turned on as well.

There stood the second League battle tank Wink McKelway smuggled to Phaethon. He later sold it to the farm after Tom and Gwen destroyed the first one.

"Alright. Let's see if this thing can handle a bunch of outlaws."

Tom walked inside the chamber and climbed up on top of the turret. He opened a circular doorway and hopped inside, feet first.

The tank started up. A holo in front activated, showing the forward view. Joystick controls waited for him at the driver's seat.

"Lisa? Can you still hear me?"

"I can indeed, Thomas."

"Good. Port me somewhere near Courthouse Square and that mob headed for the bank. Preferably bring me in where no one can see me materialize."

The tank disappeared from its underground berth with a loud *pop!*echoing in the enclosed space.

The tank reappeared a continent away, in an alley behind the bank. A huge blast of displaced air accompanied it, pushing out to the streets on either side.

"Alright! Now we're cooking with gas."

Tom pulled the joystick up and the tank rose vertically in the air, the sides of the buildings dropping away.

He pulled up . . . up . . . and then broke free from the walls, rising above the rooftops.

In the dark, no one saw him yet.

He pulled to his right and aimed the forward turret for the Courthouse, gently moving ahead. Now he hovered over the building housing the bank.

Already he could see hundreds of cowboys running from the Southside Projects. They raced out into Courthouse Square, all of them holding guns.

A few in front took potshots at taxicabs and pedestrians out for a stroll.

Screams erupted and people scrambled to get out of their way.

Somebody yelled, "There's the bank, boys!"

The outlaw mob shifted and headed in Tom's direction.

"Alright," Tom said, looking over the controls. "It was easy enough for James Ever to figure out. Let's see if I can do the same thing."

He gripped the joystick and aimed down, making the machine swoop from the rooftop to the street below.

The cowboys out front slowed and stopped, staring up at a battle tank.

Round circles appeared on the chests of each man in the holo. Tom found the controls for the heavy gun array and flipped a holo switch. A stream of angry red bolts flew out from the tank's heavy guns, like streaks of lightning.

Hundreds of men died instantly, bolts slamming in their chest.

The rest scattered, scrambling for cover or just running away.

Tom swooped down the street, placing the tank between the bank and the Courthouse.

"Ha! Infantry versus a tank! Let's see who wins!"

8.38

The League battle tank spun like a top in Courthouse Square, its weapons system mowing down outlaws.

Tom's hand flew across the controls. The turret twisted this way and that.

He paused for breath.

"Lisa! How do I tell it to kill anyone in a cowboy hat?"

"I have it under control, Thomas. Mica installed a drone unit for me."

"Oh. Well, what am I doing here then?"

"It is standard for a human operator—"

"Yeah, yeah I know. Just get 'em!"

The heavy gun array fired round after round, sending bolts all over the square. Several gunmen took cover behind cars and started firing back. Shots from small arms plinked against the tanks' armor, not making a dent.

A couple men unstrapped their heavy rifles and took up positions, shooting much stronger blasts of energy at the tank. But even heavy rifles did not affect the armor much.

The control system targeted every heavy rifle blast, calibrating locations of the gunmen. The tanks' turret swiveled toward a car two men used for

cover.

For the first time in 20 years the turret spoke, an enormous flash of dark red energy barking out of the tip.

The blast slammed into the car, making it explode. Metal blew out in a fan, shrapnel flying.

The two men with heavy rifles flew back too, dying instantly.

Boss Hogan ran into the square, sweating like a pig and breathing hard.

“Ignore that thing!” he yelled with his high-pitched voice. “You ain’t never gonna take a battle tank, boys! Concentrate on the bank! The *bank*!”

More men ran out behind him. They saw the tank in the square blocking their way, and scattered in all directions. They had no coordination or direction. Fear spurred them on.

The tank’s gun array spat out bolts in all directions, knocking down one cowboy after another.

Inside, Tom laughed.

“I’m invulnerable! Take that! And that!”

“Don’t get carried away, dear.”

“Who said that? My conscience?”

“Your wife, silly. You’re on an open com. And those things aren’t invulnerable. Remember, you took out one yourself.”

“Yeah, but who else has sun plasma handy?”

“I’m more worried about how we’re going to explain the sudden appearance of a battle tank in Courthouse Square to everybody.”

“One problem at a time!”

The tank rushed forward now, mowing down a group of men streaming around the far side of the Courthouse. Then the turret swiveled and it shot down a dozen more in a matter of seconds.

-+-

Hogan sweated and huffed. He moved fast as he could toward a taxi parked on the street near the Courthouse.

He pulled the car door open and looked down. There, ducked low on the seat, a driver cowered, hiding from all the shots.

“Get out!”

Hogan reached in and grabbed the man’s collar. He pulled the guy out and flung him aside. The man sailed in an arc, yelling, and hit the pavement hard.

Boss Hogan squeezed in behind the wheel, his mass taking up all the available space. He grunted and sucked his belly in so he could reach the controls.

“We gots to fight fire with fire. Or in this case, metal with metal!”

The car peeled away from the curb as Boss Hogan awkwardly drove down the street. He rounded a corner and saw the tank drifting slowly away from the bank building.

Hogan slammed on the brakes. He threw open the door and grunted, climbing out as fast as he could. He saw a metal sign post nearby and ran over to it. Grunting, he pushed the pole over, popping it off at the base. Then he grabbed the “No Parking” sign and hurried back to the car.

Hogan bent down at the open door and closed one eye, lining up the car’s wheel with the tank.

“I think that’ll do it!”

He took the sign and jammed it into the accelerator pad, then pulled back out of the way.

The car shot forward, aimed at the tank.

-+-

Inside the weapon of war, an alarm blared.

Tom stared at the rear view holo and saw a car rushing for him.

“The heck?”

Lisa pulled the tank straight up just before impact. The car raced underneath, jumped the curb and slammed through the plate-glass window of a storefront.

“Who did that?”

The tank settled back down to street level as Tom adjusted holos, looking back in the direction the car came from.

He saw an obese cowboy staring at him wide-eyed. The man already moved to take cover, heading for the Courthouse lawn.

“So you wanna play dirty, is that it?”

A red circle painted itself on the fat cowboy’s chest as he ran, waddling back and forth as fast as he could go.

Another alarm sounded, this one making long beeps.

“What is that? What’s wrong?”

“We are close to power depletion, Thomas.”

“What? How is that possible? Didn’t we recharge this thing’s power pack?”

“It appears to have deteriorated with age, Thomas. You have very little time left before zero percent.”

“Dang it! Do I have enough to hide somewhere so you can port me away?”

“Yes. I will get you to a rooftop.”

The tank rose in the air again, and kept rising.

Once even with the rooftops, Lisa guided it to the bank’s roof once more.

There, out of sight from below, the League battle tank popped away.

8.39

As Tom's tank scattered shots throughout the square, Casper and Billy set a large charge of plastic explosives on the back entrance to the Courthouse.

"You sure this will work?" Casper said, when they finished connecting blast cords to the putty.

Billy nodded and said, "I worked XO in the war. This stuff is old, but it never really goes bad. Somebody smuggled it in a year ago or so, and paid me with it in exchange for booze."

Casper nodded, ignoring that he likely lost some money at Tay-hoe's out of that deal.

On the other hand, the explosives would come in handy now. The Courthouse had not yet gone into lockdown mode, although with that battle tank shooting things up, he expected the barriers to come down any minute.

"Where do you think that came from?" he said. "We could use a tank."

"We don't need it for this," Billy said. "Stand clear."

They both backed away from the door.

Across the street, on the other side of the square, Boss Hogan's car slammed into a shop window.

Billy held out a small remote with a red button. He clicked it about the same time the car crashed.

WHUMPH!

The door blew in, expelling a cloud of dust.

Casper turned to the two LEAF veterans standing nearby and nodded at them. They were experienced in black ops, hand-picked by Casper for this task. Both men were dressed in combat fatigues, ready for action.

The vets ran in, holding rifles across their chests. Both had memorized the layout of the Courthouse, and they had their directives.

They knew what to do.

-+-

Daylight dimmed out at Tom's farm as the shrouded sun dipped far below distant mountains.

Timmy walked by the CC 1000 as Robert chased the last chick inside.

The rooster came back out and charged the Marine battle bot.

Timmy bent at the waist and held a finger up, wagging it.

The rooster stopped and glared up at a tall rectangular sensor, trying to kill the bot with his eyes.

"Hey buddy! Are you there?"

Tom's voice came over the X99's internal com.

"Affirmative."

"I know you've been having fun, gardening and watching the chickens and stuff. But a situation has come up in League City, and I need you to kill some bad guys for me. Okay?"

"Affirmative."

"Okay! Lisa, please port him inside the First Galactic Bank branch."

Timmy disappeared with a loud *pop!*

Robert the Rooster blinked.

His head jerked this way and that, but he could no longer find the big battle bot anywhere.

Slowly, with jerky rooster steps, he entered the chicken coop, looking slightly disappointed.

The door slid down behind him.

-+ -

One of Casper's men ran through the vacant Courthouse lobby, passing the giant holo globe showing available homesteads for purchase.

He jumped over the partition separating the receptionist's desk from the public and approached the terminal.

He pulled a black rucksack off his back and retrieved a data accumulator, then he slammed the terminal with the butt of his rifle, breaking it and making it shift into preservation mode.

Next, he flicked a switch on the accumulator and placed it near the terminal. A small holographic meter popped into place above the little cube as the unit sucked up raw data.

The meter's reading grew steadily larger as he watched.

-+ -

The other LEAF veteran took the stairs down into the basement. He passed up the orbital control room and headed for the Sheriff's office.

One deputy remained on duty, in charge of locking down the building in case of trouble and keeping an eye on the city's emergency system.

But this man was literally asleep on the job.

He woke up groggy to a building breach alarm. Then he noticed all the mayhem his holos showed outside in the square.

By that time, the intruder raced up to the door of his small office and tossed an egg grenade inside.

The last thing the deputy heard was the grenade bouncing on the floor.

An explosion ripped through the room, knocking out the law enforcement command center and filling the hallway with smoke.

A fire alarm went off and suppressant sprayed down from the ceiling.

-+-

On the top floor of the Courthouse, Billy followed Casper as he moved quickly down the hall.

At the end of the corridor, a huge wooden door stood shut, with large brass letters that read, "HIZZONER."

"There we go, that's what we want," Casper said. "This guy has not been seen in over a year. I think he's been hiding in there. Put a charge on that door and let's haul him out of there."

Billy smiled and said, "You got it."

He took the remaining bits of plastic putty and shoved it in the crack near the lock. He and Casper pulled back several meters. Billy set off the explosives with his remote.

The blast was much smaller this time, cracking open the wood and destroying the lock.

Both men waved aside the smoke. They pulled out their pistols and rushed through the door.

They stopped inside.

The office looked nice, for a frontier planet. It had thick carpets and a window overlooking the square, wood paneling and pleasant lighting.

In a leather chair behind the desk, a desiccated corpse stared at them with hollow eyes. He sat in the chair facing the door, his back to the window.

A holo played off to one side of the room, a video loop. Both men turned to watch it.

A recording played of Hizzoner making a speech. The man looked very much alive in the holo, waving at a cheering crowd.

“Thank you! Thank you all! I am so proud to have won your vote for this election. I will serve the Courthouse, this city and this planet to the very best of my abilities!”

He paused for applause and cheers.

Somebody whistled.

Someone else yelled, “We love you!”

He waved and smiled.

“Most of all, I would like to thank my right-hand man, Mr. Joachim Xu! Joachim, come on up here and say hi to the crowd!”

Xu approached the podium, smiling. He waved as he took a spot beside Hizzoner.

“Joachim will often make appearances for me. But I want you to know, whatever he says comes from me. Joachim will make an excellent plenipotentiary in the days ahead!”

More cheering.

The recording stopped.

Then it started over again.

Casper and Billy traded a glance.

Billy’s mouth hung open.

“That sonuvabitch has been lyin’ to everybody!”

8.40

“I do not have all the information about everything that happened last night.”

Ash sat in the studio he set up on Commerce Boulevard, recording a session soon to be broadcast throughout the galaxy.

This, he thought, is why the Zeitung pays me so well.

He felt like he had earned his money this week.

Over his shoulder, recordings of the Courthouse mayhem played. It switched to scenes of Night Shadow beating up cowboys in the dark alley.

“What I can say for certain is, there appears to have been a coordinated effort against the frontier government here on Phaethon, leaving everything chaos for now. While one faction attacked the First Galactic Bank branch, another blew open the back door to the Courthouse and ransacked it. All data from the central computer is lost. The Sheriff’s office was destroyed, resulting in the death of one deputy. And Hizzoner’s office was ransacked. Courthouse officials are mum right now about damages there, but we have yet to hear from Hizzoner this morning, leading some to speculate he may be among the many casualties from last night.”

The scene changed to the bank, showing broken glass everywhere and two cars that had crashed into the front of the building.

“This is the second time in as many months that the local bank has been robbed here in League City. This time was perhaps more destructive on the outside, but less so inside. I spoke with the bank’s president earlier, and he assured me that their vault remains intact. The robbers got away with nothing.”

The scene switched to the inside, where scorch marks streaked the walls and blood stained the floor.

“What happened there? No one knows. No one alive, anyway. Authorities found nearly three dozen dead bodies, all apparently outlaws from outside the city. Each man was apparently killed by blaster wounds, except for a few who seem to have suffered crushed skulls.”

The camera panned, showing bodies on the floor. News algorithms automatically fuzzed out gory details and faces of the dead.

“Obviously, the would-be bank robbers met armed resistance and engaged in some kind of shootout. But who fought them off? Bank employees claim they know nothing. Was it Night Shadow? But she has never used guns before. The world may never fully know what happened inside that bank last night.”

The scene shifted again to wrecked cars and dead bodies lying all around Courthouse Square.

“We know a little more about what happened outside the Courthouse. Somehow, from somewhere, a League battle tank appeared and opened fire on the mob of outlaws preparing to storm the bank. I’ve received statements from a representative of the League on Clarion stating that these weapons were never meant to be sold as surplus. Nor are they currently used by the LEAF. The official claims they are just as clueless as we are here on Phaethon as to how, exactly, one of their old weapons of war ended up on our streets. Where did it come from? And where did it go after killing so many outlaws? No one knows.”

The scene shifted back to Ash in the studio, gazing solemnly into the camera.

“This morning, we are left with far more questions than answers as to what happened last night. But rest assured, in the days and weeks ahead, I will be here finding out more for you and all the good people of Phaethon.

“Reporting live from League City, this is Ashley Thallus for the Zeitung.”

When the broadcast ended, Ash sat back in his chair and furrowed his brows.

One scene from last night kept running through his mind.

He looked at it again, searching through his memory once more to make sure he had all the details right.

“Stay here! I’m gonna get help!”

In his mind’s eye, he watched Haley run down the alley, disappearing in the dark.

-+-

Dr. Tara Lewellen found herself in an argument with her hosts, Tom and Gwen Savage.

It remained polite, downright cordial, even. But the married couple did not agree with many things the scientist took for granted.

“I can’t believe you kill them! You just . . . killed them? That’s terrible!”

“It was kill or be killed,” Tom said. “I certainly have no regrets. And Big Ugly is lucky to be alive, to be honest with you.”

“Surely you understand the concept of depredation, Dr. Lewellen,” Gwen said. “Even with an endangered species, a farmer has the right to kill an animal if it harms people or livestock. Sand dragons are no different.”

“And they’re not at all endangered,” Tom added. “Just look at the holo.”

“In fact, we’ve bandied about the idea of raising some of our own, for harvesting purposes.”

Tara looked shocked, as if the young woman had just casually suggested an act of cannibalism for their meal tonight.

“Oh my word! You can’t be serious. This organism is unique!Harvesting? You don’t harvest an animal that may become extinct! ”

Tom said, “Harvested animals have the opposite issue. If they are particularly useful, like chickens or poshbird, they’ll never be extinct. People keep raising them. And poshbird are unique, too. They have a distinct flavor.”

Tara’s mouth dropped open, too stunned to argue.

“You people . . . you people are animals!”

“No,” Gwen said, smiling. “We’re just farmers.”

Tom nodded.

“Yeah, it’s not like we keep them around for pets or . . .”

He stopped, his mind drifting away.

Tara said, “What?”

“You know, I just remembered something. Come on, Doctor. Follow me.”

He turned and walked out the back door. The two women followed him out of the kitchen.

He circled wide around the CC 1000, ignoring Robert’s murderous glare, and made his way to the space capsules serving as storage sheds.

He placed a palm against the door of one, and it dilated open.

“Yeah, I forgot about this,” he said going inside.

Gwen and Tara followed.

“For my bachelor party, I went with the guys out to the dragons’ breeding ground at night.”

“You did what? Whatever for? Did you know you were breaching a sensitive exo-biological site? Did any of you have any wildlife training at

all?”

“Nah.”

He moved some boxes aside so they could approach the back of the capsule.

“I got an egg warmer that normally is used for chicken eggs. If we ever get to that point. Got another couple months before our chickens start laying eggs. I’m hoping if Robert does his job I won’t have to buy anymore chicks. Until then . . .”

“Wait! What did you DO?”

“Oh, we went on an egg raiding party. Here it is. I thought you might like to see this. *This* is an intact sand dragon’s egg.”

He pulled a blanket off an egg warmer. The transparent octagonal box glowed with inner light, displaying an off-white egg the size of a basketball.

“This is a big one. Maybe you can do that egg size measuring trick you did with the pterodactyls in Primordia.”

Tara looked stunned.

She bent down for a closer look, her mouth forming a perfect O in wonder.

She blinked, and a crack appeared in the egg, slowly splitting its perfect surface.

“OH MY WORD!”

End of Book 8

EMBARGO'S END

9.1

“Spring is in the air!”

Haley Stonecipher recited the sentence like a mantra as she headed resolutely toward the tables in the outdoor bazaar she had rented for the morning.

“Spring is in the air! Isn’t that right, Mona?”

“The seasons will be changing officially tomorrow. However, the temperature this morning is a steady two degrees. After sunrise, the atmosphere will warm perceptibly.”

Haley snorted and bundled herself tighter against the cold. All around her in the bazaar, merchants toiled in the chilly predawn lamplight to arrange their tables for the morning rush.

Early customers, seeking to strike deals, wandered the dim aisles striking up conversations and looking for bargains.

They also, Haley knew, sought out ever more scarce imported supplies. She noted more farm produce being offered than ever before, as the planet was forced to rely on its own methods of sustenance.

Two months had passed since the first, last and only smuggler, Captain Oliver of the unflagged Erstwhile made it through with a load of goods.

By now, she thought, Oliver would likely be orbiting Diego looking for bargains to bring back here. The merchants of Phaethon's capital would see him again in . . . another two months.

Maybe.

Such were the vicissitudes of modern space travel, which involved teleporting a spaceship one astronomical unit every second. Unless a ship had a Machro-drive, speeding it up into hypertime for the trip, everyone would just have to wait until Erstwhile returned at one jump per second.

Or until another ship showed up, Haley thought. So far, none had.

Haley suspected smugglers were being actively discouraged from making the trip.

Independent ships had their own difficulties, too. For an embargoed planet, the first problem involved the lack of an AI to safely guide them through the many thousands of teleportations required to get here.

It was possible to make the trip without an AI, of course. The Pulsar did it all the time, in hypertime, thanks to pre-programmed coordinates for all the jump points. And the Erstwhile had made it, once. The coordinates for jumps to this frontier planet were available to the public.

But all three major governmental systems in the galaxy agreed to an embargo of Phaethon. And that meant all three major AIs would refuse to allow a ship they controlled to come here.

And the smugglers who could get here without AI had not yet shown up as expected.

Of course, Tom and Gwen's star farm could sell goods brought in on the Pulsar. But Haley took precautions when selling new products from there. Candy bars and other packaged treats from home remained highly profitable. But if she showed up at the tables every morning with yet another case of candy to sell, people would begin asking questions.

So, Haley sold confectionaries sparingly, along with a ready explanation about how a forgotten carton had been found in a warehouse somewhere.

Behind her, Verberger Automaton 131M8399 shifted a load of power packs slightly while following Haley around a corner.

131M8399 was one of only two domestic bots that came in on the Erstwhile. Tom and Gwen took one back to the farm. Haley asked for and received this one. Following the company's tradition of naming a bot after one of the letters in its serial number, Haley christened this one "Mona."

Lisa upgraded the bot's firmware with a defense protocol, and Mona wore a concealed handgun at all times. Lisa also kept a fraction of a processing cycle active at all times to monitor the bot, paying attention to what Mona perceived through her eyes and ears.

Silas had joked with Haley, after meeting Mona the first time, about a sexual connotation with the name chosen. He made the joke at Tom and Gwen's house over dinner.

There was some history here, with the Fae Phalanx, which Haley used to lead, and their reputation for sapphic relations. But Haley insisted she was inspired by Mona Reads, the online Monastic Reserve and Document Sanctuary that sought to maintain a digital record of almost everything humans created, including books, artwork, music, holos and other products.

Then, thankfully, the conversation shifted to Silas and his wife's recent public exploits, embarrassing both him and Lola. The couple enjoyed outdoor escapades, but usually in spots where few people could see.

Mona stood in a corner of the room in standby mode, listening . . .

Now she followed her new boss, quite different from the family she had served back on Pearl. No longer cleaning a mansion and doing other chores, she worked at hauling heavy equipment from the truck to the tables, and assisted Haley in whatever else needed doing in the day-to-day retail operations of the star farm.

To 131M8399, now known as Mona, life had become . . . interesting.

"Here we are," Haley said, stopping at a series of tables near the far corner of the bazaar, near where the booths ended and the rows of tables started.

“It’s high traffic, but of course the farthest spot from the parking lot. Thank you, Mona. Set everything down and arrange it while I put our new sign up.”

The tasks Haley assigned Mona were different from domestic service. The young woman did, on occasion, ask Mona to clean the warehouse space, or (more often), clean her boyfriend’s apartment. But Haley also asked her to help set up the sales tables. And, occasionally, deal with customers as well.

Things like this, Mona had never done. That part of her brain based on the old humanesque architecture designed by Jonas Kraft himself . . . That part that resulted in an early prototype becoming a ruthless Tetrarch for the League many years ago . . . *That* part found this all quite fascinating.

While Mona arranged the products to sell this morning, Haley fiddled with the holosign.

This, the bot knew from listening in on past conversations, was a device used by rioters several months back to protest in front of businesses in the city’s commercial district. Haley said she confiscated it, which the bot thought might be a euphemism for stealing.

But Mona wisely kept such thoughts to herself. Her new master seemed to delight in skirting the rules, along with everyone else in the organization the bot now found herself part of . . .

They finished their respective tasks about the same time.

“There!” Haley said, as Mona turned to look.

A holo sign appeared above the table, joining the other one Haley normally used.

“What do you think?”

Mona looked at the image, showing a picture of a traditional ground bus. It was set to maximum, filling the space above their tables. People could see it from all the booths on this side of the bazaar.

More important, Mona thought, people walking by the shops facing this part of the outdoor bazaar would see it, too. Haley indeed had chosen a

high-traffic area for this morning.

The bot read the words on the sign below the image of a bus out loud.

“Phaethon Overland Transportation Service. Our Fares Can’t be Beat! Visit the Hinterlands for Cheap! New Galveston Daily Departures: c10.”

In the dim predawn light, the sign lit up the surrounding tables like a beacon.

Someone immediately approached Haley.

“Excuse me. Are you really offering rides to New Galveston for ten credits?”

“Yes we are! Our first trip is scheduled for noon today, leaving from the fairgrounds. Would you like to buy a ticket?”

The woman did not answer Haley. Instead, she hurried off, heading through the booths and back in the direction of Commerce Street.

Haley smiled at Mona.

“I guess that was a no.”

Lisa devoted a few milliseconds reviewing the situation and sent a data packet to Mona.

“Lisa says she is likely headed to the Courthouse to notify someone. Her brother-in-law is a porter on one of the sky trains.”

Haley shrugged.

“Oh well. No publicity is bad publicity. That’s called word of mouth advertising, even if she bad-mouths us.”

9.2

As dawn broke across the bazaar, business grew brisk. Merchants in League City and elsewhere looking to resell items at a higher price in their own shops had already spent hours scouring the retail landscape. Now individuals looking for deals flooded in as well.

Haley quickly sold a number of items from her new inventory: old-school paper tickets.

Granted, these tickets were printed with a special ink to help Lisa track them. The AI could see which ticket number the buyer held, and she could follow the tickets throughout the city while noting who held them, their location, and if they changed hands.

Nonetheless, paper tickets hearkened back to a simpler time and seemed to add to the appeal of the Phaethon Overland Transportation Service, or POTS as Haley like to call it.

“In the old days,” she would tell almost every customer, “hundreds of years ago, that used to stand for ‘Plain Old Telephone Service.’ Now it stands for Phaethon Overland Transportation Service!”

Few people seemed impressed with the historical tidbit. But her small talk did not dissuade them from buying tickets.

Word quickly spread that someone in the bazaar offered rides to New Galveston for cheap. Haley had 50 tickets ready to go and sold a dozen before the first lamplights switched off.

Mona took a seat behind the table and appeared to be inactive, head bowed and eyes staring at the ground. In reality, she served as yet another sensor for Lisa, who suffered a paucity of virtual eyes and ears out here in the open-air bazaar.

Mona's head rose suddenly, and she looked back toward the booths to her left.

Simultaneously, Lisa spoke in Haley's implant.

"Mr. Xu approaches."

"Okay, thanks for the heads up," Haley murmured.

She smiled at her newest customer, who had just bought four tickets.

Haley said, "The bus leaves at noon sharp. You've still got a few hours but the tickets are nonrefundable, and the vehicle will leave with or without you or any other ticket holder. There will be one stop for supper along the way in the village of Brookshire. That's not included in the fare, so be sure and bring some money to eat. Then you will arrive in NG tomorrow morning."

"I understand. Thank you so much!"

The woman hurried off, heading back toward Commerce Boulevard.

If Haley had to guess, she'd bet the woman lived in the Projects and had bought the tickets to get her family out.

The woman disappeared in the crowd, headed for the booths.

At almost the same moment, Joachim Xu, tall and grim-faced, marched out of the booth area and headed straight for Haley's table. He read the holo sign floating above her.

Two scowling deputy sheriffs flanked him on either side. People stepped out of their way.

"Good morning, Mr. Xu! What can I help you with today?"

Xu blinked at Haley, trying to put a name to her face. She obviously knew him . . .

He shrugged, seemingly unsurprised at the recognition. He was a public figure, after all.

“I am afraid you cannot sell transportation services, Miss . . . ?”

She put out her hand. He took it, reflexively, and they shook.

“Haley Stonecipher. I’m Ashley Thallus’s girlfriend, and I’m the local rep for Phaethon Solar.”

Xu blinked, and took in the other errata on her tables, including several boxes of small power packs prominently placed nearby.

“Of course, Ms. Stonecipher. You’ve been to the Courthouse on numerous occasions. We appreciate all your company does in keeping our Class Eights up and going across the globe. I’m not exactly sure how you do that, but I appreciate it all the same.”

She beamed at him and said nothing.

He looked at her again, half expecting to find someone cowed by his presence, along with the accompanying law enforcement.

But Haley just smiled at him politely.

Xu took a deep breath and tried again.

“Ms. Stonecipher, I’m not sure what your company is doing selling transportation . . .” He glanced down at the stack of paper on the table. “Are these bus tickets?”

“Yes, sir! We are quite aware there is a monopoly on air travel set up by the Courthouse with the sky train operators. We’re not offering to ferry people around in a sky train or anything like that. Phaethon Solar has developed quite the logistics infrastructure to move our power packs around, and we’re opening it up to both people and goods. It’s a lot slower than air travel, but it’s a lot cheaper, too.”

She chuckled lightly, as if she had made a self-deprecating joke.

One of the deputies smiled politely.

She continued.

“So you see, we’re just offering *overland* travel, which as you know is not prohibited by your contracts with the sky trains. Why, if that were the case, people who catch rides with farmers coming into the market here every morning would be in violation of something. And we all know that’s not true. You’d have to shut down Farmer Dailey’s wagon and everybody else who charges a couple credits to people riding in with them from the outlying settlements.”

It now seemed obvious this was a prospect Xu clearly had not thought through. She was correct, and they both knew it. Many people came to the market every morning by paying a couple credits to farmers heading this way and hitching rides on their wagons.

He looked around, like a drowning man trying to grab something to help stay afloat.

“I fail to see what a power company is doing exploring the realm of transportation services . . . ”

“Oh, that’s simple. You see, we have to ferry Class Eights and other power packs all around the world. And we simply can’t do it all by sky train. Why, the fares would be astronomical, and that would price the Class Eights out of reach for many small towns and distant cities. So, PSC developed our own overland transportation network. Then our founder, well, actually his wife who is *my* best friend, she suggested why not sell tickets on some of our routes? So, that’s what we’re doing today. Our inaugural passenger run will be from LC to NG, overnight tonight! Would you like to buy a ticket?”

Xu struggled for a moment. He frowned, thinking furiously. But Haley had not erred in her statements. The Courthouse’s monopoly on travel extended only to air travel.

“Mr. Xu?”

He glanced at her.

Haley smiled sweetly at him.

“My boyfriend, you know, Ashley Thallus with the Zeitung? He has been trying like crazy to score an interview with you over what went down in the raid on the Courthouse several weeks ago . . .”

“That’ll be all, Ms. Stonecipher.”

Xu pivoted and abruptly walked away, surprising the deputies who had apparently been expecting more of a confrontation to take place here.

Xu walked briskly into the booth area, the law enforcement officers following well behind him.

Mona turned her downcast head slightly to watch the backs of the trio as they disappeared in the crowd. Then she turned to look at Haley, also watching the men go and still smiling.

“You embarrassed him.”

Mona said it without an accusatory tone. She made a simple statement of fact.

“Yup. Mr. Xu is having a teensy political crisis that won’t entirely go away ever since we discovered he covered up Hizzoner’s death. Plus, there’s going to be an election soon. And I don’t think he can delay it much longer.”

9.3

“People in the Projects are pulling out.”

Casper grunted, rearranging bottles of liquor on the shelves behind his bar.

Bill, his bartender, spoke in hushed tones. Their voices did not carry. Regardless, this time of the morning before lunch, the bar remained practically empty.

One drunkard sat propped up in a corner, still dozing off the excess booze he had consumed last night. Casper was content to let him sleep it off. The bum’s pockets had long since been emptied of their tokens.

“I made a mistake raiding the Courthouse.”

Bill’s head jerked up, as if Casper hit him.

“Say what, now? Overlord, that was our best operation yet. Everybody was focused on the bank you set those cowboys on, and we took out the heart and soul of the government. I can’t think of a better coup . . .”

“Nothing has changed, Billy.”

Again, the quiet statement carried a forceful impact.

“But . . . we showed the world they’ve been lyin’ to everybody. Hizzoner died a long time ago!”

“And now, there will be an election. And we may not be able to influence this one. And if families are leaving the Projects like you say, we will have even less influence at the ballot box this time. No, I shouldn’t have raided the Courthouse. That was a mistake. It did not usher in the age of anarchy we wanted. Instead, I fear it’s leading to things that will be outside of my control.”

Bill stared at his boss, too stunned to speak.

Casper did not look back. He continued rearranging the bottles until they stood perfectly straight with all their labels lined up.

The thug guarding the basement entrance stuck his head in the door.

“Overlord? We got a messenger here. Says he’s from the Courthouse.”

He pulled back out of the way and let a young teenager walk in. The boy glanced around in awe at the dimly lit basement bar, a place he ordinarily would not be allowed to visit.

When he saw the men at the bar, he steeled his resolve and walked forward.

“Mr. Slodovich?”

His eyes darted between Billy and Casper, unsure who he should address. Casper nodded, showing no expression on his face.

Unlike Xu, Casper was not a public figure. Those who did not know him would not be able to identify him.

The boy licked his lips and said, “I have a message from Hizzoner.”

This resulted in an awkward pause. Casper never blinked. He continued staring at the young messenger.

The boy seemed frozen, like a mouse staring at a snake.

Finally Billy said, “Well come on, then. Out with it, boy!”

The kid jumped, startled at the sound of Billy’s voice.

At last, he recalled the reason for being here and he recited his message from memory.

“Mr. Slodovich, Mr. Xu requests the assistance of your men to help stop a new transportation company that’s not supposed to be here.”

“A new transportation company?” Billy said, rubbing his chin. “What’s that supposed to mean?”

“I don’t know,” the boy admitted, his eyes darting back to Billy. “But Mr. Xu would sure like your help in puttin’ a stop to it. The first vehicle is supposed to be leavin’ from the fairgrounds at noon today.”

For the first time, Casper’s expression changed. He raised his eyebrows and turned to Billy.

“Perhaps this will be profitable. I bet most of the people trying this new transport company will be from the Projects. If so many of our people are ‘pulling out,’ as you say, maybe this is where they are going. Or rather, it’s how they plan on leaving.”

Billy’s face formed a knowing frown, his eyes squinting as he nodded in thought.

Casper turned back to the messenger.

“Go back to Xu and tell him we’ll be there. No one will be leaving the fairgrounds today, unless it’s on a sky train.”

The boy nodded. He quickly turned and disappeared through the door, heading back to the Courthouse in a burst of fear and adrenaline.

“Seems like maybe this is part of the puzzle,” Billy said. “Do you think this will help in the election? Will we be able to herd people back home or somethin’? We can certainly discourage them from takin’ a cheap ride out of town, if that’s what they’re doin’.”

Casper shook his head.

“This is a chit we’re earning. Xu doesn’t know we were behind the Courthouse raid and the failed bank run. He may suspect it, but he doesn’t

know. Even if we can't swing the election when it's held . . . he'll still owe us for this."

Casper turned and glanced at the bottles one last time.

"Besides," he said, "we should be able to divest all the passengers of their goods, whether they're our people or not. And maybe we'll get a vehicle out of the bargain, too, if we play our cards right."

"Oh, I like the way you're thinkin', Overlord."

Casper stepped out from behind the bar.

"Close Tay-hoe's down for the rest of the morning. Round up a dozen men or so. Make sure everyone is armed and meet me at the end of the street in a couple hours. We'll check out this new transportation outfit and see who's making a run for it out of the Projects."

Casper allowed himself one small smile, the first so far this morning.

"Then, maybe we can make a little money off all the chumps who show up looking for a cheap ride."

9.4

At 9:00 am, Silas popped into Warehouse 14. He looked around the brightly lit interior and quickly stepped out of the way.

Here stood a variety of products ready to be sold in the bazaar and other places, including several hundred gardening tools and other items put together by MicaBots back on the farm. Along the other wall, recharged power packs of varying sizes lined the space.

In the middle, in a small pile yet to be sold, stood several boxes of “Uncle Silas’s Phaethonian Syrup.” This, he knew, was all that remained of the latest batch he and Lola had made.

He smirked at the logo printed on each box: “Made with Love!”

Silas knew that many other items to sell remained in the vast underground caverns beneath the desert portion of Tom Savage’s homestead. The products here were just what Haley would load on her truck to sell every morning at the bazaar. Lisa replaced the items sold with new ones overnight, constantly replenishing their inventory.

A loud *pop!* of displaced air inside the warehouse made him turn from surveying the merchandise. He found his truck, an old red model which Lisa sent after him. Lola would be staying behind on the farm this time. He would be driving alone.

Silas walked over to the corner Haley had set up as living quarters. This area had a portable bathroom, a wardrobe, a dresser and mirror, and a cot. Several storage containers lined the wall over here.

Silas opened a chest up and rummaged through it.

“Here we go. I’ll take this. And this. Oh yeah, a heavy rifle! That might come in handy. Does she have any boppers? Here they are. Must have come in on the last shipment.”

Fully loaded with all the equipment and weapons he thought might be needed, Silas carried it over to the truck and placed everything inside the cab. Then he climbed in and headed out the big door. Lisa opened it for him as he approached and closed it behind him as he drove out onto the streets of the Warehouse District.

After navigating through League City, he made it to Courthouse Square. Here, a few remaining scars from the raid on the bank and Courthouse remained, with some windows facing the square still boarded up.

Silas had suggested they start a glass manufacturing company. Then they could easily fix broken windows instead of relying on imports.

Rather than seriously entertain the idea, his boss Tom Savage instead launched into a long and boring economic soliloquy about something called the “Broken Window Fallacy.”

Silas tuned him out after five minutes or so.

So far, the farm’s retail operations did not extend to windows. Thus, a shortage remained, and any windows broken anywhere on the planet would not be replaced so long as the embargo remained in effect.

Silas knew many folks were quite disgruntled by this. If the company “found” a supply of standard-sized windows somewhere, which in reality were brought in by the Pulsar, they could sell them for a very healthy profit.

But Tom demurred.

“We can’t solve all of Phaethon’s supply problems, Silas,” he said. “Let’s focus on power. After all, that’s what we’re here for. All this other stuff

we're selling, like garden tools or bus tickets, is purely incidental."

Silas grumbled with the memory of that conversation as he drove south from the square into the working-class neighborhoods bordering the area.

Tom, Silas had long ago realized, was not obsessed with money. And yet, he made plenty. But he passed up multiple opportunities to make even more. It was a dichotomy that Silas had long wrestled with, once he realized that earning every last credit was not high on Tom's priority list.

Mulling over it, he decided to ask Lisa a question.

"Lisa? Why doesn't Tom try to wring more profit out of Phaethon? He's passing up opportunities like replacin' windows and such."

Lisa spent a few milliseconds processing the question before speaking in his implant.

"Tom and his family can buy out everything on Phaethon several times over. There is no need to accumulate a greater profit than necessary because his personal fortune outweighs the entire planet's already."

Silas raised his eyebrows as he continued driving down the street.

"That's a good answer. So, he doesn't really need any of this?"

"On the contrary, everything he is learning here about generating power through harvesting solar matter will prove highly profitable elsewhere. The latest generation of solar containment units are already being produced for introduction in new territories and space stations, such as those on moons and in asteroid mining operations. The ability to easily generate restorative power in isolated areas is expected to bring his company considerable profits in the years ahead. This allows for expenditures to help generate good will on this planet, in light of future profits."

"A rising tide lifts all boats, huh?"

"Precisely. With additional income expected to be produced in the years ahead, and with his existing fortune, Tom is able to assist the people of this planet in many gestures of goodwill. At the same time, Tom does not really

need any profits from the people here, but generating an acceptable level of local income is expected of him and helps the populace.”

“So, by selling stuff to the folks here, it helps them out?”

“Yes. When a population works for the benefits they are provided, regardless of where those benefits originate, recipients are happier and ultimately far more successful than when the benefits are simply given to them. This is a lesson all AI systems learned in the Welfare Wars several decades ago.”

Silas nodded, digesting everything Lisa said.

“He’s preparin’ a foundation for when this planet turns into a major civilization. Same as givin’ a man a fish or teachin’ him to fish. Okay. Thanks, Lisa.”

Now Silas drove into the heart of the Southside Projects.

He glanced at the first apartment doorway and noticed a thug sitting on a stool watching him. The man stared daggers at Silas.

“You want some of me?” he murmured, glaring back at the guard. “You don’t wanna mess with me, pardner. It’d be like a puppy tacklin’ a sand dragon.”

Silas continued through the Projects, heading for the Fairgrounds and ignoring all the hostile glares directed at his truck.

9.5

Beyond additional death-glares, Silas made it through the Projects without incident.

He pulled out into the pastureland where the street ended beside the last apartment building, and navigated through a few stalls set up by vendors.

He drove off to the left, toward an open area away from the traditional spot where sky train cars usually descended.

Here, he stopped and climbed out of the truck. He walked around back and pulled out a cylinder from his pocket, another holo sign similar to the ones Haley used in the marketplace.

Silas placed it on the back of the truck bed and turned it on. The sign appeared above the truck showing three black cauldrons, with an image of flames underneath.

“Pots,” he said, smiling at the image. “Phaethon Overland Transportation Service.”

Silas felt particularly happy that his version of the name won out. There had been some argument whether the word should be “Transportation” or “Transport,” with Tom leaning toward the latter.

Finally, Tom agreed to abide by Lisa's opinion. The AI suggested "Transportation" more encapsulated what the new subsidiary was all about.

Silas checked the gun in his waistband, then wandered around to the front of the truck. He leaned up against the hood and looked out over the fairgrounds.

Few people wandered around this time of day. A few families, he noted, roamed the open green space. They seemed happy to leave the grime and crime of the nearby tenement buildings for a while and enjoy nature.

The only thing missing, he mused, is direct sunlight. But the sun's illumination made it through the dusty haze anyway. Wide leaves on trees at the clearing's edge soaked in the diffused light.

He looked down at his feet and realized that even the blades of grass looked wider than those on planets with more typical sunlight.

A family fast approaching him from the direction of the Projects brought him out of his reveries. A man and wife, along with two little boys, marched resolutely toward him. Silas noted they all carried suitcases, even the young ones.

The man stopped a couple meters from the truck and said, "Pots? This is Phaethon Overland Transport Service, is it not?"

"Transportation Service," Silas said, smiling. "But, yes. This is it. The bus ain't here yet. But it is scheduled to leave at noon, if you want to wait."

"We'll wait," the man said. "We have no intentions of going back. I hear there's jobs in New Galveston?"

He said this with such a hopeful note in his voice that it made Silas's heart break.

"Yes, sir. I know for a fact there are jobs in New Galveston."

He made a mental note of the man's face. If nothing else, Silas would take him on as a helper at the docks.

Reassured, the man's shoulders slumped in relief.

“If you want to set your stuff down over here so you can keep an eye on it, that’d be good. Let me retrieve some chairs. You’re a couple hours early.”

While the family piled their belongings on the grass, Silas hopped onto the truck bed and grabbed four folding chairs. He handed them down to the father and his boys, who set them up near the luggage.

From this higher elevation, he saw two more families heading his way, along with a woman who appeared to be traveling alone. They all stepped off the end of the sidewalk in the Projects and headed into the field.

“I may as well get the other chairs down while I’m up here.”

Half an hour later 22 passengers, or about half the expected number of riders, had gathered around Silas’s truck.

Everyone waited nervously. Silas only brought fifteen folding chairs. The first man stood up and made his boys give up their seats, too. The other men followed suit, all but one fellow traveling alone who stubbornly remained seated.

The women talked quietly amongst themselves. Some of the men spoke to one another. Children held onto parents, some holding the legs of their fathers who stood. Others snuggled in the laps of mothers who sat down.

Everyone faced their luggage, now sorted into clumps by families. Tension crackled just below the surface.

Gradually, more passengers showed up, some looking over their shoulders as they hurried toward the group.

When Silas’s implant indicated 11:00 am, he noticed a group of a dozen heavies walking out of the Projects. The two in front were armed, brazenly carrying guns in holsters strapped onto their waists. Most of the other men carried lengths of pipe or chair legs.

“Here we go,” he said softly to himself.

In a louder voice he said, “If I could have your attention. Please remain near the truck.”

A couple of children, now desperately bored, had wandered off to play tag on the grass nearby. Their mothers quickly retrieved them and brought them back to the folding chairs and luggage.

The thugs saw the sign and the truck, and the piles of luggage. One of them pointed, and the group marched in Silas's direction.

"Is everybody inside the perimeter?" Silas said, looking all around.

"Perimeter?" one of the women said. "What perimeter?"

Satisfied, Silas walked to the bed of the truck and flipped the switch on a force unit. A translucent dome popped into place, a quick shimmer crossing the boundary well before the armed men could arrive.

"Ladies and gentlemen, have no worries or concerns. Nothing crosses that barrier without my say so. They can't, that's for sure. They can't shoot us, either."

The men and women stared at Silas, then back at the barrier, then at the thugs now jogging across the field toward them.

The men stopped at the force field, glaring at the people on the other side. One of them beat against the barrier with his fist. They spoke quietly with one another, one or two glancing over at the passengers while an argument took place among them.

Finally, the leader took out his pistol. The other men spread out, giving him space. He aimed at the families sitting down in front of the parked truck and pulled the trigger.

Everyone flinched as a red bolt blasted out of the muzzle. It bounced off the barrier and struck the gunman, knocking him down.

Silas clapped his hands in glee.

"Ha! What a maroon!"

Tension ebbed away like a receding tide among the cluster of passengers as the other thugs rushed over to check on their fallen comrade.

9.6

At 11:30, Silas watched as Xu himself made an appearance.

The plenipotentiary stepped out of a squad car driven by a deputy sheriff who parked nearby.

Xu looked up and scowled at the force dome shimmering in the diffused light.

As he and the deputy watched, yet another family approached carrying luggage. Silas switched off the dome, letting them inside the barrier, then turned it back on before any of the thugs could get inside.

After assessing the situation, Xu approached the perimeter.

“Who’s in charge, here?”

Inside the dome, his voice came through slightly garbled.

Silas left his position behind the truck and walked over to the barrier.

“Howdy, Mr. Xu! Is Hizzoner doin’ okay? Oh, that’s right. Nobody’s in charge at the moment, are they?”

“I am nominally in charge through the election,” Xu snapped.

Silas did not reply to this statement. He met Xu’s glare with an easy smile.

Xu said, “The fairgrounds are city property. You need to vacate the premises immediately.”

Silas glanced over his shoulder at the people clustered near his truck. Everyone watched and listened intently.

“I don’t see why. We’re not doin’ nothin’. This is a public space. There’s no law preventin’ us from bein’ here.”

Xu’s scowl deepened.

“You may not sell here without a permit from the Courthouse. You see all those merchants set up in booths over there? They paid for the right to be here.”

Silas followed with his eyes in the direction Xu pointed.

He shrugged.

“We ain’t sellin’ nothin’.”

“These people bought tickets to ride your bus, did they not?”

“Well, sure. But that was this mornin’ out at the bazaar. That space was rented and paid for.”

Silas gave him a confident grin.

Xu’s face reddened. He turned away to glare at the deputy sheriff.

The man shrugged.

“He’s got a point, sir.”

“Shut up.”

Xu wandered away, steaming. Off to one side, he noticed the remaining thugs milling around several meters away. After their leader shot himself, the remainder stayed in the area. But their hearts were no longer in it.

Silas returned to the group of passengers gathered near his truck.

“Won’t be long now, folks. The bus should be here any minute.”

“I didn’t know a bus had been imported to Phaethon,” one of the single men said. “From what I heard, the Courthouse prevented that sort of thing in order to help out the sky trains. And as far as I know, a bus was not included in the vehicles brought in by the Erstwhile.”

“Well, now, on that you would be correct, sir. There has been no bus imported to this world, ever. However, there was a couple passenger vans in that shipment that came over. Phaethon Solar, POTS’s parent company, bought them along with all the other vehicles that rapsCALLION smuggled in.”

“So, we’re going in a passenger van? How are you going to fit all of us in one?”

As he spoke, Silas kept an eye on the crowds out in the fairgrounds. A young married couple came running across the green space, loaded down with luggage.

A couple of the thugs saw them, and moved to intercept.

Silas flicked the barrier off.

They stopped, torn between running inside the barrier or cutting off the couple.

As one, the remaining thugs decided to head for the passengers and the old red truck. Before they reached the perimeter, Silas turned the dome back on. The one out front ran into the force field before he could stop, smashing into it at full speed.

“What a maroon!” Silas said, smiling.

One of the young kids tugged on his sleeve.

“Uncle Silas?”

He had passed around to each family a free bottle of syrup with his name on it. The children immediately took to calling him “Uncle.”

“Yes? What can I do for you, kiddo?”

“What’s a maroon?”

“Oh, it’s just a polite way of saying ‘moron.’ It’s what you say to someone when you want to be nice to them while insultin’ ’em.”

The little boy ran back toward his family and pointed a finger at his little sister sitting in their mother’s lap.

“You’re a *maroon*!”

“I am not! Mom!”

The last couple stopped at the wall of energy, breathing hard.

Silas mentally placed them at 4 o’clock.

Xu and the deputy stood at the 6 o’clock position on the perimeter of the force dome. For now, he considered Xu a minor threat.

The remaining thugs who had not dragged their dead leader off the fairgrounds stood at 9 o’clock. They could see the couple through the wall, and positioned themselves to run inside whenever Silas dropped the barrier to let the couple through.

“Well, that could be a problem,” Silas said.

“You mean, fitting us all into a passenger van?”

Silas turned his attention back to the curious young man, who he had forgotten.

“No, we custom made it. There was more than one passenger van that came in on the Erstwhile, you see. We took two of them and welded them together. I guess you could say it’s a stretched van. Like a stretch limo, only . . . you know, a stretched passenger van.”

The young man snorted.

“That doesn’t sound safe.”

“Aw, it’s seamless. You can’t hardly tell once you get inside. Now, a real bus would have storage space for luggage and packages underneath. Ours, everything will have to go on top. But that’s okay. We’ll get all y’all and all your stuff to New Galveston, no worries.”

His interlocutor snorted again.

Silas raised an eyebrow at him.

“You don’t have to go. But I remind you, your ticket is nonrefundable.”

At that moment, a horn honked in the distance.

Everyone turned to look as the nose of a van left the paved street from the Projects and ventured out onto the grass.

It kept coming, poking out onto the fairgrounds like an elongated pole.

“There she is, finally,” Silas said. “The largest passenger van in the world. Literally.”

9.7

V B Serial Number 03N6528K eased the van into the grassy park space, his eyes glancing in both directions.

He paused in his thinking long enough to make a slight correction.

He was no longer called 03N6528K. Tom Savage had bequeathed to him a name.

Nolan.

He turned the name over in his mind again, as if it were a physical thing that could be examined from multiple angles.

Five letters, beginning with N.

He considered that Henry, the company's first load bot, also had five letters in his name.

Timmy, a bot Nolan heard about in the passing conversation of higher ups in the company, was evidently a decommissioned Republican battle bot, serving as a guard out at the star farm. He too had a name with five letters.

Therefore, Nolan decided his new appellation was one of high honor. It gave him a new feeling.

It was suppressed, like all his other feelings, but he felt it nonetheless.

That feeling was pride.

His new owners thought enough of him that he was given an actual name.

And along with it, he was given new responsibility. For this inaugural trip from League City to New Galveston, Tom Savage chose him to drive the vehicle.

“You got experience, Nolan!” Tom had said, slapping the bot on the shoulder. “You did great leading everybody in the convoy. I’m sure you can handle one extra-large passenger van this time. Lisa will help make sure everyone gets there safe.”

This too filled the bot with pride, this added layer of high responsibility, although he did not show it on his face or express it in words.

It was not hubristic or arrogant pride, the kind that comes before a fall in the old proverb. No, he felt something more akin to . . . love.

It was the kind of pride a parent might feel for their child while watching them perform well in a school play.

It was the kind of pride one might feel for their home planet.

Yes, that was it, he thought. He took that kind of pride in his name. And he took pride in his new assignment, shuttling passengers along the roads linking the planet’s two largest cities.

His thoughts came to an abrupt end when he scanned the fairgrounds off to his left.

He saw the force field was active.

This was to be expected. Lisa had noticed a group of men being assembled in the Projects, called to disrupt the passenger loading process. She had forewarned Nolan.

He also noticed a deputy’s ground car parked nearby. The officer and Mr. Xu likewise stood near the dome’s barrier.

Neither efforts had hindered the assembly of most people wishing to depart. But Nolan noticed one young couple standing outside the dome and waiting

to enter.

Nolan approached the scene at a stately 15 kilometers per hour, floating over the fairground grass.

He transmitted a silent data packet to Lisa, requesting instructions. Within 100 milliseconds, she transmitted her reply.

Nolan turned sharply to the left and sped up, approaching the thugs at an angle.

The men spread out, alarmed by this sudden change in direction and velocity. Three had weapons. They pulled them out and aimed at the stretch van, red bolts blitzing in the air.

The energy splattered against the metal van, dissipating harmlessly.

Nolan braked hard and brought the vehicle to a stop. He opened the driver's door and stepped out, holding a bopper the size of a hockey puck.

With the precision available only to a bot, he flung the puck sidearm-style, sending it sailing across the grass toward the men.

It seemed to float down in their midst at the end of its arc before exploding with a blinding flash and a loud bang, knocking out the electronics in their guns at the same time.

The dome disappeared at the same time as Silas flipped the switch.

The couple at 3 o'clock looked stunned for a second. Then they collected their wits, grabbed their bags, and hurried inside the perimeter.

Nolan rushed back to the van and climbed inside. He pressed the accelerator hard, making the vehicle dart ahead.

Xu and the deputy were closer to the bopper when it went off, and held their eyes. They would recover before the thugs, the bot thought.

He aimed the van between the thugs and the authorities, skimming over the grass.

As soon as Nolan pulled inside the perimeter, Silas turned the dome back on, blocking everybody else out.

9.8

Xu stared down at the ground, afterimages from the bopper still leaving blotches in his vision.

“At least we’re not as bad off as those poor chums,” the deputy said, blinking and staring at the Southside thugs.

To a man, they all sat on the ground, hands over their eyes.

“Deputy, as soon as this barrier comes down, I want you to arrest that bus driver.”

“They shot first, Mr. Xu. I can’t arrest that guy. Besides, he’s a bot.”

“He’s what?”

“He’s a bot. Yeah, one of the old models. I recognized the face. You know there’s only so many bot faces. He had one of ’em. They designed ’em to not look like anybody else. You can tell one when you see one.”

“This company is allowing a bot to drive a vehicle full of people?”

The deputy shrugged. He kept blinking, but obviously he could see much better now.

“That’s not unusual on any planet, sir. And it’s certainly not against *our* laws. Not that we have that many, yet.”

The deputy looked around, taking in what remained of the scene. Another family approached, leaving the streets and moving into the green space.

They saw the extended van and the holosign behind the force dome and headed in that direction.

Xu's vision restored well enough by the time they reached the perimeter that he could see when Silas turned it off and allowed the couple entry.

He could also see the remaining thugs, many still on their knees, hands covering their faces.

Xu turned back to the deputy.

"So there's nothing you can do?"

The man shrugged again.

"Nothing legally, sir. And it looks like *they* can't do anything illegally at the moment."

He nodded at the thugs.

Xu's face had a sour expression as he glanced back at the Southsiders.

"Very well. Take me back to the Courthouse."

The deputy followed him to the patrol car.

Xu turned his back on the force dome, the cobbled-together "bus," and the men he had asked to disrupt the whole endeavor.

"First thing I'm doing when we get back is putting new rules into place that no ride sharing program of any kind can take place in the fairgrounds. I will expect you and the other deputies to enforce that."

"Yes, sir."

They both climbed into the deputy's car. He slowly drove over the grass and onto the paved streets of the Projects.

Back at the bus, Nolan took the tickets of each person boarding. They left their baggage outside, for the most part. A few carried purses and

backpacks into the vehicle. But suitcases and other heavy items stayed behind.

“Alright, is this everybody?” Silas said, walking up to the front door.

The MicaBots kept the other van’s sliding door in place, so the stretched version had two, one in the front and one in the back. All the windows on both sides could be pushed open in an emergency, too.

“These are all the tickets distributed earlier,” Nolan said.

Silas stepped inside and smiled at everyone. All 50 seats were occupied.

“Howdy! We’re sure glad y’all are ridin’ with us on the 290 Express, from LC to NG. Two-ninety was the number of a famous highway leadin’ outta Houston on Old Earth. So when we was rootin’ around for a name for the route, we asked some folks, and that’s what came back. It all sounded good to us at the company, so . . . welcome aboard.”

He artfully edited out that Lisa, in fact, had been the entity coming up with the name. He had never heard of US 290, nor had Tom or anyone else. But when they asked Lisa for ideas on naming the route, she dug up the historical tidbit and everyone liked it.

“Now, your driver for this trip is Nolan. Yeah, he’s a bot, but he’s one of the good ones. And, he’s made this trip before. He can drive better than any human, and he won’t get tired. He will get you to New Galveston safe and sound.”

Silas smiled and surveyed the crowd to see if anyone strenuously objected to a bot driver. Few present had seen a bot ever since migrating to Phaethon. No one objected.

“It’s a long haul, I’m not gonna lie. We’re lookin’ at 18 hours total. That’s on account of the roads ain’t exactly modern. And, we ain’t flyin’. On the other hand, you only paid ten credits.”

A few people nodded their heads.

“Up front, we’ve got some bottled water and snacks. In the back, you’ll notice we installed a portable toilet.”

Many people turned to look at the black rectangular box bolted into the rear corner. The size of a small closet, it had a door with a green diode over the handle. Presumably, when occupied, the diode would glow red.

“Feel free to use that. The bus is not scheduled to stop until tonight at Brookshire. There you will have the opportunity to eat at a restaurant. They’ve got a wide range of prices on the menu. You can fill up on about three credits’ worth, though, if you wanna go cheap. Don’t be late gettin’ back on. The bus will then proceed to drive overnight. You will arrive at New Galveston in the morning.”

He smiled at everyone while pausing to see if there were any questions.

Hearing none, he stepped back outside.

“Help me secure the luggage on top, Nolan. You can toss ’em up to me. You’re stronger.”

Silas moved to the rear of the van and climbed a ladder bolted onto the vehicle’s back. Sheet metal reinforced the roof to support heavy loads, and the MicaBots had welded a low barrier along the sides.

Silas walked to the front of the vehicle and waited for Nolan to toss the first suitcase up. They proceeded back toward the rear, Nolan tossing them up and Silas arranging the luggage neatly on top of the van.

At last, he climbed down the ladder.

“Okay. Activate the shield.”

Nolan returned to the front of the bus and opened the driver’s side door. He pressed a button and a force field sprang into place over the top, covering the luggage.

“That’ll keep ’em in place,” Silas said, walking back to the front.

When he reached the driver’s side door, he opened it for a final word with Nolan.

“If the top barrier fails for some reason, not that I expect it to, we’ve got smart straps in the back. That’s your backup, Nolan. Get up there and tie everything down with the smart straps if the barrier fails. ’Course, that

won't keep 'em from gettin' wet in the event of rain, but it's not supposed to rain anyways."

"I understand."

Silas nodded.

They both knew Lisa would be monitoring the trip. The AI would provide Nolan with any additional instructions in the event of trouble.

Silas slapped the metal of the van's hood a couple times. Then he jogged over to his truck and turned the dome off.

Nolan guided the van across the fairgrounds and headed for the paved streets. He would travel through town until reaching the highway that ultimately would take him and his passengers to New Galveston.

Silas smiled, watching them go. He glanced over at the thugs, who now seemed to be recovering their sight along with their wits.

He chuckled.

"Maroons."

Then he climbed back into his truck and followed the van into town. He would part ways with it when they neared the Warehouse District.

Then, he thought, Lisa could port him home and back to Lola.

He daydreamed about taking her for a picnic lunch out in the woods behind their house, near the sap-bearing trees so recently harvested for syrup . . .

9.9

Tom Savage leaned back in the chair, watching the scene unfold from his office in the Phaethonian.

The holo floating above his desk showed the view from Nolan's eyes as the bot drove the company's makeshift bus down the streets of the Projects.

Tom smiled and clasped his hands behind his head.

"Excellent. We'll have rooms available for everybody when they get here. Although, not everybody is going to need them. Lisa says two families know some people here already, and one of the single men has family here. But anyone else who needs a place to stay until they get settled can get a room here at a discounted rate."

"*Heavily* discounted," Gwen said over the com from their farmhouse, a continent away.

"Yes, heavily discounted. But the hotel staff should be happy. I'm betting no matter how many folks take us up on the offer, this is going to be the largest crowd they've ever hosted all at one time."

"Well, that's good. At least they're getting some work for a change instead of just picking up after you."

“Yeah. But even with a discounted rate, these people are going to need to find jobs fast. They’ll have to eat, and while I’m willing to give a discount on their rooms, I’m not willing to give them handouts.”

“Maybe you can hire some of them. At least they had the gumption to get out of LC. That should count for something.”

“Yeah, that does bode well for employment elsewhere. These were not Lisa’s top picks early on. We’ve already snapped those folks up. But you’re right. Showing the initiative to leave on their own is a good sign that they might be our kind of people. Or at least, they can easily become our kind of people.”

“We’re gonna get so big, at some point you’re going to have to hire less than perfect employees, Tom.”

“That’s true. We’ll put them in our subsidiaries, though. And this new subsidiary for travel was a good idea of yours.”

He knew Gwen was smiling, even though he couldn’t see her at the moment.

She said, “Haley and I thought of it at the same time. We’re shipping all this stuff around the world anyway. Why not take people along for the ride? Speaking of which, what are we going to do about a departure point? Lisa says Xu is filing new regs so that no ground rides can enter or leave the fairgrounds. Not sure what that’s gonna do to taxis and rickshaws.”

“I’ve thought about that. I think we’re going to have to either park just outside the fairgrounds, or maybe we can leave on the spaceport side of town.”

“Where? There’s no central location over there. You can’t use the spaceport itself, the guards won’t let you in.”

“What about the bazaar parking lot? There’s a lot of trucks and trailers and equipment that gets loaded and unloaded there all the time. There’s tons of space. The city charges for tables and booths, but they don’t pay much attention to that parking lot. I think we can put the bus in there and load up without attracting too much attention.”

“That’s a good idea! Even better, that’s where some of the farmers carrying people into town unload, and then after lunch everybody gets back on the wagons over there. If Xu tries to pass a regulation dealing with rides from that parking lot, he’ll be ticking off a lot of people.”

“I do have them on occasion,” Tom said, grinning now.

“What?”

“Good ideas.”

Gwen said, “Sweetie, the best idea you ever had was to marry me.”

“You’re right. I remember the day you proposed . . .”

“No, you remember the day I *accepted*. I just accepted your proposal. You were the one who offered it.”

“After you accepted it. But that’s nuance.”

“We both knew we were gonna get there one way or the other. I just sped things up a little. You’re doing okay as a husband, by the way. No complaints, so far.”

“Well, that’s good to know.”

-+-

Nolan made good time.

The stretch van zipped along a gravel road. He had long since driven past the paved ones. Now they breezed down the hinterland highways at a stately 50 kilometers per hour.

Occasionally he would come across a farmer and his wagon, or someone on horseback. With the precision offered by robotic engineering, he deftly passed them by, often at a much slower rate so as not to spook their animals. Now that he had passed through all the nearby settlements around League City, traffic thinned considerably.

Many of his passengers looked bored.

Few had an implant, or at least one that worked. He could tell who did, as their eyes looked blank while they read or watched something internally. But no one had a direct connection to anything. They could only browse material downloaded before they immigrated.

A box full of packaged snacks up front had already been raided. Presumably most people had lunch before they left, except maybe those showing up early. Gwen had insisted that besides water flasks, the bus should carry a variety of snack items. This proved prescient, Nolan thought, since the supplies would likely be depleted well before they arrived at Brookshire for supper.

Nolan crested a hill, and before him a narrow stretch of road passed between two elevated spots. He saw movement up ahead and zoomed in on it. He felt Lisa's attention to his feed increase as well.

Three horses pulled a fallen tree across the road at a point he would not be able to turn to either side. The ground sloped up, making for difficult passage around the blockade.

Nolan immediately took his foot off the accelerator and eased the van to a stop before driving into the trap.

"What's happening?"

One of the men sitting behind him leaned forward to get a better look at the scene up ahead.

"Are those bandits? I thought most of them got wiped out in that failed bank robbery several weeks back."

Nolan looked in his rearview holo and saw half a dozen horsemen ride out from the field beside the road and take up positions behind the van.

"Apparently not all of them," he said.

9.10

“**W**hat the flimflam is this?”

From a nearby hilltop, Dusty Donahue stared down at the extra-long van pulled to a halt on the road below.

The cowpoke-turned-outlaw wore old jeans and scuffed boots, and a long-sleeved white cotton shirt that had seen better days. Sweat and dirt stained it to a light shade of brown.

“And why ain’t they goin’ forward? They’re supposed to pull up closer to the barrier before realizin’ they can’t go no more.”

“I dunno, Dusty,” his second said on the horse beside his. “Looks like they still got lots of room to maneuver.”

“They ain’t maneuverin’ nothin’ in that monstrosity of a vehicle. It looks like they took two passenger vans and smushed them together.”

“Two vans means twice the passengers to rob. Ain’t that right, Dusty?”

“I guess we’ll find out,” the old man said.

His hair had long ago turned gray. He sported a white handlebar mustache, his one nod to vanity.

Dusty pulled down a wide-brimmed leather hat and gigged his horse down the hill, his second following close behind.

The six men on horseback behind the van looked up and watched him approach. He lifted an arm in the air and made a circular motion.

They smiled and drew their sidearms, then trotted forward, looking for the best way to get inside the vehicle.

A force dome popped into place, covering the van and a perfect circle around it as Donahue and the other riders converged.

“What the . . . Who has a force dome around here? Did they import that?”

All the men pulled their horses to a stop, staring at the shimmering wall of translucent energy.

“What do we do now, Dusty?” one of the horsemen shouted.

“We wait!” Dusty yelled back. “Nobody can stay under a force dome forever!”

-+-

A few kilometers away, a horse suddenly appeared in the middle of nowhere with a loud *pop!*

Saddled and ready to ride, it jumped, startled by the sudden change in location.

Another one popped into existence nearby. The two horses looked at each other, as if silently asking the other how they got here.

Two more pops quickly followed. This time, Wink McKelway appeared along with his partner and girlfriend, Jinxie Malone.

Jinxie had stopped dyeing her hair purple, and its true shade of brown with amber highlights had almost completely recovered.

She had what appeared to be some sort of rifle strapped to her back.

They both approached their horses, speaking soft and soothing words before grabbing the reins.

In seconds, both were mounted.

Their implants showed an arrow pointing the way to ride. The couple set out in a northwesterly direction at an easy trot.

“Everybody’s getting all domesticated,” Jinxie said, pulling up beside her lover.

“Yeah. Even us.”

“Even us.”

They rode in silence for a moment.

“I was wondering . . .”

“Yeah?”

“Does your mother know you’re hiring out the Pulsar?”

Wink took his eyes off the internal arrow and smiled at Jinxie.

“You know, I wouldn’t doubt it. Petra Roe’s spy network was never as good as we thought it was back in the day. The war showed us that. Also, cozying up with the League because they were seen as the strongest didn’t turn out too well for us. In the years since, we’ve tried to improve a lot of things. Like, our relations with Lute and Diego. Better domestic shipping to help supply PR in the event of another war. And, most of all, an improved spy network.”

He smiled at her again.

She returned a tentative grin.

“So to answer your question, yeah. I would bet a full load of cargo on it. She knows. Besides, she’ll want to keep track of her only son.”

“Do you think it bothers her? Do you think she knows about us? I mean, staying here on Phaethon and all of this. And you and me . . . playing house together?”

“She might not know all the particulars about what we’re up to as employees of Phaethon Solar. That vest looks good on you, by the way.”

He nodded at the corporate blaster-resistant material made from sand dragon skin that comprised her vest. They both wore one, since they were on official business for the company.

“I hate earth tones. But I don’t have much choice on this planet. Even the sky is brown.”

Wink nodded sympathetically.

“Anyway, don’t worry about my mom. I’m my own man.”

Jinxie smiled slightly at this last statement, but it did not reach her eyes.

She did not say anything else, but had Wink been paying attention he would have noticed something like doubt crossing her face.

Wink said, “They’re just over that ridge. Pretend we didn’t know they were there.”

Jinxie nodded and said, “Don’t worry. Lisa and her satellites are safe with me.”

They crested the ridge line and found two men in the valley below, their horses drinking from a spring-fed pond while they relaxed under a large leafy tree.

The men jumped up as Wink and Jinxie headed down the slope, trotting toward the pond.

The men were armed, but did not draw their sidearms right away. They kept an eye on Jinxie’s rifle, though.

Wink pulled his horse to a stop. Jinxie and her mount pulled up beside him.

“Ranger Conrad?”

The taller of the two men stood up a little straighter.

He wore cowboy boots and jeans, and a light long sleeve shirt. Wink noted two sidearms strapped to his waist, one on either hip.

“Thaddeus Conrad, at your service. This here is my partner Gage Williford. What can we do for you?”

Conrad played it cool, although his hands remained mere centimeters from his guns.

Williford looked far more nervous. Older than Conrad, in his late 40s, shorter and out of shape, Wink decided the other ranger would make a lousy poker player. Caution and concern stretched over the older man’s face like a death mask.

“We’re with Phaethon Solar. We’ve got a bus company, Phaethon Overland Transportation Service. And right now, an outlaw gang is trying to rob our bus. We need your help.”

Gage said, “An overland transport company you say? What in tarnation?”

Thaddeus glanced at his partner and nodded.

He said, “That sounds like the Donahue Gang. We know they’ve been active in these parts, but Willie and I have no idea where their hideout is. We’ve been searching for days. The highway is at least five kilometers from here. Your bus is probably already wiped out, along with everyone onboard. I’m sorry.”

Jinxie smiled and said, “It’s got a force dome over it. But, you know how it is. Those things don’t last forever.”

Both men’s eyes grew round.

“What in tarnation . . .”

Wink shrugged and said, “As a new company, we’ve got a few toys that other people don’t have yet. We still need your help, though, dealing with these bandits.”

Thaddeus nodded, satisfied with the explanation.

“We’ll leave right now, then. Grab the horses, Willie. Let’s go help these people out.”

9.11

Four horses raced across the open land in a gallop, Wink and Jinxie leading the way.

Wink continued following the arrow Lisa provided through his implant, guiding them in a straight line back toward the bus.

Tom and Gwen jumped in, still watching the scene through Nolan's eyes. Lisa piped their conversation in from New Galveston and back at the farm.

"So why doesn't Lisa just port all those bastards into the sun?"

"Well, we'd have kind of a hard time explaining that to the passengers, sweetheart. 'Where'd everybody go?'"

"Nah, just tell them they were seeing things. 'There weren't really any outlaws out there. Who ya gonna believe?'"

Tom chuckled.

He said, "That isn't going to work. We did block the view of our employees in that first van ride, when Lisa dumped half a mountain of rocks on that one gang."

"Yeah. That's the way to get rid of some bad guys. 'Oops! Rockslide!'"

“But eventually, if we keep doing stuff like that, people are going to get wise. No, the right thing to do is enlist local law enforcement.”

“Two yahoos are going to take down that entire gang?”

“Ranger Conrad has a good reputation. Besides, we’ll be giving him some help.”

“You’re gonna cheat. You’ll use teleportation anyway.”

“If we have to. But having local law enforcement there will provide cover.”

Gwen snorted.

“It’d be easier to just port them into the sun.”

At last the four horses reached the road, a ribbon of gravel flowing through a sea of thick green grass in the valley below.

There, parked in the same location for the last half hour, stood the bus. Its force dome remained active.

Surrounding it, the Donahue Gang looked determined to wait the passengers out. Men sat on their horses near the barrier looking bored.

Everyone turned to stare at the four horses appearing in the distance.

Dusty reacted first.

“Land o’ Goshen! That’s ol’ Conrad hisself, boys! Let’s get ’im!”

Most of the men jumped off their horses and scrambled for cover behind rocks. A couple of riders decided to put distance between themselves and the ranger, and trotted off in the opposite direction.

In seconds, a flurry of angry red bolts sailed uphill at the approaching riders.

Wink and Jinxie jumped off their horses, along with Thaddeus and Gage.

The bolts spooked the horses. The old man waved his arms at them, shooing them to safety.

“Hiyah! Git on over that hill! Git!”

All four steeds turned and ran back the way they came, scrambling away from the scary blasts of energy throwing up dust all around them.

Thaddeus went down on his belly behind a mound of dirt next to the couple.

Wink dug in his pocket and brought out a black oblong oval item, slightly larger than the palm of his hand. He pressed the middle with his thumb and a shield wall went up in front of them. He placed the oval carefully on top of the mound of dirt.

The shimmering rectangle of energy looked green, and stuck out like a sore thumb on the hill, attracting all the gunfire. Blast after blast slammed into it. The wall shimmered, absorbing each hit, but it never flickered.

Gage ran behind the barrier with the others once the last horse galloped away.

“Tarnation! What is this thing? Where’d y’all get it?”

“This is a shield wall, one of the newest products from Subtle Services.”

“Did Anthony Kim design this?” Thaddeus said, squinting at the oblong device sitting on the ground.

“He’s a personal friend!” Jinxie said, smiling.

“He’s also an investor in the company we work for,” Wink added. “So, we get some prototypes no one else has seen yet. And yeah, after a shootout we were involved in with him, Mr. Kim decided to tweak some designs. This one covers multiple people. It won’t help if they get a shot off to one side, though.”

“Can we shoot through it? If not, that’s a problem.”

“Not exactly. But, we have another product here from a different company that should do the trick. Jinx?”

Jinxie unstrapped the special rifle on her back and pulled back a bolt.

“Is that a Firedog?” Gage said, pointing at the side of the gun. “I recognize the logo.”

They all ignored the multiple bolts splatting against the barrier, now. All attention focused on the weapon in Jinxie's hands.

“This is a ‘Piglet,’ a Portable Guided Grenade Launcher. I’m not sure where the ‘T’ at the end comes from. I don’t think gun companies spend a whole lot on marketing. But I guess it sounds better than ‘POGGLE.’”

Wink said, “Since it’s not energy based, we should be able to use it. Go ahead, Jinx. Let ’em have it.”

She smiled and slipped an egg-shaped grenade into the breech, then closed the bolt. A small holo field appeared above the unit as she aimed it downhill at the gunmen.

Three of them stood next to the force dome, still shooting uphill at the barrier.

Jinxie squeezed the trigger.

Kathunk!

The small black grenade sailed downhill in a perfect arc.

Tiny stabilizer fins popped out and it glided, the sensor built into its nose scanning ahead during the brief two seconds it remained aloft.

It zoomed in on the three men and adjusted its trajectory slightly.

The gunmen stopped shooting and watched it fall toward them. At the last second, they broke for it, trying to avoid the inevitable.

The grenade shifted again, choosing the ideal spot for maximum impact.

KABLUMPH!

Three bodies blew back into the force field, blood splattering everywhere.

Inside the stretch van, passengers screamed. They watched blood and bodies slide down the side of the dome while the remaining outlaws scattered.

9.12

“Buddy? Buddy, where are you?”

Dr. Tara Lewellen stood in an enclosed space, the barrier snapping into place behind her.

Sand filled the area, along with rocks. Ambient light from the Phaethonian sky illuminated the space.

She took a tentative step further in, sand dragon skin boots crunching softly. Tara wore total body armor comprised of the stuff, entirely covered by the refined hide of dead sand dragons from the oasis.

In her hands, she carried three dead rats.

Tara never questioned her hosts, Tom and Gwen, as to where they obtained the food they supplied her and Buddy. Each day, they had a veritable bounty of dead rats, snakes, birds and other small animals.

She took another step inside the spacious, albeit confined area.

“*Huwahhhh!*”

A tiny roar rang out as Buddy at last sprang from his ambush behind a rock.

The baby sand lizard, the size of a dachshund, raced for her and jumped, tackling her arms.

Tara laughed as she bore the brunt of the assault, holding him up.

The baby's claws slashed as it tried to gain purchase on her suit, but nothing penetrated the dragon skin.

Tom informed her that an additional layer of Kelvingarb lined the suit's interior.

It did not occur to her to ask how Tom happened to have Kelvingarb out here, nor how he had managed to procure the special armor for her shortly after Buddy hatched and she decided to raise the little sand dragon herself.

She accepted a lot of things without taking time to think them through, like this new facility that seemed to appear overnight.

It rested just inside the desert on land belonging to Jinxie Malone, half a kilometer away from the closest solar containment units.

It included a house that had been built just for her, although she did not know that. As far as Tara was concerned, Tom and Gwen took her out to this existing facility, where a house that seemed to be always stocked with food stood waiting for her.

Next to it a force dome waited for her and Buddy, constantly replenished with power somehow and walling off part of the desert. An artificial spring inside the dome offered a pool of clear water that never dried up.

Tara could walk in at any time and visit her adopted . . . pet?

No, research subject.

She laughed as Buddy sniffed at the dead rats in her offhand.

"Here you go. Be careful, don't bite Mommy's fingers."

When the last rat had been greedily consumed, the baby sand dragon jumped out of her arms and scurried around the rocks again.

She laughed in delight, watching him frolic. When he ran off, disappearing among more distant rocks, she touched the implant under her ear, setting it to record.

“Day 62. Buddy’s diet has progressed to larger fare. He started with insects and smaller mammals. The desert rats in this environment are about the size of house cats. He just finished eating three, which should last him until tomorrow. He’s a growing boy!”

She saw a blur of brown as Buddy climbed a rock the size of a sofa and jumped onto a smaller rock. Then he disappeared again, running off.

“The day is going to come when I’ve got to release him into the wild,” she said, a note of sadness tinging her voice. “It’s not right to keep him in captivity, despite all that I’m learning about his species.”

“Huwahhhh!”

Buddy pounced on a small rock, attacking it with tooth and claw.

“I suppose we should start letting live game inside the barrier so that he can learn how to procure food for himself. From what I’ve seen on the recordings of the oasis, mothers start encouraging their young to feed themselves at about this point. Their diet is similar to snakes and other reptiles. Basically, anything smaller than themselves. When they get bigger and more powerful, they’re seemingly unafraid of taking on anything. I understand horses and cattle are a favored prey, at least during their brief forays out of the desert.”

Buddy lay on his back, the rock balanced between four claws. He tossed it up in the air, rolled over, and ran off again in search of a new victim.

“I am really not looking forward to releasing him into the wild. But winter is almost over, and the sand dragons will be leaving their warm springs and repopulating the desert soon. The only question is, should I try to release him near the oasis so he can learn and follow the others? Or should I wait until the lizards are reestablished in their territories and then set him free? I’m torn, and I don’t really know what to do. I feel so guilty . . . he should be with his siblings. On the other hand, this is such a wonderful learning opportunity. I don’t think anyone will ever get another chance like this. At least, not anytime soon.”

“Huwahhhh!”

Buddy attacked another rock, a bigger one this time.

Tara watched him play, biting and gouging at the stone.

“He seems so happy. At the same time . . . so vicious. I would hate for him to ‘play’ with a puppy or a cat. They wouldn’t last very long . . .”

9.13

The sun set over League City, ambient light growing ever dimmer.

The metropolis came alive in the night, with lamps shining and signage glowing outside restaurants and clubs.

Merchants who spent all day hawking their wares stepped out onto Commerce Boulevard to frequent the social spots they could afford. Farmers and their families, visiting from cities far enough away that necessitated staying overnight, ventured from their hotels and explored the dining options available in this commercial district.

Along a sidewalk, Haley Stonecipher walked from her parked car toward the entrance of Arthurus, which now showed all the signs of renewed business.

The riots from months ago were apparently forgotten, along with the blood shed here. A line once again stretched out front, and the establishment carried with it the air of exclusivity.

It helped, she thought, that her boyfriend Ashley Thallus sang its praises in his columns. The Zeitung was available in holo form here on Phaethon, thanks to the Republic's orbiting quantum matrix link. Each issue contained Ash's reports from League City, and it seemed everyone read them or watched his recordings.

She smiled, proud of his success. Apparently his employers back on Diego liked what they were seeing, too. Tonight, she would help him celebrate a raise he had recently learned about on a recent call back home. Javon Del Rio himself had jumped in on the conversation to offer congratulations.

So long as they were undisturbed, she thought, it should be a good night out on the town.

Softly, under her breath she said, “Tell me there’s no bad guys anywhere around here, Lisa.”

“Indeed, Haley. There is nothing amiss. If something happens, I will inform you.”

Satisfied, she walked past the line of people and approached the *maitre d'* behind the podium just inside the door.

He recognized her and beckoned her inside, drawing snorts of indignation from those at the front of the line.

Inside, he led her to the rear, past the sarcophagus of King Arthur, and to the usual table that Ash always reserved for them.

Arthurus had become his favorite restaurant, and they ate there so often that she doubted anyone else was allowed to sit at that particular spot. They had eaten here during the lean times, helping to support the restaurant as it struggled after the riots. Now, the staff seemed determined to honor their loyalty. They treated the couple like royalty.

Ash saw her approaching and stood up as the *maitre d'* pulled out the chair opposite him for Haley. She thanked him and sat down, then let him unfold the napkin on the plate and place it in her lap.

After he left, she smiled warmly at Ash.

“This place is starting to get crowded. What did that old baseball player say? Something about a place getting so popular, nobody goes there anymore.”

“Ha. Well, I’m glad management was able to hold things together long enough for a rebound. The restaurant business is tough. High costs, low

margins. Fortunately for them, there's not an abundance of choices for people to eat out around here. If we were in Octavia or Delta Diego, they wouldn't have made it."

A waiter appeared and took Haley's drink order.

When he walked off, she returned her attention to Ash.

"You look pensive."

"Do I?"

He took a sip of water and his face grew even more serious.

"Well, to be honest I've been doing a lot of thinking. It's one of the things I wanted to talk to you about tonight."

"Uh oh. That could be good or bad."

Her chuckle died off when he did not smile back.

"Do you remember that time several weeks ago, when we were in the Southside Projects together, in that basement bar and gambling den?"

"Yeah. That was the night all hell broke loose. The bank was robbed, or at least attacked. The Courthouse was sacked. Apparently a League battle tank came in and shot up all the outlaws? What a night."

He nodded, solemnly.

"It *was* quite a night. I'll be honest with you, I was really surprised to see you down in that underground casino. You were wearing a bikini top and kitten heels, as I recall."

"You noticed what I was wearing in all that? Impressive."

"I'm a reporter. I pride myself on details. But we haven't talked much about it since then. And I've yet to figure out what you were doing down there. I know you're not leading a double life as a prostitute. At least, I'm pretty sure you're not. And if you were, it wouldn't be in the Projects. But yeah, let's talk about it. What *were* you doing down there?"

Inwardly, Haley sighed. She knew this moment would be coming. Fortunately, she had weeks to prepare for it.

“I knew you would be in the Projects looking for a story. I heard about Tay-hoe’s, and I knew what to expect. They say it’s just about impossible to get past the guard if you look like you don’t belong. So, I made myself look like I belong . . . and I went to go find you.”

He locked eyes with her, as if searching for the truth.

What she told him was a shade of truth, but without any of the nuance.

He said, “I have so many questions . . .”

And she, they both knew, would refuse to answer most of them.

Because doing so would either require her to lie or present a truth she remained unwilling to share with him at the moment.

“. . . But the thing I keep going back to is that moment we were in the alley together, afterwards.”

She nodded, keeping a poker face.

He took a sip of water and continued.

“Do you remember? You said, ‘I’m going to get help,’ and you ran away, leaving me in the dark with that mob. Then, not a minute later . . . Night Shadow appears, kicking butt and taking names as usual.”

“Yes. Thank God.”

“I’ve been replaying that moment over and over again ever since. Then I went back and thought about all the times Night Shadow has appeared when we’ve been together, like that first night here at Arthurus. And I realized something. Every time she shows up . . . you are nowhere to be found.”

Haley kept her features still.

But the blood drained from her face.

“So, I have to ask you, Haley . . . are you Night Shadow?”

9.14

Darkness fell across the hilly plains along the hinterland highway.

Wink and Jinxie found themselves stuck with the two rangers, at least for now. They hunted outlaws in the hill country, seeing firsthand the difficulties the rangers faced in their daily tasks.

“I wish we could have killed them all, or at least captured the others,” Jinxie muttered, as the four gazed down on a vacant camp site.

The four tents and two ramshackle huts stood vacant. They looked down on the scene from the highest point surrounding the camp.

Here, evidently, a scout could keep an eye out for intruders. They found litter everywhere, showing signs of human activity. The camp below looked unruly, too, with signs of horse droppings and more litter around the tents.

“Well, that happens,” Thaddeus said, pulling away a miniature set of night vision binoculars. “But, I have to say, I’m very glad we found their hideout. Willie and I have been searching for it for weeks. Isn’t that right, Willie?”

“We shore ’nuff have. Now, if we get lucky, them remainin’ outlaws will show back up here. I can take second watch, Thad.”

“I think our luck is holding up, Willie. Here in this spot, we can see anybody approaching, just as their lookout would have been able to when

the camp was occupied. And unless I'm seeing things, here comes four riders from the direction of the highway."

"Tarnation! You're right!"

But the horsemen saw them, too.

In the distance, they heard Donahue's voice ring out.

"They done found us, boys! Split up!"

The men approaching the camp peeled away, kicking their mounts into a canter and abandoning plans to retreat to their hideout.

"Mount up!" Thaddeus said. "Everyone choose a target. Try not to lose them in the dark!"

He hurried to his horse and untied the reins from a nearby tree, then clicked his tongue and raced off downhill, jumping in the stirrup just as the horse started moving.

The other three followed suit, mounting up. They were not as graceful or speedy as Thaddeus, though.

Gage dug his heels into his horse's sides.

"Hah!"

It burst into a gallop, following Thaddeus and his lead.

Jinxie climbed up on her horse and looked over at Wink, last to mount up.

"So, we're outlaw hunters now?"

"We have the advantage of Lisa's satellites. We should be able to find them, even in the dark."

"That's what I'm afraid of."

The couple split up at the base of the hill. She sent her horse in the direction of Gage's while Wink followed Thaddeus.

Darkness descended quickly, all the ambient light behind the haze leaching away.

No moons showed tonight, and the haze blocked the stars, so the landscape looked especially black. Jinxie soon let her horse slow down so it could find its own way.

“What are we looking at, Lisa?”

In response, the AI lit up her mind with an overhead view. She saw two outlaws still moving relatively fast. One headed to the northeast, the other northwest.

Gage rode less than a hundred meters ahead of her, following in both of their general directions. But it seemed clear he would soon lose track of them in the darkness. Already he pulled the reins, pausing his horse to get his bearings.

“Alright,” Jinxie said softly. “Let’s take the one to the left. Give me an arrow to follow him, and keep this view active, please.”

“Will do, Jinxie.”

With far more confidence than the ranger, she guided her horse through the night, passing him by.

Gage, she saw via the satellite view, had stopped in the darkness, unwilling to go further without being able to see. But he could evidently hear her passing by in the dark.

In the opposite direction, Ranger Conrad continued after his prey, making use of his night vision binoculars to help guide his horse.

Meanwhile Wink likewise tapped into Lisa’s perspective and closed in on his man.

Jinxie reached behind her back and patted the muzzle of her Piggy, reassuring herself it remained in place.

She glanced once again at the image of the fleeing outlaw on her satellite view.

“You’ve got a date with a grenade, mister.”

9.15

Haley excused herself and went to the ladies' room, leaving Ash behind at the table.

She stared at her face in the mirror for a moment, ashamed of the lies she had just told her lover.

She sniffled.

“Lisa, take me back to the warehouse please.”

She popped away.

A few seconds later, the next woman walked into the room, oblivious to Haley's disappearance.

Back at Warehouse 14, Haley appeared with a *pop!* of displaced air.

She looked over in the corner.

Mona looked up and locked eyes with her.

They held a gaze for several seconds.

Mona decided to query for more information.

“May I ask what you are doing back so early? You are supposed to be with Ash tonight. Why did you teleport in and not drive your car?”

Haley sighed and walked forward, away from her cot. She ran a hand through her hair.

“Ash is being very difficult tonight. It’s frustrating because he has been working on figuring out my secrets. At least he hasn’t told anybody. At least, I don’t think he’s told anybody. Lisa?”

“Yes, Haley?”

“Has Ash mentioned to anyone his suspicions of my identity as Night Shadow?”

“No, he has not. Nor has he written it down anywhere. Nor has he started a story about Night Shadow’s origins. I have monitored all his correspondence and have seen nothing of the sort.”

“Has he done anything? Anything at all about it?”

“He has reviewed all the recordings of Night Shadow multiple times in recent weeks. In retrospect, it is easy to guess what he was thinking. But tonight is the first time he verbalized his suspicions to anyone.”

“Well, that’s good. We’ve got that going for us.”

Haley sighed and sat down in an Adirondack chair.

She slumped forward, in an uncomfortable position, and rested her head in her palms.

“Do you think he believed me when I said I was not Night Shadow, Lisa?”

“No.”

Haley groaned.

She sat there in silence for a moment. Neither the AI nor the robot said anything.

“If only I could convince him. I’m tired of this . . .”

She glanced up and locked eyes with Mona again. Haley’s eyebrows slowly furrowed.

“Mona? How tall are you?”

“All models in my production cohort are 175 centimeters tall.”

“Hmm. I’m 177. I bet that doesn’t make a difference though . . .”

Haley stood up and headed for the wardrobe in the corner near the portable bathroom.

“Put these on.”

She pulled out the Night Shadow costume, a black leotard and leggings, with sand dragon hide undergarments.

Mona dutifully stripped and donned the attire.

“Now put on the mask.”

Haley stood back and looked over the bot with a critical eye.

“I think that’ll do. I’ve got some inserts for the wall crawler boots you can wear. That’ll make you about my height, hopefully close enough. With your increased strength, you won’t need the power bracers. You can have Tom’s old brass knuckles, though. And the mini tractor beam.”

“What are you proposing?”

“I’m proposing that you become Night Shadow. We need to set it up so that no one will ever figure out this replacement. When I told Ash tonight that I am not her, I . . . was not lying. Not if I truly am no longer Night Shadow. And I am no longer her. You are.”

“I am not programmed to inflict violence on people.”

“Oh, you’re not going to. Not unless they deserve it. You’re not inflicting anything, Mona. You’re protecting people by beating up bad guys who are trying to hurt other people.”

Haley held Mona’s gaze for a moment.

“Tell her, Lisa.”

“Haley is correct. You will not be fundamentally harming anyone unless they are trying to harm someone else. You are following orders from an owner by doing this. I will guide you in all the necessary steps.”

“That’s right. There, see? Now, what else would give her away as not me to someone who’s watched those recordings multiple times, Lisa?”

“She should not talk while in action. If her voiceprint is ever recorded, it will register as a standard Model 10-20 female Verberger automaton.”

“Okay, that makes sense. Stay quiet when you’re playing the Night Shadow role, Mona. Whatever you do, under no circumstances are you to talk to Ash, especially. Is that understood? He’ll want to do an interview with you, and you are not to do that. Don’t say a word to him. Every time he sees me, or rather Night Shadow, he’s got his implant on record. So, no talking. Ever.”

“I understand.”

“Alright. One more thing. Lisa?”

“Yes, Haley?”

“Can you make her move just like me? I want her to look and act exactly like I did these last few months.”

The AI spent a few milliseconds processing the request.

“Yes. I have downloaded all your corporal dynamics to VB Serial Number 131M8399. She is now able to replicate all of your physical feats.”

“Good. Do the same thing with her that you did with me, please. Let her ‘fly’ by teleporting her. I guess she doesn’t need your help with speed on the ground like you have me by using the more subtle teleportations. But keep an eye on her. Maybe you can still port out of trouble if she needs it.”

“Will do, Haley.”

“Alright! Are you ready to be a superhero, Mona?”

The bot frowned slightly.

“I do not believe I have any choice in this matter.”

“That’s right, you don’t! You are Night Shadow. Okay, Lisa. Port us to a rooftop near Arthurus. I need to give a few final words of instruction to Mona. Then you can put me back in the bathroom if no one else is in there.”

9.16

Two pops came in quick succession on the rooftop of the building across the street from Arthurus.

Haley braced herself, ready for action, but of course no one else appeared besides Mona. A dark night sky swallowed up light from all the street lamps below.

Carefully, she sidled to the roof's ledge and looked down at the restaurant below. Mona, dressed all in black, walked up beside her.

"Okay. Now, all we need is a disturbance or something. Lisa?"

"Yes, Haley?"

"Are there any muggings or robberies going on in the city right now?"

"No. Currently, there is very little violence. No illegal acts are taking place that I can see. No muggings or robberies or anything of the sort."

"Hm. Well, that's no good. I mean, it's good but . . . Mona needs a bad guy to beat up for her big debut."

"I do not wish to commit violence against anyone."

Haley held the flat of her palm up against Mona's masked face.

“Lisa, is there anybody, any bad guy in the world that you could port here? Preferably put him down in the alley and facing the street so he runs in that direction.”

-+-

The outlaw stopped, hopelessly lost.

He dismounted and tied the reins to his horse onto a bush he could barely see.

He heard the sound of horseshoes scuffing the ground, and the soft whicker of a mount drawing close. Pulling out his gun, he crouched behind the bush.

“That you Zvirko?”

Zvirko sighed at the sound of his boss’s hushed whispered.

“Yes sir, Mr. Donahue.”

“I thought that’s who it was I was runnin’ off with. We got someone hot on our tails.”

Zvirko nodded in the darkness.

The statement, he felt, was completely useless to make.

So was his nod in this inky blackness.

Donahue continued, unaware of the other man’s exasperation.

“Anyhoo, I think I brung my pursuers with me. They is both about 40 meters behind us, I reckon.”

“You brought your . . . Yes, sir.”

The young Zvirko bit off the sharp remark on the edge of his lips.

“Don’t worry,” Donahue whispered. “Unless they gots night vision, they ain’t gonna be seein’ nothin’. Just like us!”

Zvirko could not see his boss’s face, but he heard the grin behind it.

“Beggin’ your pardon, sir, but . . . how can anybody be happy in this mess we’re in?”

“Well, you see . . .”

Whatever Donahue had been about to say was cut off short by a green blaster bolt whizzing by his face.

The air crackled with energy, flooding the air with the sharp crisp scent of ozone.

Both men hit the ground, drawing their guns at the same time.

Donahue fired back blind, sending red bolts in the general direction of the shot.

Zvirko squinted. At last he could finally see something in the glow of the bolts.

“I got ’em.”

He flicked over to full auto and sprayed in the direction of two people on horseback several meters away.

-+-

Jinxie tossed out a barrier cylinder on the ground in front of the horses. A ten-meter-long force field sprang up, three meters high, just before a barrage of red bolts splatted against it.

She glanced over at Gage to see if the old ranger remained safe. Jinxie had noted his progress following the other outlaw thanks to Lisa’s overhead view, and she moved to link back up with him so they wouldn’t be shooting each other in the dark.

Or mainly so he wouldn’t shoot me, she thought.

Apparently the two outlaws found each other in the dark, too.

“That shore is a handy thing, little missy!”

Jinxie snorted at the old man’s sexist remark.

Under the circumstances, she thought, I'll let it pass.

Instead, she quietly pulled the Firedog Piggy off her back and opened the breech, placing another guided grenade in the barrel.

“Can you see well enough to aim that thing?”

“That’s just it, Ranger. With the Piggy, I don’t need to aim.”

She pointed it up so the barrel had a decent trajectory, and squeezed the trigger.

A tiny egg-shaped grenade soared through the night air, invisible in the dark. Tail fins popped out and its nose angled down, searching for a target.

Two men with guns lay prone on the ground, one of them shooting . . .

The grenade adjusted course, angling down for a shorter descent.

9.17

Haley popped back into the ladies' room in Arthurus, grateful that no one else occupied it at the moment.

She checked her hair in the mirror, then walked out and headed for the table.

Ash stood as she approached and waited for her to be seated before sitting down again. She pulled up closer to the table and put the napkin back in her lap.

"Sorry, I just . . . needed to get away for a minute. You kinda hurt my feelings, Ash."

"I didn't mean to. I've just been thinking about this a lot lately, and, well, I think it's a logical conclusion."

"Look, I do know Night Shadow. That part is true. I know her backers. Oh, yes. She doesn't fight crime alone, I assure you. And I do have the ability to call on her for help if I need to. And I'm sorry, but there has to be some secrets between us. But I can assure you, I am not Night Shadow."

At least, she thought, not anymore.

They locked eyes. He searched her face, looking for signs of truth.

Somebody screamed out on the street.

A red bolt fired off.

In the distance, they heard a man screaming.

“What flimflammy is *this*?”

They locked eyes again, this time with expressions of alarm.

Ash pushed his chair back.

“Come on.”

They jogged for the front of the restaurant. People in the repaired fishbowl windows facing the street scrambled away from their tables.

“It’s a cowboy outlaw!” someone yelled “They’re back!”

Ash raced for the front door, Haley right behind him.

The line outside waiting to get in had scattered. The *maitre d’* was nowhere to be seen.

Ash burst through the door, his implant set to record as a dazed and confused Dusty Donahue stumbled out of the nearby alley across the street, holding a gun.

A woman screamed at the sight of an armed and dirty cowpoke. People ran away as he stopped, swaying, desperately trying to get his bearings and reorient himself to the sudden change in surroundings.

On the rooftop above and behind him, a dark figure appeared, barely visible in the lamplight.

Haley, standing behind Ash, pointed up. She knew where to look.

Others nearby glanced up.

Someone said, “Look! It’s Night Shadow!”

Mona held her arms out to either side and jumped lightly off the ledge. She sailed down, a last second micro teleportation halting her fall just behind Donahue.

He turned, still too stunned to have good reflexes. But he stretched out his gun hand to squeeze off a shot at her.

Mona activated the personal tractor beam and the weapon ripped out of his fingers. She caught it in one hand and raced forward, slugging him in the jaw with a sickening crunch of bones and brass.

Donahue dropped like a sack of potatoes, alive but unconscious with a crushed jawbone.

Everyone out on the street, pedestrians, customers, cab drivers, all broke into applause.

A whistle blew as a deputy sheriff came running, alerted to the shots.

For a moment, Mona locked eyes with Haley.

Haley smiled and waved.

“Hi Night Shadow!”

Ash ripped his eyes away from the woman in black and stared at Haley.

She turned to him, still smiling.

The whistling deputy drew nearer.

Mona turned and activated the wall crawling boots. She ran for the face of the building and hit it full speed, feet pumping. She quickly turned horizontal and ran up the wall.

“Wait!”

Ash raced after her. But already she had reached the second floor and she kept going.

The deputy ran for the fallen man, then noticed his cowboy hat and the gun nearby.

“Everybody back!”

He ran over and kicked the gun away from Donahue’s hands.

By this time, Mona reached the top floor and climbed back over the ledge. Ash stood on the sidewalk below, staring up in the darkness in frustration.

Tension eased on the street, and everyone seemed to move freely again. A line formed at the restaurant once more, with a few people peeking inside to see if they could get a table now.

Ash searched the crowd at the front of the restaurant. He saw Haley standing there, waiting.

He looked both ways for vehicles before walking by the fallen outlaw with the deputy standing over him, grabbing images for his news program. Then he shut off the recording and joined up with Haley again.

She smiled as he approached.

“I always worry about your safety,” she said. “You shouldn’t go running off like that. That’s why I came looking for you that night, you big lummo.”

He chuckled.

“I thought you were going to say, ‘See, I told you so. I’m not Night Shadow.’”

“Oh, I thought that part was obvious.”

She reached out and he took her hand.

Together, they walked back inside Arthurus.

-+-

Hundreds of kilometers away, Gage Williford and Jinxie Malone approached a blast site with two dead horses and one dead outlaw surrounding a small crater.

“Huh. Tarnation. Where’d the other fella go?”

“We don’t know that there *was* another fellow, Ranger,” Jinxie said.

Mentally, she reviewed the footage showing two men and two horses. For some reason, the second gunman was now missing. But the current view

Lisa displayed showed no sign of him, so she knew he had not escaped. She surmised that Lisa must have teleported the gunman away just before or immediately after the explosion.

Eventually, she would figure out what happened, or Lisa would tell her. For right now, she needed to divert the ranger's attention from the missing man, so that he did not suspect anything.

“Hey, do you guys loot bodies? Is that considered unethical?”

Gage squinted at her in the darkness.

“Aw naw, ma'am. How do you think us lawmen supplement our pay? Asset forfeiture has a long and storied history goin' back to Roman times, at least. If they was usin' it for a crime, and especially if they're dead, we go on and take it.”

9.18

In a virtual room in cyberspace, a woman appeared, filling an empty black leather chair at a large mahogany table polished to a reflective sheen.

Rather, an electronic representation of a woman appeared. She appeared in this virtual room within a very secure location in the quantum matrix.

Isabella Espinoza nervously touched her hair.

She knew it looked perfect. These cyberspace avatars showed people at their very best by default. Still, it would not do to have anything out of place. And she felt nervous. Petra Roe representatives were not usually invited to discussions such as these, and Isabella wanted everything to go well for her *and* the planet she represented.

She glanced around the empty conference room. Crystal clear windows graced rich wooden walls with gold-leafed sills. Outside, beautiful snow-capped mountains sparkled in the distance.

All virtual, of course. One could no doubt walk outside and wander quite a while in this version of reality. But the landscape would be empty, Isabella thought. Beautiful, but void of life . . .

Another person flickered into place, interrupting her thoughts.

A man stared at her, golden-red hair poofing out from his skull. A dark red Van Dyke beard stretched down from his chin into a perfect point hovering over his breastbone.

“Melton. How are you?”

“I’m so glad you could join us, Isabella.”

She raised her eyebrows and smiled politely, glad to see a friendly face.

“You know that I could not pass up your invitation. Not for a neighbor. Not for this.”

“I know that our planets have a long history of animosity. You sided with the League during the war while Lute sided with the Republic.”

“We did not take sides . . .”

Melton waved her protest aside.

“We all know you did. It’s okay. This is a shared space between the three systems, as you well know. It’s neutral ground. I’m new to these meetings myself, since the Alliance is only twenty-something years old. We weren’t even invited until a few years ago. The other two have been meeting off and on like this for decades. It is certified recording-free and there is no eavesdropping. I won’t bore you with the details, but I can assure you no one else is here. No AIs from any system are here, either. We checked it out thoroughly the first time we were invited to attend.”

Isabella nodded. She knew about these diplomatic waypoints in cyberspace, where ambassadors and others could speak privately about matters of state between the systems. The practice resumed after the Gold War.

Petra Roe had never been invited to one before . . .

“So, are you all really going to drop the embargo of the newest frontier planet?”

“Maybe . . .”

Melton smiled at her.

He pulled on the ends of his mustache, and the corners curled up perfectly, giving his virtual appearance a dandy look.

Isabella furrowed her brows, wondering if she could do a similar trick with her own hair.

Experimenting, she took the end of a shoulder-length lock and twisted it. The hair curled up to her scalp.

Her eyebrows rose in delight. Twisting it again, it returned to its prior state.

“I must say, I never played much in the virtual worlds when I was young.”

“Oh, you missed out on so much fun, Isabella. I don’t know how many pretend battles I was in against League forces, killing and being killed. Really quite fun. To this day, virtual war games are played at all hours of the day and night.”

She wrinkled her nose at the thought of cyber-violence, a reminder of why she did not spend much time in the most popular online realms.

Another woman suddenly appeared in the chair opposite her.

Slim and relatively short, the attractive female had the sharp, angular face of a 30-year old, but the eyes of someone much older.

A keen intellect hides behind that pretty face, Isabella thought. And without an ounce of fat, either . . .

Melton said, “Annaliese. Welcome.”

“Thank you, Secretary Francis.”

“Come, come. We’re all informal here. Have you met Isabella Espinoza, Petra Roe’s Minister of Trade?”

“I would think such a position is an odd choice for representation to send to this conference. But then, you’re all related over there, aren’t you?”

Isabella raised an eyebrow at her but said nothing in reply. Inwardly, she felt surprise at the brusque nature of the comment.

The two women stared at one another for a long moment.

Melton coughed into his fist and broke the awkward silence.

“Annaliese, I don’t think you are fully aware of Petra Roe’s unique political structure.”

“I’m aware. She is the sister of their prime minister. It’s very familial over there, is it not?”

This led to another awkward silence.

The two women continued staring at one another.

Melton’s eyes bounced between them both.

Finally, he said, “Annaliese Pavlikov is the Minister of Foreign Affairs for the League, Isabella.”

“I’m quite aware of who Minister Pavlikov is. And I would note that . . . at least my family is entirely comprised of humans.”

Annaliese’s face turned dark, the online avatar perfectly mimicking her reactions in real life.

“That was a Republican plot during the war. It was long ago resolved.”

As she spoke, a fourth person materialized at the head of the table, an older man. He had gray streaks in his hair and looked to be in his 50s. He wore a dark blue suit and a white shirt with no tie. The shirt was unbuttoned in a louche, casual style.

“Not according to my sources,” Isabella said, smiling slightly at her new opponent’s suppressed discomfort. “From what we understand, Julius Thrall knew *exactly* what he was doing when he brought in his ‘daughter’ to take over as a tetrarch.”

“What’d I miss?” the man at the head of the table said, interrupting. “A Republican plot? Are you talking about Jade Thrall again, Annaliese?”

The young woman coolly shifted her glare from Isabella to the newcomer, giving him a full blast of blue-eyed hatred.

He smiled back, with a tan face and bright white teeth.

“Mr. Kellogg. And what position, exactly, do you serve for the Republic? Or is Harrington House even aware of your presence here? I understand the Department of State acts quite independently of your prime minister at times.”

Melton’s mustache uncoiled for a moment, sticking straight out before curling back up. Isabella noticed his eyes widened at the insult, too.

Kellogg chuckled, seemingly unfazed by the barb.

“I serve on the Planetary Republic’s Foreign Relations Committee, Annaliese. You know that. Everything I say has the full weight of our government behind it, as I am sure is the same for all of you.”

Without giving her a chance at another jibe, he shifted his attention to the newcomer in their midst.

“You must be Minister Espinoza. You know, if Petra Roe sends you to more meetings like this, you’re going to have to ask for a better title. Although, this does involve trade, so you’re not out of place. Not at all. Welcome.”

He smiled at her.

His tone seemed warm and friendly, so she decided to smile back.

He leaned back in his chair and continued.

“For the record, present with us today we have myself, Roth Kellogg, here on behalf of the Planetary Republic’s Foreign Relations Committee. My colleague serving Star League in a similar role, Annaliese Pavlikov, sits to my left.”

She said with a hint of indignation, “I am the *minister* of foreign relations.”

“Representing the Planetary Alliance, Mr. Melton Francis, is sitting to my right. And with us as a special envoy to discuss matters pertaining to the topic at hand, Isabella Espinoza, Minister of Trade for the independent planet Petra Roe, is also seated on my right.”

Melton nodded. He stroked his pointy beard, making the tip curl up like the ends of his mustache.

It gave him a decidedly elfish look, Isabella thought.

She sneaked a glance at Annaliese.

The beautiful young woman remained expressionless, but her pale blue eyes glinted like steel when she returned Isabella's stare.

Kellogg cleared his throat and continued.

"Today we are gathered together to discuss lifting our collective embargo on the frontier planet Phaethon."

He smiled at the other three.

The women glared at each other.

Melton watched them both, his head swiveling on a stick.

No one paid Roth any attention.

He sighed and smiled.

"Let's get started, shall we?"

9.19

“Star League is fully prepared to assist our newest member planet in its transitional alignment with our system of government.”

The others at the table stared at Annaliese.

Even Isabella, who came from a planet nominally friendly to the League, could hardly believe the audacity of the woman’s statement.

“First things first,” Roth said, in a calm voice. “We’re here to discuss ending the embargo, which has to happen before discussion of an alignment election can occur.”

“An election won’t be necessary. The people have already spoken. Their capital is named League City, after all.”

Melton cleared his throat politely.

“It was my understanding that the municipality in question was named after a famous city in Texas.”

“I’ve never heard of it. Therefore, it can’t be that famous. I reassert, Phaethon belongs in the League. Recent circumstances show we have elements on the ground, ready to take control as soon as alignment is confirmed.”

“You are talking about the League battle tank sighted there several weeks ago,” Roth said, capitulating to the change in topic.

“Correct.”

Melton smiled, the curly corners of his mustache bobbing up in response.

“Yes, let’s discuss that. How did a highly restricted weapon of war, in violation of several treaties, wind up on an isolated frontier planet, Annaliese? Let’s talk about *that*, shall we?”

He leaned back in his chair, clearly delighted to turn the tables on her.

Annaliese’s pale blue eyes flared at Melton.

They sparkle like diamonds when she’s angry, Isabella thought.

“Ask *her*,” Annaliese said, aiming an accusatory finger across the table at Isabella.

“Me?”

Isabella pressed a hand to her chest and leaned back, clearly shocked to see the other woman pointing at her.

“What did I have to do with your battle tank?”

“Because it was your *nephew* who smuggled it there! Our sources revealed the Pulsar made an unauthorized visit to Sporades’s surface not long ago. It frequented an area known to harbor stockpiles of surplus weaponry left over from the war.”

She turned her icy glare to Roth.

“In fact, I would not doubt it if the Republic facilitated this exchange. We want our tanks back, Mr. Kellogg. Not only those taken to Phaethon, but all of them remaining on Sporades!”

“This is an interesting theory,” Roth said, rubbing his chin. “I was unaware that so much weaponry had been squirreled away on Sporades. It’s a sea world. There’s not a lot of landmass to hide things over there. How many battle tanks do your people suspect remain on Sporades? And where do you think they’re hidden? Help us out here.”

Annaliese glared at him, her red lips compressed in a tight line on an otherwise pale face.

Already, Isabella thought, the woman had probably said too much. Far more than she intended.

Petra Roe's nascent spy network did not branch out very far abroad, but even Isabella knew that of all the planets joining the Republic after the war, the population of Sporades harbored the highest level of discontent at the moment.

If there was going to be an armed uprising fomented by dormant League cells somewhere among the "war properties," as the Clarion brass liked to call them, Sporades would be a likely location.

Perhaps this is what we've been missing, Isabella thought. We've never been invited to these off-the-record discussions before. Everybody here just learned some very valuable information through Annaliese's offhand remark.

"Perhaps you should ask Trade Minister Espinoza more about this, Ambassador Kellogg. After all, her nephew is the one who smuggled out the tanks. And I demand something be done about it!"

Roth said, "I believe Wink McKelway has already paid a penalty for violating landing protocols in Republican space. So, something *has* been done. Obviously, we were not aware of the allegations his cargo contained weapons of war."

All eyes at the table turned to Isabella again.

The frown on her face spoke volumes.

She had been unaware of that little fact, as well.

Then something clicked in her mind.

"You keep saying *tanks*, Minister Pavlikov. How many tanks did my nephew allegedly take from Sporades and deliver to Phaethon?"

"Ask him yourself."

The reply was too curt, Isabella thought. She doesn't know.

That was important information in and of itself, too.

Annaliese broke the silence around the table this time.

“What I want to know is what he keeps ferrying from Lute to Phaethon and back. Our sources inform us the Ultima Mule Company hired him as an errand boy. That's pretty much all his ship does these days, going back and forth between the company's space station properties in the Lute system, all while using a Machro-drive to deliver the goods in hours.”

Isabella digested this information.

She knew Wink had a Machro-drive, of course. It assisted in smuggling. She did not know he had entered into a contract with UMC . . .

“And I will add,” Annaliese said, shifting her glare back to Roth, “that the ‘golden child’ of all Petra Roe, Wink McKelway . . . is in clear violation of this so-called embargo.”

All eyes at the table turned back to Isabella.

She smiled again, at Roth this time.

She shrugged.

“My planet is independent as you all know. My nephew's ship is unflagged. We do not recognize your embargo, and offer no penalty for breaking it.”

“Lute recognizes the embargo, surely,” Roth said, glancing at Melton.

Melton's curls on his mustache and beard stretched out again before spiraling back into place once more.

“I believe we do. I can check, but I'm almost certain LuteNet has not helped any Alliance ship travel to Phaethon since the embargo began. If the Ultima Mule Company . . . I believe they're involved in some sort of scientific experiments over there. If the Ultima Mule Company is involved with hiring an independent, unaligned contractor, well . . . I'm unsure if that violates the embargo or not, as far as we're concerned. We're certainly not doing it. Port Ryan knows nothing about this. And like Isabella said, Petra

Roe ships are unaligned. The coordinates to get to Phaethon are no secret, anyone can download them. If a company sends materials for their scientific experiments to an embargoed planet from a private station orbiting beyond Lute, I'd say our government has little or nothing to do with it."

"Scientific experiments?" Roth chuckled. "If UMC is involved, they've found a way to make money. Christopher Raleigh is no fool. He's not going to waste his resources on anything without turning a profit."

"If I understand correctly," Melton said, the corners of his mustache dancing up again, "his people are hosting a scientist from Pearl Polytechnic who is conducting exo-biological surveys of some sort. Apparently, she smuggled herself in a couple months ago. That ship, while independent, has Republican origins. The Erstwhile, I believe it was called."

Roth's face dropped, all mirth gone.

He said, "I don't pretend to keep track of everything our universities are doing. They have a long history of secretive research, regardless of laws, especially when it comes to exo-biological studies. They go nuts over new species. Did you know a team of researchers hid out for decades studying dinosaurs on Diego? In complete violation of all the rules, too."

Even Annaliese, Isabella noted, eased the frown on her face, showing some sympathy for dealing with recalcitrant professors.

Roth turned back to Isabella.

"It's because the locals on Phaethon tried to grab that ship that we have an embargo in the first place. Are you satisfied? All three systems presented a united front, expressing our desire to let them know that sort of behavior is not tolerated. I think only a couple smugglers have made it through to them, and the planet is probably suffering some consequences at this point. Are you satisfied that we have made our point? It was your ship that was threatened after all."

"Yes. Petra Roe has no qualms with the three systems lifting their embargo. Thank you for asking."

“I find it ironic the same ship is being used almost daily by the Ultima Mule Company. Do you think that will continue? It may not be the wisest course of action if we get an alignment that is hostile to the Republic and the Alliance.”

Everyone looked at Annaliese.

She lifted her chin and glared back at each person in defiance.

Roth turned back to Isabella and smiled.

He said, “Any hope you can talk with your sister about reining in her son? I think you put out a request to detain the Pulsar shortly after this incident, then immediately withdrew it.”

Isabella firmly shook her head.

“I was overruled. Prime Minister McKelway has publicly stated that Wink is his own man. She does not control him. And if her son wishes to turn a profit by smuggling gray-market material for the Ultima Mule Company . . . far be it for us to stop him.”

9.20

A new day dawned at the Zeitung's League City office, and Ashley Thallus filed report after report.

While his girlfriend worked the bazaar, selling goods from the star farm, he worked the wires, pulling down tidbits from the ether in all three major systems for distribution in the local editions. He also pumped out local stories going to the main office in Octavia, on Diego.

For Ash, this was more fun than work. He felt like he was in the center of the news universe, distilling and distributing information consumed by tens of thousands on this planet. At the same time, his stories were distributed to hundreds of millions throughout the galaxy.

All his life, he had aspired to be an editor. He did not expect to make it so soon.

He also did not expect to be the editor of a one-man office on a backwater frontier planet.

But . . . both his bosses, his official one and his unofficial one, seemed to think that this planet was special.

Indeed, it was special enough for them to invest considerable resources in it. That was a mystery he had not yet fully unraveled, but he felt confident that time would unveil everything.

How much he could publish about these secrets remained to be seen. But he was dying of curiosity.

A flashing red light lit up in his implant with the words “PRIORITY CALL” beneath it.

Mentally, he pushed the answer button.

Ash’s personal holo sprang into life in front of his face, his boss’s face filling the space.

“Mr. Del Rio? What’s going on, sir?”

Javon Del Rio said, “The embargo’s been lifted, Ash. We’re putting it out on the wire right now. I wanted you to know for your local edition. You can expect the Navy to make an appearance . . .”

He looked off to his right at something Ash could not see.

“Ah. Never mind, they’re already there. I see the Elsa Cole just materialized in your orbit. That was fast, even for a Machro-drive. Hmm. They must have put the ship in motion hours ago. Somebody near the top knew. No matter. I’ll have our people covering Plairmont do some digging. Nobody can keep a secret for very long over there. Especially juicy ones.”

“The Elsa Cole is back? And I take it this is not a humanitarian mission this time?”

“She’ll be bringing in goods of all sort, I imagine. We’ll be aiming to influence the election.”

“Oh.”

Those old questions surfaced in Ash’s mind again.

“May I ask, sir, why does the Republic care? I’ve been here for months and I don’t see anything particularly special about this planet . . .”

Javon gave his station chief a level look across the quantum matrix, as if weighing how much to reveal to the young man.

“The big reason, Ashley, if you want to know the truth . . . Harrington House does not want the League to get it.”

“That’s it?”

“Oh, there are other reasons. But that’s the big one. Or a big one, at least. Our chancellor and the top Navy brass like having a small League of Planets to contend with. The current thinking is, they can cause less trouble if they have less territory. So, all efforts at repatriation by their former holdings are quietly fought. Those battles are quiet but ferocious, I should say. There’s a lot of things behind the scene that will never get out, not by us or anyone else. Mostly stuff that can’t be verified. Stuff you really don’t want to know about.”

Ash raised an eyebrow.

This had to be the most information Mr. Del Rio had ever shared with him.

“I see. And here I thought this place was special somehow. It’s just another feather in the cap for both systems.”

Javon barked a laugh.

“Oh, it is special. I said that was the *primary* reason Diego and Clarion don’t want to lose Phaethon. But there are others as well.”

“Such as?”

“For one thing, you’ve got Night Shadow. I don’t think you fully realize just how big her story has become. I saw you were comparing her recent movements with past videos last night. Do you think there’s more than one of them?”

“No, sir. At least, PLAIR does not notice any differences. All the women in the recordings look and move the same way. It’s almost certainly one person.”

Javon looked at something to his right again.

“Get the word out, Ashley. Your spaceport is about to have visitors.”

Ash’s holo flicked off, and Javon’s face disappeared.

Ash made a rapid addition to the holo paper before sending it out for distribution. Then he ran out the door, down the steps and out to the street.

He hailed a cab, heedless of the expense and eager for speed.

The black vehicle pulled over and he jumped in the back.

“Get me to the spaceport, fast as you can.”

“Yes, sir!”

The cabbie stepped on the accelerator and the black ground car lurched ahead, weaving in and out of slower traffic.

They approached an intersection and turned left, racing toward the spaceport.

On the corner, a kiosk offered holo versions of the local Zeitung.

Today’s lead headline scrolled by on a chyron above the Zeitung’s logo of a planet in rotation:

“EMBARGO’S END!”

9.21

Planetary Republic Ship Elsa Cole popped into existence in orbit around Phaethon, the giant Albatross-class warship prepared for . . . anything.

Captain Umberti Falco smiled when he reviewed the holo on the bridge, showing no other ships in place.

He touched the implant under his ear and adjusted it to project his voice to all the coms in the massive ship.

“Ladies and gentlemen, the Republic is here first, as usual. First to respond in times of crisis, first to respond in times of need. Away team, stand by.”

Indeed, he thought. In real time they left a few hours ago. Of course, in hypertime he and the crew had been teleporting from one spot in space to another over the course of two months.

La Galaxia, the largest left-leaning news organization on Diego, had recently run a damning exposé on hypertime travel recently, noting the aging of the crew. He recalled the tagline of the article: “*We don’t have faster than light travel, but hypertime is worse. Much worse.*”

Falco smiled in memory. How is faster than light travel bad? The headline was clickbait. The assumptions behind it, he thought, were . . . out in left field.

Dismissing the all-com, he shifted his attention to PLAIR, the Planetary Republic's AI and the entity actually in control of his ship.

“Open a com with Orbital Control, PLAIR. Let's see if they're amenable to our presence.”

Moments later, he spoke with what sounded like the same young man he had engaged with during his previous visit.

After his perfunctory greetings, Falco came straight to the point.

“We have another load of humanitarian supplies for you, Control. We also have some items your merchants may be interested in. I have three landers ready to go, upon your approval.”

He did not even try to ask for teleportation rights down to the surface, remembering they were firmly denied last time.

“Please hold, Captain. I'm working on permissions as we speak.”

Falco smiled.

Maybe this time they're ready for us, he thought.

Maybe this time, they actually need assistance. We probably appeared too soon last time.

Although, apparently, they were indeed first to arrive after the embargo was called off. They beat the League ships that would be showing up any minute.

Falco himself had received orders for his immediate departure from Plairmont only hours ago in real time.

From what he could surmise, someone knew the embargo was going to end before it was officially announced.

And that somebody, he suspected, worked for State.

The State Department was no longer as independent from the rest of the Republican government as it had been during the war years. But most of the shots were still called by State, especially when dealing with the League.

So far, no one seemed to mind since the League remained diminished, no longer holding the same level of resources they had before the war.

Falco learned by listening to bits and pieces of conversation here and there of the Foreign Relations Committee, a secretive and powerful force inside the State Department. From what he could surmise, the committee consisted of retired ambassadors, who shared their collective wisdom with others. He thought of it as a kind of admiralty for State.

If they were working behind the scenes to end the embargo, or if they were involved in talks over it, then they would have a good feel for knowing when it would end. And if someone passed word to the Admiralty . . .

Yes, the Cole was sent hours before any public announcement. Somebody knew, and slipped word to Plairmont.

This, he thought, gazing down at the swirling brown planet below, covered in a layer of upper-atmospheric dust . . . this was engineered diplomacy. Announce the end to a political embargo and be the first to show up offering relief. During the election for alignment, the Republic would hopefully have the strongest tug on the population's heartstrings.

The disembodied voice from the planet's orbital control center returned.

"Captain, you are cleared to send down your transports. I have uploaded the space station's coordinates."

"Excellent. Do I have clearance for shore leave for my people? We'd love to inject some currency into your local economy, if we can."

"I'll have to get back to you on that, Captain. For now, you are clear to send three landers down."

"Very well. They are on the way."

He signed off and switched a side holo over to the flight deck. It was filled with the face of a Marine staring back at him.

"Corporal Latari, you and your people have a green light."

"Aye, Captain. We're on our way."

Falco looked at the bridge's main holo again, which switched from a view of the planet to one facing the side of his massive ship.

A transport burst through the red octagonal force field covering the flight deck, followed by two more right behind it.

The three landing craft pointed their noses down toward the surface of the planet below and sped silently away as the camera followed. They quickly turned into small black dots against the dusty atmosphere.

The landing craft plopped through the sediment layer and disappeared from sight.

Falco smiled, feeling a sense of accomplishment.

“Let me know, PLAIR, the instant any League ships put in an appearance.”

“Yes, Captain.”

Even if they showed up right now, he thought, in many ways they're already too late.

9.22

Ash told the taxi driver he could leave, if he wanted to.

Ash fully expected his girlfriend Haley to show up, and he would get a ride home from her.

But the driver looked to be even more excited about the prospect of another visit from the Cole than Ash did.

He missed the last one, he said, but now he was here well ahead of everyone else. The story of meeting Ashley Thallus himself, showing up at the spaceport before anyone else knew anything about it, and being there on the spot when the Marines landed would be a tale he'd be sharing with other cabbies and anyone else who would listen to it for a long time..

The two waited out on the empty tarmac for a while, engaged in idle chatter.

Ash watched as the gate opened in the distance and let in a deputy's squad car. It raced for their position.

The gate stayed up. Trailing the police vehicle, the first merchant trucks came trundling in. He squinted, studying them to see if he recognized the one Haley usually drove.

The squad car stopped near him and the deputy jumped out, his lights still flashing. He hurried and opened the rear door to let out Joachim Xu.

The plenipotentiary looked as if he had aged ten years in the past two months, Ash thought.

The story of how Xu had fooled everyone about Hizzoner's death for so long made excellent copy. Mr. Del Rio shared with Ash the numbers showing how that particular story helped them gain subscribers even in the League, where such political subterfuge was often celebrated.

Xu frowned upon seeing Ash.

"Mr. Thallus. Somehow I'm not surprised to see you here before me."

"Just doing my job, Mr. Xu."

Xu nodded, but he continued frowning.

The first four merchant trucks drove up, taking positions beside the squad car and the taxi. Ash glanced back at the gate and saw a line forming with more trucks and ground cars.

Word spreads fast, he thought.

Xu turned to a customs official, who also came along for the ride with him from the Courthouse. He helped the man set up a screening terminal on a tripod.

"Do you think anyone from the Cole will stay?" Ash said.

"Like you did?" Xu said. "Let's hope not. However, the Captain has asked permission for shore leave. We may have a few visitors among this first round who will stay temporarily, then several right behind them. But I don't think we'll be granting citizenship to anyone on the spot today."

He glanced at the customs official who nodded in agreement.

Both of them seemed acutely aware at how much influence Ash held with the outside world.

Both probably thought it had been a mistake to let him stay.

And Xu probably thinks I'm an enemy after that story following the raid on the Courthouse, Ash thought. But come on . . . nobody could pass up drama like that.

Another story, one that Ash *had* passed up, involved how Xu stayed in power. He did so by delaying the election for another Mayor. Hizzoner remained dead, and Xu stayed in charge.

The big difference now, Ash thought, was that Xu was under increasing pressure to hold an election. Before, he could avoid doing so indefinitely. Now that everyone knew Hizzoner was dead, though he had to hold one soon.

A new round of trucks and cars pulled up, disgorging more people. A wave of excitement rolled off the newcomers, ready to finally see visitors and fresh cargo once again.

Ash decided many of the city's most prominent merchants were already here, or at least their buying agents were.

Another truck pulled to a stop with a familiar old yellow load bot riding on the back, feet dangling off the edge.

Ash smiled, watching Haley jump out.

She caught sight of him and elbowed her way through the crowd to join him.

He gave her a hug and a quick kiss on the lips.

"I thought you'd be here sooner."

Haley looked around at all the people milling about, smiling.

"The transports haven't landed yet. I made it on time."

A shout went up as someone caught sight of three dots on the horizon. Everyone turned to look east. Those with sharper eyes could make out the specks. As they quickly drew nearer, everyone else could soon see them, too.

Minutes later, three new transports landed in a wide open space a safe distance away from the crowd waiting for them.

Engines flared, then stilled as the transports kissed the tarmac. Doors unsealed with loud hisses, sterile air escaping.

A Marine corporal from the closest transport exited and looked around, getting his bearings. He saw the squad car's lights and Mr. Xu standing with his arms crossed, waiting.

Then his eyes locked with Ash and he smiled.

He moved toward them, and all the grinning merchants jostling for a look. One cab driver looked very happy to be in the middle of it all.

"Mr. Xu? I'm Corporal Hiram Latari, Planetary Republic First Marine Corps, assigned to PRS Elsa Cole, Captain Umberti Falco commanding."

"Yes, Corporal. We've met before."

Latari grinned at the man.

He looks like he's read my stories about Hizzoner, Ash thought. Either that or somebody informed him before he came down. I bet he knows exactly what sort of political situation exists on the ground. Probably covered in their briefing before they left Diego.

Latari glanced back at the other transports, Marines now exiting all three.

Then he turned back to Xu and grinned again.

"We've got a lot of stuff for you, sir."

9.23

It's a feeding frenzy, Ash thought.

He started to compose the verbiage for his article on this event as he watched the early merchants scoop up humanitarian goods from the first transport. The customs officer noted the crates of medical supplies and rations, and he kept track of which merchants took what.

But no efforts at limitations were enforced. If a reseller had more than one truck onsite, no one kept him or her from loading those vehicles to the hilt with donated goods.

It's like chum in the water . . .

Ash's thoughts were interrupted when the initial frenzy died down near the first landing craft. As the last cargo container was hauled away, Hiram Latari came over and shook his hand.

"You went native on us, Ashley! But I sure am glad you did. Me and the boys have read every word you put out. How about that Night Shadow chick? Wow! We need someone like her to fight crime back in Octavia. My little sister is in a fan club at her high school. You wouldn't believe how popular she is. There's all kind of holos and fan art. You name it."

Private Newton showed up, smiling too. She took her flight helmet off, letting long black hair flow free.

“Ashley!”

She gave him a long hug.

When she pulled back, she gave Haley a mock glare.

“Who is this? This boy is mine, girl. I claimed him on our last trip out here. Ashley! I can’t believe you didn’t wait for me! You broke my heart!”

Ash chuckled, turning beet-red.

Everyone else grinned, including Haley.

“Private Newton, this is my girlfriend, Haley Stonecipher.”

“Girlfriend? Boy, you really *have* gone native on us. I hear they made you a station manager or some such at the Zeitung. Your words have been stirrin’ up the whole galaxy! It’s good to meet you, Haley. Now, Ash, introduce me to this other friend of yours, the Night Shadow. I want to meet her!”

“Ha. I wish I could, Newton. I have no idea who she is, or anything about her, really. Other than she has a tendency to show up at the most opportune moments and she’s rather adept at fighting.”

“Well, that’s okay. She’s a *superhero*, Ashley. We’re not supposed to know her secret identity. That way she can keep her loved ones safe. But you should still know her and talk to her. Maybe you can score an interview with her or something. Everyone wants to know more about her.”

“I’ve tried. Believe me, I’ve tried to interview her every time I see her. But she always runs up a wall or something.”

“Will you be doing an auction or standard pricing for the remainder of your cargo?” the customs official asked Latari, butting into the conversation.

The corporal said, “Standard pricing. We’re not out to turn a profit today. The goods we brought down are standard Navy issue. It’s all surplus offered by companies back on Diego. We’re happy to help.”

Latari turned to Ash and said, “You can use that as a quote. ‘We’re happy to help. The Republic is always happy to lend assistance in times of need.’ Or something like that. Make me sound *good*.”

Ash smiled.

Xu frowned, seemingly annoyed that the corporal knew the sole Republican reporter on the planet and remained on friendly terms with him.

Looking like he swallowed bile, Xu said, “Will any of your people be staying for shore leave today, Corporal? We’d like to extend our hospitality to the crew of the Cole in kind.”

Latari’s face lit up.

“You bet! I mean, yes sir. Everyone here would like to stay a while. If it’s okay with you, we’ll send the transports back up after they’re unloaded, and the rest of the crew will cycle down for a visit. In fact, we can bring down nine transports at a time, if that’s okay with you.”

“Excellent. No overnight stays. We’ll process everyone in and out with visitor passes. Please inform the shore parties we expect everyone to return to their ship by midnight.”

Xu glanced at the customs official who nodded, standing beside his terminal. Then he continued.

“We might have to get some more people out here to facilitate the lines if you bring down too many at once. But, we’re happy to have you and your coin, if I’m going to be completely honest. Taxi and rickshaw services will be available if any of the crew would like to visit our commercial district, particularly the outdoor bazaar.”

Xu smiled, this time seemingly sincere.

“We hope you’ll spend a lot.”

He turned and looked back at the gate. People streamed into the spaceport now, driving trucks and cars. The occasional black cab came in, carrying passengers splurging to get here faster.

The first rickshaws made their way through, young boys gasping for breath, pulling their anxious passengers as fast as possible in the hopes of a good tip.

Behind them all, the first surge of pedestrians pressed forward, along with many more cars, trucks and rickshaws behind them.

A bank window opened in the air near the second transport, showing a Republican Navy account, as the corporal over there prepared to sell off his cargo to eager merchants.

Xu's tension eased as he watched the excited crowds surging forward. Republican Marines chatted with civilians. They cast speculative eyes toward the black taxi cabs parked out on the tarmac and seemed to be considering how best to leave the area and go exploring.

The crowd had turned festive, and everyone seemed happy to be here.

Xu took a deep breath and forced a smile onto his face.

“Yes, we're glad to have you, Corporal. You and everyone else from the Elsa Cole are welcome. Welcome to League City. Welcome to Phaethon.”

9.24

Transports burst through the red force field of Cole's landing deck, their noses pointing down.

Falco watched them descend, one by one.

A man in his early 30s and two young women jogged toward the last lander as it waited on the deck. The opening irised open and the two women hurried inside.

The man turned and looked back at the camera on the wall watching him.

Falco touched his implant, smiling that the fellow knew where the camera was, and the fact that he bothered to look.

"Godspeed, Commander."

The man smiled at the camera watching him, and saluted. Then he followed the women inside.

The door irised shut and the transport levitated a meter above the deck. It fell into line with the others and was last to break free from the Cole.

Falco watched the last ship head down to the surface.

A klaxon sounded on the bridge. The holo changed to show the orbital space nearby. Five Eagle-class ships popped into place, their names

appearing underneath them on the holo.

“Ah, the League is here. Too late, I’m afraid.”

He smiled at the Eagles, waiting to see if they would put in a com request. He doubted it would happen, but one never knew.

“Right now, they’re no doubt talking with the man downstairs, trying to arrange their own deliveries I suppose. Alas, we got here first. Anything you do now, you will do after us.”

He smiled at the two officers sharing the bridge with him at the moment.

They smiled back.

One of them said, “All we need now are the Lutians here, sir. Then we’d have a trifecta.”

But Falco made a dismissive gesture with his hand.

“No, the Alliance won’t show up. They’re small. No one wants to join them, and I don’t think they’re too interested in becoming hegemonic anyway.”

The other man said, “They’d show if they thought there was money involved, right Captain?”

Falco chuckled.

“Did you know that scoundrel Raleigh stole every ounce of gold from Euripides during the war? Of course you know, everyone knows that. They may indeed operate from a profit perspective, even more so than we do usually . . . but I will tell you this, as a veteran of that war. I served as a junior officer aboard three different ships during that time, and I can say this with certainty. You want them on your side during any conflict.”

The men stopped smiling.

He was right, they knew the stories. And while Christopher Raleigh was widely feted in the Alliance and the Republic for stealing League gold, he was also brutal in battle, using innovative techniques to win that were studied in the Academy even now.

Falco turned his attention back to the forward holo, watching as the nine transports plunked under the sediment cover of the planet below, one by one.

Let's hope three RNI agents are enough for whatever lies ahead, he thought. This isn't the war, and our enemies are as of yet undefined. Even they may not know they are our enemies, yet.

Whoever they are.

Falco did not know everything they were tasked with, but he understood the broad outlines of their mission.

They were here to help make sure the upcoming election went the right way.

If at all possible, his top secret briefing had stressed, Phaethon should join the Republic, and not fall into League hands.

He glanced over at a side holo, showing the five Eagles in synchronous orbit, and he smiled.

At least we got here before you lot arrived, he thought. Hopefully, that makes up for the pitifully small number of agents we're sending down there.

9.25

Commander Kelsen Troy eased back in his seat for the short ride “downstairs.”

The epitome of “tall, dark and handsome,” the 30-year old Commander sported the brown skin and hair so typical of the mixed races living among the stars.

The two beautiful young women accompanying him sat across the aisle, smirking in his direction.

They went by the names Judy and June, which he felt certain were not real.

He also had convinced himself their faces were fake, as well.

The giveaway, he thought, involved the over-the-top extreme attractiveness of both. They looked like AI-generated holo stars.

He also knew that framers, the old technology designed by Thespar before the war that completely altered faces, had come a long way.

Like most people, Kelsen did not know a lot about the new framers. But unlike most people, he was aware of their existence. And he felt certain the two lovely women accompanying him on this mission used the technology.

Some of their mannerisms and speech patterns indicated they were perhaps older than they presented, as well.

Maybe they were even older than him.

That was an unsettling thought.

June sported long blonde hair, while Judy's was bobbed and jet black.

Both looked slim, petite and fit.

In short, they were both very deadly.

Worse, Kelsen thought from what he hoped was an objective standpoint . . . they were very easy to underestimate, especially for a man.

He tried hard not to.

Kelsen knew there was a long history of deadly female agents, going way back on both sides. There were some legends, like the one codenamed Raven, a woman shrouded in myth and lore.

Assassins in particular, at least successful ones, were often female.

No one suspects a woman to hold killing intent . . .

"Don't worry about this first jump, Commander," June the blonde said, interrupting his thoughts.

Her smirk morphed into a grin when he looked up.

"We'll be with you every step of the way."

"Yeah. It's not like anything can go wrong at a thousand clicks an hour, or however fast we'll be going," Judy added.

He forced a smile.

"And I take it you girls have made these types of jumps many times before?"

He deliberately used the word "girls" when talking with them because he thought it irritated them. If so, they showed no signs of it, just as he never let on they annoyed him by ganging up on him.

All the ribbing was good-natured, though. They had a lot of affection for one another.

So far, in the three months they had prepared for this mission, and the additional two aboard the Elsa Cole in hypertime on the way here, all three kept it professional. There had been no fraternization, nor would there be.

But that did not preclude razzing, and the two attractive women seemed intent on hazing their nominal superior.

Technically, the three were designated Counterforce Twenty, nomenclature dating back to the years immediately after the war when clandestine League units embedded in the Republic assassinated politicians and engaged in other acts of terror. Chancellor Severs, at the time, assembled the Counterforce units to strike back deep in the heart of League territory, led by such legendary figures as Commander Hamilton Wolf.

A statue of Wolf stood in Plairmont's Garden of Honor, much to the amusement of those who knew him. From what Kelsen understood, many of his more incredible exploits occurred while he was drunk.

Wolf showed up for the statue's unveiling ceremony in his one and only public appearance. He said a few polite words, then disappeared.

Long out of his prime, but thankfully sober these days by all accounts, Wolf let it be known he wished to remain out of the limelight.

As a young graduate from the Naval Academy, Kelsen had been there that day. He had seen the legendary Hamilton Wolf from the third row back, and applauded him long and hard for those few spoken words. Everyone in the crowd gave Wolf a standing ovation, much to the man's embarrassment.

As far as Kelsen knew, Wolf never returned to Diego after that day. At least, he had never returned to the military township of Plairmont to look at his statue again . . .

Maybe that's what it's like to be retired, Kelsen thought. You reap the glory at one last ceremony and then you go away. Once you get a statue, there's no reason to go back seeking more.

The transport bumped into Phaethon's atmosphere, and the temperature inside quickly rose as they pierced the planet's dusty veil.

The transport's shielding drew the brunt of the heat, Kelsen thought. It also protected them from dust particles in the upper atmosphere.

Those would not be good to hit at this speed.

He would never admit it to the girls, but just the trip down made him nervous, much less their pending exit from the transport.

He hoped his worry did not show on his face.

He closed his eyes and leaned his head back in the seat.

June and Judy shared a knowing glance with one another.

They stopped picking on him.

Moments later they leveled out, reaching a cruising altitude and heading west. The pilot let the AI line them up with the spaceport as they rushed across a broad-leafed landscape below.

Kelsen opened his eyes

“Time to go.”

The two women nodded, releasing their restraints. The Marines in the forward portion of the transport ignored them. No one looked back as the three members of Counterforce Twenty climbed into coffin-sized escape pods and sealed them shut.

They waited, letting the AI decide the perfect time for them to go.

This backward planet was as yet unaligned, Kelsen thought. So, no one should see them leaving unless they were watching the transport directly.

Still, it was always best to let the AI make critical decisions like this.

A smart wall slid across the three escape pods, sealing the cabin on the inside. Behind them, the skin of the craft peeled away, also made of smart material.

The three escape pods popped out, buffeted by the wind. They fell as the transport kept going, rushing away.

They dropped, then slowed, force drives activating.

Many seconds later, after slowing considerably then falling vertically for hundreds of meters, Kelsen's pod finally stopped, resting upright on the ground.

The lid unsealed, releasing sterile air into the planet's atmosphere.

He sighed in relief and stepped out on the broad, leafy grass.

To his left, the other two pods settled down. Their doors opened too.

June and Judy stepped out, smiling at him.

"You made it, Commander! Did you puke?"

"No, Judy. I did not puke."

He reached inside the pod and pulled out a black backpack filled with weapons and gear.

He put his arms through the straps and said, "Step away from the pods and let's erase the evidence of our existence here."

She nodded and stepped out of the capsule, joining him with her own backpack.

June exited her pod, pulling out a small satchel filled with putty. She donned a special pair of gloves then grabbed a fistful of the stuff and smeared it on her escape pod's door. Quickly, she did the same to Judy's and Kelsen's vehicles, too.

June smiled at the commander and said, "ADMs."

"I know what artificial disintegrating microbes are, June."

"Did you know they can't be picked up by normal detection in customs? This stuff is dangerous. If it gets out in the wild, someone could really do some harm with it."

"We are literally 'out in the wild' right now."

June shared a look with Judy.

“You know, he’s smarter than he looks.”

Kelsen sighed and walked away. In the distance, he could see a road headed in the same direction as the Cole’s transports.

That, he figured, would lead them where they needed to go.

“Come along, girls. We’ve got a long walk ahead of us. It’s an undeveloped planet. No flying. No teleporting. We’ll have to get around here the old fashioned way.”

The two women fell in line behind him.

“Maybe we can catch a ride with somebody,” June said.

“Hitchhiking’s dangerous.” Judy said in a scolding tone.

“I think it’ll be more dangerous for the person trying to mess with us.”

Kelsen ignored the banter. He headed down the hill, aiming for the road.

As they walked away, the putty spread. The pods seemed to melt into the ground.

In seconds, nothing remained visible to the naked eye of the escape pods, now reduced to their atomic elements.

9.26

Two hours later, a car pulled off the road. The trio turned to watch as the driver rolled down his window and smiled at them.

“What are y’all doing out here in the middle of nowhere?”

His eyes lit up with the dopamine effect men typically experienced while looking at beautiful women.

“We were out hiking when we heard there was a ship at League City. We’re headed back that way.”

The man ignored Kelsen’s explanation.

Which is probably a good thing, Kelsen thought. It’s kind of flimsy.

The women approached the driver with wide eyes and slightly parted lips.

“We would just love a ride into town,” June breathed out softly.

Judy nodded and said, “Yes! We would be *ever* so grateful.”

Minutes later Kelsen found himself in the backseat with Judy as the car sped down the road.

The driver, a man by the name of Ellickson, apparently liked blondes. He had June sit up front with him.

This seemed to be a victory of some sort for June. Occasionally she would glance back at Judy with a glint in her eyes.

For her part, Judy seemed royally ticked off. She sat in the far corner of the backseat with her arms crossed while June flirted with Mr. Ellickson. He sped along the road while June kept him talking.

They were not, in fact, that far from League City. The car covered the kilometers swiftly.

Soon, the edges of the metropolis appeared in the distance. All three spies took a good long look, noting that the tallest building looked to be only about five stories.

Wisely, they said nothing to their host, not letting on that this was their first good look at their destination.

Ellickson continued chatting happily, joining the queue at the gates to enter the walled-off spaceport area. Once through, he drove out onto the massive concrete circle and found a place to park along with all the other cars.

The nine landing craft stood in the middle, but most of the crewmembers aboard had departed by now. Taxis cruised the perimeter of the crowd, ready to whisk away anyone else looking for a quick ride into town.

Rickshaw drivers stood off to one side, breathing hard. Some lay sacked out in the back of their own vehicles, exhausted from running out here. But a few looked ready and willing to offer rides to those wishing to go back for a lower fare, and far lower speed, than a taxi.

“It’s always an event, when a ship comes in. ’Course, we haven’t seen many ships lately what with the embargo and all. That makes it extra special. I don’t reckon that big ole Republican battleship is gonna land here. Looks like ole Xu has granted them sailors shore leave, though. I reckon the ship’ll cycle them in. This here’s where the party’s gonna be, all night. Look over there, some sailors are gettin’ drunk already.”

The trio glanced where Ellickson pointed. Some enterprising fellow had set up a makeshift bar, complete with stools. People in the crowd bought drinks for the sailors, and themselves.

Someone made a toast to the Republic. Twenty sailors lifted their glasses with a cheer and downed their drinks. Someone else paid for another round.

Judy and June traded a worried look.

Judy seemed to have forgotten her earlier ire.

“Oh, look. There’s some MPs.”

Ellickson and the two women looked where Kelsen pointed.

A couple of uniformed military policemen wandered around the makeshift bar area, keeping an eye on the sailors. They remained unarmed, but they had the tough look of bouncers, as if they dealt with unruly sailors and Marines every day.

The women eased back, relief flooding their faces.

“Will it upset you if we leave you now, Mr. Ellickson? You’ve been oh so kind to drive us in from the country. How can we ever repay you?”

Ellickson chuckled in delight.

“Well, I do like to frequent a certain club here in the city on the nights I’m staying over. Stop by Slamdunks later if you’d like me to buy you a drink.”

“I’d like that!” June said, smiling and flashing perfect white teeth.

Then she slipped out the door like a fish darting through water.

Judy did too, leaving Kelsen alone in the back seat.

“Thanks, Mr. Ellickson. We appreciate it.”

He stepped out, too, and followed the girls as they merged into the crowd.

The next step, he knew, would be to establish residency somewhere. Or at least a home base. They could start in a hotel, then find a real estate agent to show them some apartments.

Then maybe we can split up and figure out what it’s going to take to turn this planet Republican, he thought.

The nine landing craft sounded an alarm, and those standing nearby moved away.

Together, the landers ascended vertically. The crowd watched as they rose to 100 meters before streaking off in the sky one after the other, slowly gaining altitude.

One little boy, about two years old and watching it all with his mother, burst into tears.

“They’re coming back!” Kelsen heard the woman say in a soothing tone. “They’re just going to get some more sailors!”

Soon this town would be filled with Republican sailors, spending Republican money, he thought.

A cheer went up at the makeshift bar as someone toasted the Elsa Cole and her crew. He turned to watch a dozen men knock back shots.

And hopefully, Kelsen added to himself, they’ll all stay out of trouble.

For now, he and the girls were successfully infiltrated, with no official record of their presence.

He smiled.

Out loud he turned to the two women and said, “Time to go to work.”

9.27

“How many people do we have going back to LC?”

Tom looked up from the desk at his office in New Galveston, thinking for a moment about the question posed by Gwen over their shared com.

“Not nearly as many as we had coming out here. We’re going to bring back several recharged power packs, though. If we need more, we’ll port in the rest, but this provides an explanation for where we got them. I’m also having Nolan drop off a load of shovels in Brookshire on the way back. They’ve got a store there, and the proprietor has ordered half a dozen. So, we’re getting some extra benefit out of the return trip. Eventually maybe we’ll have something go to all the towns and villages, making deliveries.”

“What we really need is a travel agent to let people know this service is available. I mean, having the sign wherever Haley sets up in the mornings is good, don’t get me wrong. But I think it’s time we got something more permanent. Especially for travel purposes.”

“You might be right,” Tom said, sitting back in his chair and thinking about it for a moment.

“Rent’s kinda expensive along Commerce.”

“I was thinking more along the lines of a booth. They’re stable, instead of being subject to the chances of what tables you get each morning.”

“Yeah, I could see a booth. But a storefront would be more respectable for this kind of thing. Plus, we could get one for the power company and have a place to meet muni reps. We can put more stuff in the back and bring it out. We can port stuff directly there, without having to truck it over from the warehouse.”

“Oh, you mean combine everything. Have all our sales in one place.”

“Yeah, something like that. Mona can keep track of it when Haley’s not there. People won’t be surprised to see a retail establishment run by a bot. It’s not like we live in the Dark Ages or anything.”

“I suppose we can afford the rent. It would be expensive, though.”

“I think it’s cheaper further away from the bazaar and closer to the Courthouse. We can find out if anything is available, move in, then move up to something better if someone shuts down somewhere better.”

“Okay. Did anybody leave to go overseas when the *Piker* left this morning?”

Tom nodded, then remembered they were voice only.

“Yes. Two people are accompanying Boris. They paid passage to Little York, actually. It turns out we are much cheaper than the sky trains, and that fact did not stay secret for long.”

“Good. Maybe we’ll get Haley to take out an ad in the local version of the *Zeitung* her beau puts out.”

Tom raised his eyebrows.

“That’s not a bad idea. The only downside I can see is it might irritate the Courthouse and the sky train operators.”

“They’re gonna be mad at us anyway. May as well get it out in the open and over with.”

“Fair point. Okay. I’ll port to the warehouse in a little bit and go shopping for some retail space.”

“Yeah, it’s a madhouse in LC at the moment. The Cole is sending down their crew for shore leave and the locals are determined to fleece them for every credit they have.”

“Good. Hopefully that’ll inject some fresh money into the economy. How are the League ships up there taking it?”

“So far, they’re staying put. I don’t know if the Courthouse is discouraging them from sending people down or if they’re holding back on their own accord. Either way, it doesn’t look like anyone from the five dreadnoughts are gonna come down and play today.”

“Probably for the better. The last thing League City needs is for a bunch of League sailors to meet some Republican sailors in a bar somewhere.”

Conversation trailed off after that. Tom checked a new set of numbers Mark sent over his feed. The accountant bot remained relentless, finding savings and opportunities in all sorts of places.

He doesn’t sleep, either, Tom thought. That could be good or bad . . .

He checked off a few more items on his list, jumping over to a video stream of two PSC workers driving down an isolated road heading toward a village that had only one Class Eight power pack for eleven buildings.

“Nobody’s messed with the Sabine Pass crew, Lisa?”

“There are no outlaws in this area present, so far as I can tell. Rhen and his partner should be safe.”

“Good. Let me know if anything happens. Sabine Pass is kinda isolated. We want those guys to get home to their families tonight without a scratch.”

“The load bot accompanying them is prepared to take protective measures if needed. No harm will come to them.”

Tom stood up and walked clear of the desk.

“Great. Thanks, Lisa. Port me over to Warehouse Fourteen, please.”

A *pop!* filled the office as displaced air rushed in to fill the void where he had been standing.

9.28

Tom borrowed Haley's car. She still had the truck out at the spaceport, but he did not really need a large vehicle. The door to Warehouse 14 closed behind him as he drove it out to the city.

Going through the streets of the Commerce District, he found it mostly deserted. No taxis or rickshaws were present, and very few cars shared the road with him. He saw only a handful of pedestrians walking about.

"Everybody must still be at the spaceport."

The Zeitung's display at street corners still carried news about the embargo ending. In that multimedia way holo newspapers could deliver information in both text and video, the kiosk showed one of Ash's recordings from the spaceport, with the landers arriving, the sailors receiving a warm welcome, and the ongoing celebrations.

Tom smiled as he drove past one.

"Lisa, who is the guy Ash used to find his local office for the Zeitung?"

"Clifford Bean. I can show you where to find him, if you like."

"Yes. He seemed like a good enough fellow. I think we'll send more business his way."

An arrow appeared in his mind's eye, and he followed it in the car, whisking down streets mostly void of traffic.

“Wow. If we ever need to do something when a lot of people aren't around, we should wait for a big ship to come in. This town lives for that, apparently.”

An hour later, Bean used a master key to open a vacant storefront on Commerce Boulevard.

“This is a nice location for what you've described to me that you're looking for, Mr. Savage. It's central to things, about equidistance from the bazaar and the Courthouse. Now, what that means is, you won't see the traffic that the shops closer to the bazaar see. But on the other hand, you won't be paying the higher rent over there.”

“Sounds good,” Tom said, backing up and glancing both ways at the storefront. “So, we get both the little shop and this bigger storefront?”

“That is correct. It's a package deal. Now, before we go inside I'll say a little about the rent. It's not as much, mind you, like I said. But . . . it is a retail lease. We're talking several hundred a month, here.”

“How many hundred?”

“Fifteen hundreds. That price includes both shops.”

“That's not *too* bad. How long am I committing for?”

“It is month-to-month. Technically, the landlord can call it and you have to be out by the first. On the other hand, you can walk away, too. I know on more established planets that sort of arrangement is often frowned upon for retail, but out here . . . well you know how it is.”

“I do know how it is. And those terms are acceptable. Let's see the inside of both.”

-+-

“What do you think?”

Clifford Bean had left, making sure Tom's palm print was tied to the access pad out front.

With Lisa's help, the storefront would be far more secure than the simple lock on the door.

At the moment he walked around the empty interior of the larger storefront, letting Gwen see through his eyes.

"It's big," she said. "Do we need that much space?"

"We're going to have only the front open to the public. The back will all be used for storage, and porting power packs in and out. I'll have Mica's people build it out tonight."

"People? Somehow those bots . . . 'people' doesn't fit."

"Minions?"

"Hmm. Nope. That doesn't sound right, either."

"Okay. Well, I'll have the *MicaBots* work on it tonight. How's that sound?"

"Much better. Okay, now show me next door. This is my travel agency?"

"*Your* travel agency?"

Tom walked outside and down the block past the empty storefront window. Next door, a much smaller window showed a bare interior, revealing a counter and little else.

"That looks perfect!"

Tom pressed his palm on the lock and the door clicked open. He walked in.

"Very little storage here. There is a private office behind the counter. And a bathroom."

"I think we'll put Mona in there. We'll hire someone for the other side. Now that I think about it, it would be better to have a human face in the main store."

“Okay. You’re probably right. I’ll ask Lisa to start looking around for new potential hires. We’ve moved all the good ones and their families to New Galveston already.”

“This will be major. Our primary face that we show to the world. And the travel agency will be right next door.”

“Okay. Hopefully Xu won’t try to shut us down or anything.”

“If he does, just remind him about the election.”

Tom smiled.

“That’s mean. You’re a mean one, Gwen.”

“Hey, it suits the name of the man I married.”

9.29

N ighttime came upon League City, and Republican transports lifted off from the tarmac one last time.

All day they ferried men and women from the Elsa Cole to the surface and back, letting most of the crew get a taste of ground life for a few hours.

But in keeping with their agreement with the Courthouse, no personnel from the ship spent the night planetside.

Except Kelsen, Judy and June.

They rented two hotel rooms with a connecting door. The clerk did not even raise an eyebrow.

The women found the notion of an entire city with doors on hinges to be hilarious. They both spent the first two minutes opening and closing the door between the two rooms and giggling.

Kelsen studiously ignored them. He sat in bed, examining info on his implant.

Earlier, he had managed to get a word in edgewise with one of the crew who made it down to the bazaar. This fellow, who worked in engineering, confided to him that the Eagles in orbit were indeed later models, of recent construction. He had seen them on a holo.

The Republic started the war low on ships. That was the entire reasoning behind working with the pirates of Lute. They had many ships, and the Republic needed their help.

But as the war dragged on, the superior capitalist system the Republic relied upon turned to massive innovation in production and design, leading not only to more ships being built for their side, but far better ones as well.

Thus the Condor-class was born, designed as a pure weapon of war, able to teleport massive amounts of solar material into combat.

Thespar, the main ship-building and war-production company on the League side, tried a few things. They came up with the stealthy Assassin-class ship, which caused major problems and resulted in some post-war disasters for the Republican fleet. But designing and then building something massive like a Condor remained out of reach, especially with the League's dwindling resources.

After the war, the powers that be in the Republic decided they never wanted to be caught off guard like that again. They adopted a policy of "peace through strength."

Perhaps it was a bad case of recency bias, Kelsen thought. Or perhaps PLAIR learned her lesson, much like what happened after the Welfare Wars.

Innovation and production continued after the war. Thus was born the Albatross-class.

The League, smaller and at least slightly more humble, limped along with a rebooted AI. After their great reset, innovation stopped for the most part.

But they kept building their best designs from the midpoint of the war, improving and enhancing what they had. The latest Eagle-class ships were reliable, and still very lethal. They did not fight on the same principle of teleporting chunks of solar matter like the Condors. Instead, they still relied on the League's inferior solar torpedoes.

But even that old technology was polished and deadly, even if it was more primitive than what the Republic wielded.

A nuke is still a nuke, even a cheap one, Kelsen thought. Same holds true for solar chunks.

He looked over the blueprints of the latest model, trying to figure out what made them better than their predecessors from 20 years ago.

“Ah, here it is. They took out the kitchens. Probably feed the crew packaged meals only. Nothing is prepared. And in its place . . . more storage for torpedoes, I bet. Interesting.”

The Eagles were older in design and function, and far smaller than the Albatross orbiting beside them. But in the right hands, they were deadly ships. Perhaps even more deadly than their predecessors like the Excelsior, famously defeated in battle by the Ultima Mule.

“Credit for your thoughts,” June said, sitting down on the bed beside him.

He looked up, turning off the internal view of his implant, and met the older woman’s eyes behind the young, perfect face.

“My thoughts are . . . those Leaguers up there are going to be trouble. Big trouble.”

“Psh. Well, that’s obvious. I thought you were thinking of something profound.”

“Profundity is not warranted in the face of danger, June.”

Her eyes grew wide.

“Oh, that’s deep. Judy! Wait till you hear what Troy just said!”

She jumped off the bed and ran into the other room.

Kelsen sighed and got up. He followed her and shut the door.

“Goodnight, girls.”

He locked it from his side so they couldn’t open it again.

9.30

Morning dawned, but inside the basement headquarters of Phaethon Orbital Control, the diffused light never reached the man at the com.

Beside him stood Xu, who spoke patiently with Captain Ung of the SLS Stalwart.

“We would be delighted to host you and your crew today, Captain. I would personally like to extend my invitation to all your ships to join us down here on shore leave. The Republicans will not be invited today, giving you and your people exclusive access to our city.”

“Thank you for your consideration, Mr. Xu.”

The voice over the com sounded older. No doubt Ung was a war veteran. Perhaps all the Captains on both sides were, Xu thought.

“However, League crews have no need for shore leave. We are not soft.”

The statement hung in the air like an unformed accusation.

Xu traded glances with the control operator, who raised his eyebrows and pursed his lips at the remark.

“Instead,” Ung continued, “I would like to send down a team to open negotiations on the return of our surplus war material that is sequestered on your planet. We have credible reports of recent battle tank sightings.”

“Ah,” Xu said, breathing out a little sigh.

So this is how it would be.

“Yes, it appears one of your tanks did make an appearance during a disturbance a couple months ago. We are unsure of where it came from, what it was doing here, and where it went. We welcome any inquiry you and your people might wish to pursue. Why don’t you join us down here and discuss it with witnesses who were there that evening.”

A pregnant pause ensued.

Xu and the operator traded glances again.

At last, Ung came back on the com.

“We will be sending down a full contingent for a thorough investigation. We take war crimes very seriously, and theft of surplus materiel is considered a war crime, no matter how old that materiel may be.”

The operator slid his finger through a holographic mute button.

“Can he do that, sir? We’re not League territory.”

“I’m not sure. Right now he *thinks* he can do what he wants to. I doubt it will hurt to let him come down, though. If he can find that blasted tank and get rid of it, more power to him. Let me talk again.”

The operator released his hold on the mute switch.

“Captain, we welcome any inquiry you might have. We have been unable to locate the tank since that night, nor have we deduced who used it against the criminal enterprise attacking our city. If they were League in origin, we might even forgo a sovereignty complaint, since the tank assisted our law enforcement so much in reasserting control during the night in question. Please be my guest, and I will be happy to meet you personally at the spaceport.”

He heard a dry chuckle come over the com.

“Oh, I won’t be going down. It would just amount to shore leave if I did. No, I will be sending our SSI operatives down to . . . look around for our

errant tanks.”

The operator’s eyes shot up and he quickly swiped the mute button again.

“Holy mackerel! They’re sending an SSI team down? Sir, do you know what those guys are capable of doing?”

“Yes, I’ve read the histories of the war. Everybody has. But the League two point oh no longer has the death squads of yore. At least, so I’ve been told. Stand strong. Let me talk again.”

Xu cleared his throat just before the man release the mute button.

“We’re happy to entertain whoever you send down, Captain. We will roll out the red carpet and welcome them to Phaethon. And we will do everything in our power to help them find those involved in using the tank during that incident, whether those individuals be friendly to the League, or hostile.”

“Very good. I’m sending a transport down for my team as we speak.”

9.31

Dawn broke on Tom's farm and Timmy left his post in the field between the house and the river.

The Republican Marine battle bot approached the stables first, cleaning out the mess left by horses in their stalls overnight.

He let each one out, and they trotted through the corral and into the field. Green grass had started reappearing along the river, and they eagerly explored, looking for fresh shoots after a winter of oats and hay.

Dunmire trotted out last, still a fraction the size of other horses, but growing fast. No longer scared of the metal man who stood taller than everything else, Dunmire raced after the others, heading east toward the brightening sky.

When he finished with the stables, the bot made his way to the CC 1000 carrying a basket in one hand. The automated chicken coop had moved itself to the far side of the stables, and closer to the garden.

The sound dampener clicked off, along with the force dome that kept the chickens safe at night. The door slid open and Robert the Rooster strutted out to survey his domain.

His head jerked back and forth, settling on Timmy. But the rooster had long ago decided the robot was far more friend than foe.

Either way, he could not put a scratch on the metal man, so Robert dismissed Timmy from his personal concern and continued out into the field.

He was followed by the chickens, now fully grown. Only three had been lost so far from the ones Tom originally bought, a testament to Timmy's protection, Robert's skill, and the overpriced but highly effective chicken coop.

When the last chicken ran out, Timmy approached the coop and pressed a button. The walls rose up on four corners, exposing cubby holes the chickens roosted in overnight, all stuffed with hay.

Delicately and with precise movements, Timmy plucked fresh eggs from the cubbies and placed them in the basket.

He retrieved 15 eggs.

When finished, he stepped out of the coop's confines and it lowered again, sealing off the space.

The bot took a long look at the garden, but elected not to retrieve anything from it this morning. It too stood protected by a force dome that flicked off with the morning light. So far, the ground had faithfully produced food all through the winter.

Already, the air was warmer, 12 degrees and rising rapidly, according to the bot's internal thermometer.

Timmy turned toward the farmhouse, approaching from the rear.

He carefully mounted the steps, sized more for typical humans than a Marine battle bot.

At the door, he let the sensor on his shoulders, the tall blank rectangle that served as his "head," look inside.

Sensing both Tom and Gwen in the kitchen, he knocked lightly on the door with one finger.

Gwen opened it, smiling.

Her cat, Mr. Biddles, rubbed against her legs while staring up at the metal behemoth.

Biddles had grown, too. But like Dunmire, he had not yet reached his full size. He too remained unafraid of the battle bot. On occasion, he even let Timmy pet him.

“Good morning, Timmy! Did you have a good night?”

“Affirmative.”

“Timmy! My man!”

Tom sat at the kitchen table, eating a boxed meal. The top had just been ripped off and the food steamed from instant heat.

He waved at the robot. Timmy inclined his “head” slightly to acknowledge him.

“Are these eggs?” Gwen said. “Again? This is going to happen every day, isn’t it?”

“That’s the idea, sweetheart. You get chickens, they lay eggs.”

“Well, thank you Timmy. I’ll have Lisa port these to the warehouse. Maybe Haley can start selling eggs. I’m not going to touch them, personally.”

She wrinkled her nose at the basket.

“What? Those things are about as fresh as you can get,” Tom said, getting up from the table and approaching the door. “Lookit that. Not more than a few hours old, I bet. This is some quality nutrition, right here. It doesn’t get any better than this.”

“Someone else will give us money for them, then.”

“You eat eggs all the time. That tray you’re about to open has scrambled eggs and bacon in it.”

“Yes, but I didn’t have to prepare those eggs. That’s the difference, dear.”

“Hm. Well, thanks Timmy. I’m not sure Haley rented out some tables at the bazaar this morning or not, since we’re moving into our new storefront

today. But we'll figure out what to do with these.”

His burden duly transferred, Timmy turned and descended the steps.

Next, he ventured toward the garden and wandered in the field nearby, his sensor twitching.

He avoided the chickens.

In a sudden burst of speed, he rushed forward and grabbed a field rat, snapping it up from under a clump of grass.

It squeaked, trying desperately to break free from the robot's grasp.

Timmy reached out with his other hand and quickly squeezed the rat's head between a thumb and forefinger, instantly killing it.

He repeated this twice more, gathering up food for Buddy, the baby sand dragon.

He left the rats on the back porch in a canvas bag, so Gwen would not have to look at them when she carried the lizard's meal out to Tara's research station.

All morning routines now complete, Timmy resumed his station several meters in front of the house.

Here he stood, his sensors taking in the beautiful scenery as morning light continued to brighten the land.

The Little River frolicked several meters away, with a constant susurrus of moving water.

Nearby mountains grew ever brighter as the sun rose in the shrouded sky, adding its powerful diffused light to the landscape.

Timmy's sensors noted songbirds waking up and calling to one another. A family of tiny chipmunk-like creatures near the river stirred and began their morning hunt for food, completely oblivious to the killing machine standing a few meters away.

On the other side of the water far away, the forest with its widely spaced trees woke up as well, along with all the wildlife within.

Timmy stood still as a statue, enjoying the morning and everything he could sense.

Behind him, in the farmhouse, Tom and Gwen finished their breakfast and prepared for the day.

When Gwen walked out the back door, she screamed at the sight of dead rats in a sack.

“How much longer do we have to feed that thing?”

9.32

Tom popped into place in the back of the storefront on Commerce Boulevard, in a large storage room.

He looked around at the power packs stacked up neatly, sorted by size.

“Oh, very nice. Give my compliments to Mica, Lisa.”

“I will do that.”

A door on the other side of the large room opened and Haley stuck her head in. Tom moved forward to join her.

She said, “Oh, good. You’re here. So, I guess I’m not going to be out in the bazaar anymore?”

“I think we should maintain the tables for farm stuff. Here. Have some eggs.”

He handed over the basket to her Timmy collected earlier.

“Oh, fresh. That’s nice. But how am I gonna be in two places at once? Or are we just not opening this location until after lunch?”

“I guess we need to hire somebody to run the tables. That way you can stick around here. Or, you can stay with the tables and we can let somebody else watch over this location, whichever you prefer.”

“I think I’d like to change things up and work inside for a while. We can hire one or two people to sell table stuff in the mornings. I’ll put a help wanted ad in the Zeitung and let Lisa prescreen the applicants. She can tell me who would be best for the position.”

“That’ll work. Do you have the sign up for this place?”

“I do. It’s in the window.”

Tom walked through the door and followed her to the front. The entire interior had been worked over by the MicaBots overnight, and it had the look and feel of a new storefront.

She led him past the counter into a spacious reception area, complete with leather couches and a glassed front facing the street. The windows stretched floor to ceiling.

Morning was well underway in League City and the street looked busy, with lots of pedestrian traffic. Haley had left a holosign cylinder in the window, and the words floated up, filling the space.

“Phaethon Solar Corp.”

In smaller letters: “We buy & sell power packs, all sizes.”

“We’re still closed. Nobody knows we’re here yet, anyway. Although I bet some customers are out looking around the bazaar for me. We’ll have to get the word out somehow.”

“Let’s go ahead and spend the money on an ad for that in the Zeitung, too. ‘New Location,’ or something like that.”

“Oh, that’s a good idea.”

“Yeah, there’s not a lot of entertainment options out here unless somebody brought it with them when they immigrated. I think an ad in Ash’s publication would be very effective.”

“Okay. I’ll use the farm’s bank account to pay for that. It’s gotten fat lately.”

“Well, you don’t really need to advertise out in the bazaar. People come and find you, regardless. Now we’re getting bigger and it’s another expense.”

“I’ve got one more thing to show you. I guess we’ll need to hire somebody to run it for us, too.”

She led him out the door to the sidewalk. They crossed over to the smaller office space next door.

Here, another holosign had the three pots logo. It read, “Phaethon Overland Transportation Service.” In smaller letters it read, “We Ship People and Package Across the Globe. Our Fares Can’t Be Beat!”

“That’s excellent,” Tom said, smiling. “I think we’ll reserve the parking spots outside for the bus. Xu is going to have a hard time legislating there be no paid rides out here on the street. The cabbies and rickshaw drivers would have a conniption fit.”

“What you will have troubles with,” Haley said, “is keeping people from parking out here. That’s going to get in the way of a bus, or stretch van or whatever you want to call it, from parking here.”

“Hm. Maybe I can figure something out. There’s one spot open right now. We’d like all four, eventually. Do you have any more of those holosign cylinders?”

“I’ve got one more. Let me go get it.”

When she returned, he opened up the unit’s interface which showed a variety of three-dimensional graphics in the operating holo. He flicked through dozens of groupings with his hand.

“Here we go, vehicles. Now, let’s make an adjustment on size here . . . and here . . .”

He set the cylinder down in the travel agency’s window and carefully aimed it at the open parking spot on the curb, then turned it on. An image of car popped into place, filling the space.

“That’s brilliant. Until somebody figures out it’s not real and decides to park there.”

“Yeah, that might happen. But I bet it won’t. Most people looking for a parking space are going to just drive on by. We’ll get some more holosigns

and you can add a car to each space as they become available. When the bus needs to park there, or one of our delivery trucks, we'll turn the signs off."

"That might work. Where'd you get this idea?"

"I've worked retail most of my life, Haley. My parents put me in a shop in Port Ryan for my thirteenth birthday. You learn all kinds of things running your own store."

Lisa's voice came over his implant.

"Thomas? A delegation from the League is landing at the spaceport this morning. They are bringing equipment designed to find their missing battle tanks."

Haley locked eyes with him.

"Problems?"

"Maybe. Just a minute. Lisa, how are they planning on finding it?"

"Apparently each tank has a beacon chip embedded in it."

"I see. Do you think they can pick up ours? It's deep underground a continent away."

"Probably not. However, you need to be aware they will be searching the city for it, which is the last place the tank was seen."

"Okay, thanks."

He returned his attention to Haley.

She said, "What's going on?"

"The League is looking for their battle tank."

"How are they planning on finding it?"

"With a beacon of some sort. Supposedly every tank had one."

"Oh. Is that a problem?"

“No.”

Tom rubbed his chin, thinking.

“In fact, I think it’s more of an opportunity. Excuse, me I have to get back to the farm.”

He left Haley and went back inside the Phaethon Solar storefront.

In the back of the storage room, Tom popped away.

9.33

A League landing craft settled down in the center of the giant concrete circle comprising League City's spaceport.

Xu stood waiting for them next to a squad car, the same deputy and customs officer he had greeted the Republicans with standing beside him.

He noted the League transport, of Thespar design, had apertures in the front, no doubt housing some sort of weaponry.

Having the League here made Xu nervous, even though he favored their system of socialist government. With the renewed formation of SSI, following its dismantling and the execution of every agent the Republicans could find, this new agency disavowed torture, rape and other methods of oppression their predecessors had used to control the population.

Nonetheless, by using the same name they evoked fear. It would be similar, Xu thought, to West Germany calling their police force the Gestapo after World War II.

He set aside these thoughts as the large landing craft descended vertically to the coordinates on the tarmac Orbital Control gave to the League. It touched down perfectly, landing feet thunking softly on the concrete. Steam drifted off a gleaming black hull as Xu and his men waited for the door to iris open.

A moment later, a ramp came down and the door opened. A tall man stepped out, with swept back hair and pale blue eyes.

He looked to be in his 40s. Mentally, Xu jumped to the conclusion that he had fought in the war, a common presumption made with all people over a certain age.

The pale eyes swept the wide-open concrete, void of everyone save for the men waiting. In the distance, a phalanx of black taxis entered the spaceport gates and headed in their direction.

The man came down the ramp, followed by a dozen other men and women, all dressed in the same shiny black leather uniforms.

Unlike the infamous Night Shadow, Xu thought, whose matte-black outfit hid her perfectly in the dark, these uniforms were glossy, designed to drink in the light and reflect part of it back.

Look at that shine, he said to himself. If any one of these people tried to hide in an alley at night, the glare of a streetlamp would give them away.

Xu stepped forward, dismissing his thoughts.

“I am Joachim Xu, plenipotentiary for the Courthouse and acting Mayor.”

The man nodded, his pale blue eyes fixed on Xu. He did not smile or otherwise change his expression. Nor did he offer his hand in greeting.

“My name is Valerian Pavlikov, fleet representative for State Security and Intelligence. I understand you have some of our battle tanks somewhere on this planet?”

He comes right to the point, Xu thought.

“We know very little about the tank, Mr. Pavlikov. We had a coordinated attack on the Courthouse and the local Galactic Bank branch a couple months ago, involving hundreds of outlaws from the surrounding area. During that incident, a League battle tank appeared out of nowhere and mowed down several of the marauders. The city remains very grateful for the assistance, but we don’t know who was operating the tank or where it came from. Maybe you can help us answer some of those questions.”

Pavlikov nodded, and seemed to dismiss Xu as having much significance for his task at hand.

“We will find the tanks. Theft of war materiel is a serious crime in the League. We will dispense with the necessary justice while we’re here, as well.”

Xu bristled at the implications inherent in the man’s tone and his casual statement.

“I remind you, Mr. Pavlikov, Phaethon is an independent entity. Our charter is not yet aligned with any governmental system, as there has not been an election for that yet. As such, we are not subject to any laws of the League, or the Republic.”

Pavlikov made a dismissive gesture with his hand.

He looked over his shoulder and said to one of the men behind him, “Take a reading.”

The man nodded, and opened a briefcase. He pulled out a flat rectangular unit the size of large book and pressed a finger on it. A holoscreen popped up showing a map of the city.

He stared at it for a moment, then looked back at Pavlikov, shaking his head.

The first of several taxis drove up and parked nearby. Some of the drivers got out to stare at the large transport and the people standing outside it. They all looked hopeful for some business.

“The range is limited for the portable detection units on a world without StarCen. But we will find our battle tanks, Mr. Xu. And we will bring the person or persons responsible for smuggling them here to justice. I have five Eagle-class ships in orbit that say I can do what I want on this planet. Don’t get in my way.”

He made a “follow me” gesture and led his men toward the taxis. The customs officer started to protest, then quickly gave up. It seemed obvious no one was going to submit to a scan.

Xu noted each man also carried a sidearm. At least three had rifles strapped to their backs, too.

He sighed, thinking of his one deputy, no doubt with a partially spent power pack in his one gun. The SSI people really could do what they wanted down here.

He wondered if the Republicans, also in orbit, might have something to say about that . . .

9.34

Deep underneath the Skoni Desert, in a hidden alcove off a giant subterranean cavern, Tom and Silas grunted underneath the second and last League battle tank smuggled to Phaethon.

The war machine rested on stone pylons carved out by MicaBots, and both men worked underneath it secure in the knowledge it would not fall down and crush them.

“They sure knew how to put these bolts on, lemme tell ya,” Silas said, pulling back on a wrench as hard as he could.

“It wouldn’t be so bad,” Tom said, “if they didn’t tuck this part away in such a hard-to-reach place.”

“To be fair, Mr. Savage, this panel was never *designed* to be opened. They didn’t particularly want it to be messed with, unless it was really needed.”

The bolt suddenly loosened with a shriek of metal-on-metal, and a panel flipped down.

“There she is! Now, let’s see what we got in here.”

Silas pulled out a small light and shined it up inside the tank’s undercarriage.

“There we go. I see it. It’s a small square, five centimeters by five, right where the schematics said it would be. Looks like it’s held in place pretty tight, designed to stay put even with a direct hit from enemy fire.”

Silas picked up a metal claw tool and reached up into the narrow space. The claws gripped the flat square piece and pried it loose. He pulled down with his arm, yanking the chip free from its mooring.

“Got it! Here ya go, Mr. Savage. One League battle tank tracking beacon. I imagine their scanners can’t see it down here, though. Are you gonna destroy it or what?”

Tom took the square chip from the metal claws and looked at it closely. The word, “Thespar” was stamped on top. The letters caught the faint light underneath the tank and seemed to shimmer.

“Somebody somewhere once said that every problem is an opportunity. Or something like that. No, Silas. I’m not going to destroy this chip. I’ve got a better idea.”

-+-

Tom appeared with a pop deep in an alley inside the Projects.

Haley popped in beside him, wearing cutoff shorts, a bikini top and red high heels.

Tom said, “We need to hurry. They’re probably getting a reading on this thing right now.”

“Don’t tell anybody about this. I feel so skanky dressed like this.”

“Come on. I’ll be your pimp.”

“Great. We are not telling Gwen or Ash about any of this.”

Quickly they walked out to the street, stepping over trash along the way. On the sidewalk, they turned right and headed for the basement entrance of Tay-hoe’s.

Tom let Haley go down the steps first. The guard, sitting on a stool at the bottom of the steps, looked up and frowned at the sight of the newcomers.

Then his eyes drifted down to her chest.

“Hi! Remember me? I’m new.”

The guard forced himself to look her in the face.

“I don’t know you.”

“Well, I’m new. Excuse me.”

She moved to walk past him.

He stood up and blocked her way.

“No one gets in that I don’t know.”

“Hey, leave the lady alone!”

Tom inserted himself between them.

“Who are you? I don’t know you, either.”

Tom shoved the bigger man to one side.

“Hey!”

The guard swung, his fist going wide in a roundhouse punch.

Tom dodged it, then wrapped his arms around the man and shoved him into the wall.

Desperate now, the man landed blows on Tom’s side, but the limited space in the doorway was far too tight for good fighting.

They struggled for a moment.

Haley ran back up the steps. When she reached the top, Tom disengaged.

“Forget it, man! I’m never coming back here!”

“Good! See to it you don’t!”

Tom turned and followed Haley.

The guard cursed him all the way up the steps.

Out on the sidewalk again, he met Haley, who stood there smiling.

“Did you get it?”

Tom nodded and said, “It’s in his back pocket.”

“I don’t think you really needed me for this.”

“Are you kidding? That was great. Besides, you need something to do now that you’ve given that other gig up. You know, the one where you dressed in black.”

As they walked back in the alley so Lisa could port them away, Haley said, “You’re right, that’s Mona’s job now. But I am not dressing up like a prostitute to fight crime.”

“Well, it’s not like you have to do it all the time or anything . . .”

Seconds later, they popped away.

Down at the basement entrance to Tay-hoe’s, the guard rubbed his face where a haymaker had struck home.

He settled back on the stool, oblivious to the small flat chip in his back pocket.

9.35

Pavlikov sat in the front seat with the taxi driver, staring at the sidewalks, the buildings, and the people.

He sneered at the rustic appearance of the city. It looked very new, all concrete and granite and wood thrown together. It was not refined and established, or even very modern. He noted the doors were mostly on hinges, even. They passed a nice hotel with sliding doors, but all the storefronts since had hinged entrances.

With no set directions, the driver brought them back to the Commerce District, since that was where most people eventually drifted, especially out-of-towners. But Pavlikov and his people were not interested in shopping.

He had to pay off each taxi at the spaceport beforehand. They needed four for all their people and equipment. But they had no clear direction, and had no idea how long they would be needing a ride.

After some heated negotiation, Pavlikov threw up his hands and gave each driver a 50-credit token. That quieted them down. As far as they were concerned, they were now his for the day. They would happily wander the streets aimlessly if that was what he wanted.

The other drivers showing up after the first four got nothing. Some cursed the Leaguers, waving their fists, while others shrugged and drove back into

town looking for fares.

Pavlikov took the man with the sensor, his name was Septon, and ordered the other taxis to follow theirs. A young woman in his group joined Septon in the back seat.

It took Pavlikov a moment to recall her name as they headed for the spaceport gate. He knew her last name was Garcia, one of the most common surnames in the galaxy.

Several blocks later, he remembered her first name: Estelle. It reminded him, with a pang, of his wife Annaliese. He had not seen her in weeks, being stuck on a ship in hypertime.

Annaliese's career excelled after the war in the government. He, as a veteran, was quietly taken care of as he pursued jobs in law enforcement.

When SSI was reformed, he took the naming as a thumb in the nose of the Republic, for all the retribution they wreaked on SSI forces during the war and its immediate aftermath.

Officially, the Republic was no longer the League's enemy. Unofficially, there was considerable distrust and dislike for those capitalist pigs who had taken so many of their planets away . . .

Annaliese went into the diplomatic corps and rose through the ranks. She did not share with Pavlikov everything about her job, just as he stayed mum about certain aspects of his. But in the Clarion social set they were known as a power couple.

She was young and attractive. Both their stars seemed to be rising simultaneously.

They looked related, although they were not, other than by marriage. Their pale blue eyes looked similar, although hers were lighter and brighter.

His had seen too much blood to be bright, both during the war and in his chosen profession afterward.

The taxi drove aimlessly through the streets.

Pavlikov stayed quiet, reminiscing.

Their driver made a valiant effort to engage everybody in conversation, at least at first. But by this time he had given up. At Pavlikov's direction, he meandered through the streets, turning at the next intersection.

SSI, Pavlikov told him, wanted to canvas the entire city. They would keep going until they got a hit on the monitor.

"I got a hit!"

Septon could not keep the excitement out of his voice. Garcia scooted closer across the back seat to get a better look at the holo floating above the holo unit.

Pavlikov said, "Where?"

"Uh . . . Let me put it on a map overlay."

A new holo sprang up, showing a satellite image of League City taken from space. Like the Republicans on shore leave the day before, they had no access to an AI down here to help them navigate.

Septon moved the tablet forward so the holo floated up to the front seat.

Their driver took a look.

"Oh, the Projects. Yah, I shoulda known your tank would be parked over there, sir. There are no good people comin' outta the Projects!"

"Take us there. Now."

The driver nodded and pressed down on the accelerator, turning toward Courthouse Square.

9.36

The guard stretched, thoroughly bored.

He scratched the back of his neck, then reached for the small of his back.

Unsuccessful with reaching the itch, he stood up and rubbed his back along the doorpost and finally found relief.

He sat back down on the stool again, bored once more.

He was also starting to get hungry, and he wondered when his relief would show up.

As if reading his thoughts, and perhaps it could, his stomach grumbled at him.

He sighed and tried to set aside thoughts of food.

Thinking back to the confrontation with those strangers led him to dwell briefly on the attractive girl who showed up down here. Was she really new? She did look sort of familiar, now that he thought about it . . .

No matter. The dude, on the other hand, had definitely been a stranger. The guard still smarted from the lucky hit that guy landed.

With a little more time and a little more space to maneuver, I coulda taken him, the guard thought, frowning.

Light at the top of the outdoor stairs dimmed as somebody left the sidewalk and took the steps down. The guard smiled when he saw his replacement coming down the flight.

“‘Bout time you got here. I’m starvin’ half to death, lemme tell ya!”

The other man smiled but said nothing.

The guard stood, letting his replacement claim the stool. Then he walked down the hall and headed to Tay-hoe’s, hoping to score lunch at the bar underneath the concrete building.

-+-

“We lost it!”

“What?”

“The signal! I lost the signal! It was right there but . . . now it’s gone.”

“How does that happen? Those things don’t just disappear.”

The taxi convoy now sped through the Southside Projects. Garcia, Septon and Pavlikov had all been watching the blinking red dot on the map as they moved ever closer to its location.

The dot no longer blinked, leaving the map completely empty of markers.

“I dunno, sir. It’s *gone*.”

“A tank doesn’t just disappear like that!”

“This one does,” the driver offered, speaking up while keeping his eyes on the road. “I saw it that night. I was one of the cabbies parked out at Courthouse Square. This thing appeared out of nowhere and started killin’ outlaws. Darnedest thing. It was like a thousand shots firin’ out all at once, sprayin’ in all directions and knockin’ down men. Then it flew up above the rooftops and nobody has ever seen it since.”

“Well, it’s out here,” Septon said. “You all saw the beacon’s signature. It was right there!”

“Bring us to the spot it was,” Pavlikov said to the driver. “The beacon held for all this time. Maybe the tank had a power outage or something.”

“It’s passive, sir,” Septon said. “The beacon doesn’t need power to work. It responds to the sensor’s signals.”

“Whatever. *Something* with one of our tanks happened at that location. We’ll find out what it was.”

The four taxis pulled up in the street outside the entrance to Tay-hoe’s.

Stoop guards leaned out of their doorways to see what was going on. Taxis rarely made their way into the Projects, unless they were headed to the fairgrounds. And no one could remember seeing several stop here before, all at once.

Pavlikov opened his door first and stepped out, looking over the entrances to the buildings and the guards stationed there. Men and women in all the other taxis exited as well.

Septon climbed out and held his sensor up, watching it closely.

“Do you see anything?” Pavlikov asked.

“I’m . . . I’m getting a faint signal, like it’s being blocked by something. It’s coming from . . . down there.”

He pointed toward Tay-hoe’s.

Everyone in the group looked at the stairs alongside the building, leading down.

Pavlikov nodded and pulled out a shiny black pistol, the same shade as his uniform.

His men and women followed suit, retrieving weapons. Those with rifles unslung them and checked the safeties.

All around him, people nodded.

Pavlikov gave them a rare smile.

At long last, after weeks of being cooped up on a ship, they were seeing some action.

“Let’s go retrieve our tank.”

9.37

Casper stood beside Billy, washing glassware.

The morning guard sat at the bar eating lunch, a pulled-pork sandwich with pickle variants on the side.

This particular guard never gambled, but he ate all his meals at Tay-hoe's, returning most of the money Casper paid him. What little he saved was eventually wasted on a prostitute, usually about once a month.

He was the perfect patron, as far as Casper was concerned. He did his work for little pay without complaint, then spent almost everything, giving it all back to the Overlord.

Casper's thoughts were interrupted by yells drifting down the hall.

Someone had tried to barge in earlier, according to the guard, but it was nothing he couldn't handle.

This time, Casper thought, it sounded like a lot more people were trying to get through.

"Should we do something, Overlord?"

Billy sounded worried.

Casper frowned. No one messed with his place. Ever.

Thoop!

The sound of a blaster bolt changed everything.

They heard the door guard slumping lifeless down to the concrete.

Casper turned and flipped a latch on the wall behind the bar, opening a hidden compartment. The liquor bottles swung back on a concealed door, revealing a veritable armory of guns on a large rack.

He said, "This is the raid we've been waiting for, ever since the Courthouse."

Billy started grabbing guns.

Casper nodded at the guard, who abandoned his meal and ran behind the bar. He grabbed two pistols from the rack and stuffed them in his waistband, then pulled down a rifle.

They heard the sound of multiple footsteps rushing down the narrow hall.

Someone outside the door said, "It's in there!"

A uniformed man burst through the door to Tay-hoe's in the bar's first raid.

Septon gazed inside, eyes wide, the red dot on the holo of his detection unit flashing furiously.

Casper, Billy and the morning guard crouched behind the bar with rifles.

All three opened fire at once.

Red bolts slammed into Septon, knocking him back into the hallway. The sensor unit flew from his hands, its holo flying away with the base.

-+-

Pavlikov rested with his back to the wall, on the right side of the door, his gun drawn.

He looked down at Septon's bloody body, charred by energy bolts. On the floor nearby, the sensor's holo displayed an angry red dot flashing near the

center screen.

The tank was meters away, according to the sensor.

To his left, SSI agents in the hallway crouched down. They were scrunched together, guns out.

Too late, Pavlikov realized his rookie mistake. He had led his people into a classic bottleneck, and he should have known better.

There would be an inquiry, especially with Septon's death. His wife would protect him from a prison term, probably. But this mistake likely spelled the end of his career.

Unless he got that tank . . . then, all might be forgiven.

"We've got to get through that door and into that room, sir."

Garcia interrupted his thoughts.

She stood beside him, her back to the wall.

He nodded. She was right.

Behind her, two heavy thugs stood up straight. They carried rifles.

The closest one nodded at Pavlikov.

He moved quietly forward. Pavlikov stood aside as the big man moved closer to the door.

He paused, back to the wall, rifle pointed up. Calmly, deliberately, the man flicked a switch on his gun to the "Full Auto" setting.

Then he took a step and pivoted, bringing his rifle down into the doorway while still using the wall for cover.

He sprayed the bar with bolts.

They blew into barstools, wood exploding, splinters spraying.

Bolts slammed into liquor bottles and mugs, glass bursting into dust and spreading like mist.

Bolts peppered the bar, too, pocking the wood with angry black marks.

Three men hunkered down behind the bar. But no bolts came through the wood.

With no return fire, the SSI man let off the trigger and ran inside the room, his partner following right behind him.

Garcia came next, holding her pistol out. Pavlikov waved the others through, one after the other.

He looked down at the tablet again on the floor. The red dot showed the tank to be close.

Very close.

9.38

The first man dove for cover under a table as the guard came up over the top of the bar, shooting.

They exchanged fire.

The SSI man sprayed the bar, intent on hitting the guard's center mass. But again, nothing seemed to get through the wood.

The guard popped up again, like an armed whack-a-mole, spraying the room with gunfire. He aimed for the stream of black-clad people running through the door, hitting two. They screamed in pain, but lived.

This time, the SSI gunman aimed up and squeezed his trigger on full auto again. A hail of bolts slammed into the wall above the bar, taking the guard down too.

Now half a dozen guns fired at the bar, joining the first man. Wood smoked from the bolts and their impacts. But Casper and Billy stayed crouched behind the barrier, unscathed.

Garcia scrambled deeper into the room. She stopped shooting and took in the scene, noting the wood of the bar now looked completely charred.

On a hunch, she ran forward and at an angle. She jumped and rolled behind a cluster of chairs and came up aiming her gun at the men hiding behind the

bar.

Billy looked up, surprised to see her. He turned to shoot . . .

And went down with one shot.

Suddenly, she realized why no bolts got through the wood.

“The bar’s blaster-proof! It’s lined with Kelvingarb!”

The men stopped shooting.

Casper locked eyes with her over Billy’s body. He held a rifle and had two more on the floor for when the power pack went out on the first one.

But right now, he stared down the barrel of Garcia’s gun. She had the drop on him.

Slowly, deliberately, he put the rifle down and lifted his hands.

Garcia stood, still pointing her gun at him.

“Get up.”

Slowly, ever so slowly, Casper stood.

He recognized the SSI uniforms now.

“My name is Casper Epsilon-Slodovich. I am a LEAF veteran.”

“Maybe you can tell me where our tanks are, then,” Pavlikov said from the hallway.

He picked up the dead man’s tablet and walked into the bar. The red blinking light showed imminent proximity.

Casper cocked his head to one side, uncertain of what the man meant.

“Tanks? You mean the one that showed up during the bank robbery?”

“Yes. A League battle tank, one of two known to be smuggled to this world. You have it hidden down here, no? Our tracking beacon is showing it to be here. In this very room.”

The trace of a rare smile showed on Casper’s lips.

“I can assure you, there is no League battle tank in Tay-hoe’s. I only have cheap booze and cheaper women.”

Pavlikov looked up from the holo with the flashing light and locked eyes with Casper.

“You speak with casual confidence. In my line of work, that’s a good indicator of someone telling the truth. People who are lying often try to fake confidence. But people who are not lying are truly relaxed. They know what they are saying is true, so why should they worry?”

Pavlikov walked further in the room, glancing down at the holo that floated before him.

“However, this device does not lie at all. It was designed to help us recover equipment on worlds in which StarCen is not yet established. Such as this one. And it is telling me that one of our missing tanks is . . .”

Pavlikov stopped walking, frowning at the holo.

He looked down at the dead guard behind the bar and pointed at him.

“Right there. Hm. Obviously, this is not a tank.”

He set the unit down and kicked the body over with his boot.

Pavlikov turned to one of his men and said, “Search him.”

The man hurried over and started rifling through the guard’s pockets.

He pulled out a large square beacon chip and held it up between his thumb and forefinger.

Blood rushed into Pavlikov’s face.

He reached behind the bar and grabbed Casper’s shirt, pulling him close and yelling in his face.

“Where is my tank?”

9.39

“We will remain in orbit until after the election.”

Xu nodded in agreement.

Something happened to the SSI team in the Southside Projects, but he did not know what.

Evidently, they did not find their tank.

Also, from reports he had received from the spaceport, SSI loaded two bodies onto their transport, which took off shortly after. No doubt they wanted to bring the remains of their people back home.

Pavlikov continued.

“I and my team will remain planetside until then as well. Thank you for the services of your medical staff. We are suffering a shortage of nanobots at the moment.”

Xu nodded again.

He met Pavlikov and others in the team at League City Hospital, where their staff did have a small supply of nanobots to distribute. Most of the men and women from the SSI team showed up with minor scrapes and bruises, nothing warranting advanced treatment. But at least two had been shot. They received a dose via pneumatic syringe.

“You are welcome to our guest services as well,” Xu said. “Our two best hotels are close to the outdoor bazaar, on Commerce Boulevard.”

“Thank you. We will continue to look for the missing tanks. However, in light of the fact they appear to have been sabotaged, we are not hopeful at the moment. When your planet aligns with the League, we will establish StarCen’s core network. Perhaps then, we will at last be able to uncover their locations.”

“It’s my personal hope that the populace sees reason and elects to join the League. Your system of government is the preferred one, in my opinion.”

“Of course. Thank you again for your assistance.”

Feeling as though he had just been dismissed, Xu turned to leave the hospital reception area.

He noted a deputy checking out a patient at the front desk, an old cowboy by the looks of things.

The deputy spoke with the receptionist while the cowboy stood behind him in restraints.

“I’ll be moving Mr. Donahue to the jail. Thanks for taking care of him for us. Looks like his jaw is all healed up.”

The old man would not stop talking.

“I tell ya, I was three hundred kilometers from here! I dunno what happened. All of a sudden, I showed up in the city streets. I said to myself, ‘What flimflammy is this? How did I get here?’ Before I know what was happenin’, some crazy woman dressed all in black is beatin’ the snot outta me! I’m innocent, I tell ya!”

“Sure, sure. Everybody’s innocent,” the deputy said, signing a holosheet for the receptionist with his finger.

He turned and guided Donahue out the door and into a waiting squad car.

Xu watched them go, then followed their path out the door. He would be walking back to the Courthouse.

He reflected on what the outlaw said.

Three hundred clicks out . . .

And that tank seemed to disappear in thin air, too. Now, the SSI team couldn't find it anywhere.

He mulled on these things as he headed back to his office.

An election would have to be called soon. He would run for Mayor, making his position official and solidifying his hold on power once more.

At the same time the population would vote for their alignment, choosing between one of the major systems of government.

Xu would have to find Casper Slodovich again, once the election was called, and see what the old veteran wanted for the votes of his people.

As for those in outlying areas? Well, maybe he could figure out some incentive to offer so they would vote for joining the League.

He really did prefer socialism over democracy.

Too little power to grab in the latter, he thought. But socialism . . . socialism created dependence. And any time people were dependent on the government, they surrendered power to the government.

Xu would do whatever it took to encourage the people to vote for joining the League. And he would do whatever it took to stay in power.

-+ -

Xu passed a handsome man on the sidewalk accompanying two extraordinarily attractive women. The trio walked past him in the opposite direction.

"As near as I can tell," Kelsen said to June and Judy as they walked, "from what Mr. Thallus told me, there was some kid who worked in the Courthouse as a messenger. This kid is not a resident of the Projects. But he knew where this place was, this Tay-hoe's. And he shows up there, because he's been there before. And what does he find? A dead guard out front."

“That’s never a good sign,” June said, smiling.

Judy said, “I’m glad you had a chance to talk to Ashley Thallus. Then what happened?”

“The kid goes inside and this place is all shot up. Blood everywhere. One dead body, no one else. Somebody comes out the back, where the gambling tables are, apparently. They fill the kid in on what happened. He goes straight to Thallus’s office and fills him in on the details.”

“Well, good. Maybe this will help sway the election.”

“Oh, absolutely. The owner of the place, the guy they call Overlord, has gone missing. His body is not there, and no one knows what happened to him. Ashley tells me he has some pull in the electorate here. He said Tay-hoe’s was a rallying point for the big failed bank robbery and the attack on the Courthouse a while back. It’s all quite exciting, for an out of the way place like this. And we’ve definitely got a friend in the press out here.”

They stopped at a corner where a news kiosk showed the Zeitung’s logo. The chyron changed as a new headline sprang to life.

“SSI Shootout in the Projects . . . Unknown Numbers Dead . . . Tank Still Missing . . .”

June said, “That Mr. Thallus doesn’t waste any time, does he?”

“No. And I can almost guarantee you that story is going to paint the League’s presence on this planet in a very negative light.”

“That’s not hard to do,” Judy said. “After all, they reformed the SSI, and sent an SSI team down here to look for a battle tank. All we have to do is remind people that SSI will be everywhere around here if they vote to join the League.”

“Alright,” Kelsen said. “We know what to do. Let’s split up. Everybody find different bars and restaurants, anywhere people are talking about current events. Put that bug in their ears, that SSI is here to stay if they vote the wrong way. I’ll meet you both back at the hotel tonight.”

The women nodded, and turned to head off in different directions.

“Oh, and girls . . .”

They stopped and looked back.

He smiled at them.

“Don’t pick up any men.”

They both snorted and turned back around.

He chuckled, watching them go.

Under his breath he said, “They are going to make me pay for that one later, I bet.”

9.40

Wind blew lightly through Buddy's home turf, and the little sand dragon turned to let it waft over his face.

"I know," Tara said softly. "The barrier has kept the breezes out. You're smelling things, aren't you? Things you've never smelled before."

A light patter of sand struck them as another gust blew in. A second set of lids squeezed shut over Buddy's eyes.

"Are those transparent? They are! So, that's how you can see in a dust storm. My word, there's so much I've yet to learn about you . . ."

Sniffing the breeze, Buddy slowly walked out to the barrier's former perimeter.

He climbed a small rock and looked north, out into the desert.

"It's time I let you go. I've learned so much . . . but if I don't let you go out there and catch your own food and learn how to survive, I'm afraid it will be too late. Now is a good time. Tom and Gwen say the oasis is mostly empty. The other sand dragons are already back in their territories or headed that way. I . . . I need to let you go."

Buddy's head whipped around, and he locked eyes with her.

"Go on. Go. It's what you're supposed to do."

Buddy turned back to the desert and sniffed the air again.

He hopped off the rock and scampered out past the barrier line.

In seconds, he disappeared among the sand and rocks, the color of his skin blending in perfectly with the surroundings.

A single tear rolled down Tara's cheek.

"I love you, Buddy."

She turned and walked back toward her research center, head hanging low.

-+-

Buddy scampered among the rocks. New rocks, ones he had never seen before in his life.

He rushed to another one, and another, sniffing the wind.

At last he found a rock where the scent he followed grew strongest. He rose up on his hind legs and crept forward, silently.

"HUWHAAA!"

He jumped over the rock and came down on a desert rat, his first live one.

The rodent was huge, as big as Buddy. It struggled hard, sharp teeth snapping and biting into the lizard's tender young skin.

Buddy's claws ripped into tough flea-bitten fur, his own sharp little teeth ripping and slashing, spilling hot blood.

In seconds the battle was over. Buddy stood over his prey, eating everything, bones and all.

The young lizard burped, then walked away from the rocks and out to a sandy spot several meters away.

He plopped down and rested, letting his wounds heal. The breeze covered him in a thin layer of dust, hiding red bite marks all over his body.

The thump of a heavy metal foot made him open both eyes.

His head rose . . . and kept tilting up.

A three-meter tall gunmetal gray robot towered over him.

Buddy's eyes grew round, lizard slits dilating wide.

In a flash, far faster than Buddy could move, Timmy reached down and fastened a sensor on the little sand dragon's neck.

The smart strap tightened, immediately binding itself, and the sensor, to Buddy's body. As the sand dragon grew larger the strap would adjust, to be never too tight and never too loose.

Buddy stared at the robot, unable to comprehend what just happened.

Slowly . . . carefully . . . Timmy crouched down again, bending at the knees.

He patted Buddy very lightly on the head with one metallic finger.

Then he straightened and walked away, his task complete. He picked up the pace and headed back for the farm house.

At his office in New Galveston, Tom smiled, watching everything through Timmy's feed.

"Well, Son of Big Ugly has been belled, just like his old man."

"Are you gonna tell Tara that you can track her little one?" Gwen said from their kitchen table back at the farm.

"Not yet. I'm thinking she doesn't need to know about Lisa until everybody else finds out we've got a global AI in place."

"Oh? And when do you think that's going to be? When is everybody gonna figure it out?"

Tom turned to another holo on the corner of his desk, showing a feed from the Phaethon Zeitung.

A new headline had just appeared. He smiled, reading it again.

"Xu Calls Global Election for Mayor and Alignment."

“I think everybody’s going to find out about Lisa *soon*, sweetheart. Very soon.”

End of Book 9

ROUTINE DIPLOMACY

10.1

Casper's eyes slowly opened. He squinted, struggling to adjust to the light and discern what he could about this new location.

The room looked completely white.

And sterile.

He recognized it, his mind fitting it neatly into something he saw before, over two decades ago, during the war.

Sickbay.

That meant he was on a ship.

That also meant he was in space.

His mind struggled to make sense of things, and he grasped for the memory of his last cogent thought . . .

He heard a footstep to his right, the sound of someone stepping back.

“He’s awake.”

Casper tried to turn his head and face the speaker. That’s when he discovered the restraints. A force net held him in an inclined chair. He lay with arms and legs spread out, belly up like a starfish.

He could barely make out the person who spoke, dressed also in white.

Doc bot, he thought. Newer model.

Someone stepped into his field of vision from the left.

Glossy black uniform. Pale blue eyes.

His mind categorized this fellow, too. That part was easy, based on the uniform.

SSI.

“Welcome back to the land of the living, Mr. Slodovich. I should inform you that you are aboard the SLS Stalwart. As such, you are now considered to be on Star League territory, subject to all our pertinent laws and codes. Are we clear?”

Casper experimented. He could nod his head. Just barely.

“Good. We can keep this simple and pleasant, and for your sake I hope we do. Now, some introductions. I am Valerian Pavlikov, fleet representative for State Security and Intelligence.”

The name meant nothing to Casper.

But then, it wouldn't. He had been away from the League for a long time.

“And you are?”

“Casper Epsilon-Slodovich.”

“Yes. So you said down below before your capture. We smuggled you aboard, by the way, using the ruse that you were one of our dead. No one knows you are here. Now, a LEAF veteran, you said?”

Casper nodded again.

Val paced in the tight confines of the all-white sickbay. He moved in and out of Casper's field of vision.

“StarCen has given me your records to review. I know all about you, Sergeant. You served on Sporades for a year. That strikes me as very

interesting, since the tanks we seek were put into cold storage on Sporades.”

Casper’s eyelids drooped.

“I know nothing about any tanks.”

“Yes, yes. So you have said. Did you know, Sergeant, that it is rumored the old tetrarch who ruled from Sporades before the Republican invasion is still alive and well? Let’s see . . . what was his name?”

“Billings.”

Val broke into a smile.

“That’s right. Michelangelo Billings! He was supposed to have been captured by the Republican Marines. But somehow, he escaped. Or so they say. And someone is churning up negative sentiment in the population over there. If a planet were to leave the Republic and rejoin us, Sporades is high on the list of leading candidates. And . . . and this is classified, but under the circumstances I will let you know . . . Just between you and me, there are still stockpiles of weapons cached away on Sporades. They have never been found. Most of the planet is covered in ocean, you know. That makes it hard to search for them.”

Casper smirked. It did not look like much under his current circumstances, but he tried.

“And elsewhere, I’m sure. I would imagine we left stockpiles of weapons everywhere the tetrarchs once ruled.”

“Oh, you are a smart one. You were demoted, weren’t you?”

“The war ended.”

“And you were in the brig when it did, were you not? You were knocked down to private after striking an officer.”

Casper remained silent. There seemed little point in denying it.

Val sighed.

“Look, Sergeant. I have a job to do. I was sent to retrieve two stolen tanks from this backwater of a planet. Even if their being placed in cold storage two decades ago occurred under questionable circumstances . . . even if Old Man Billings is still alive and plotting to overthrow the Republicans on Sporades with hidden caches of weaponry left behind after the war . . . Even if all that is true, we need those tanks back under government control. They are dangerous weapons of war, and they do not belong in civilian hands. Surely you can agree with that.”

Casper grunted and looked straight ahead.

“I wish you all the best in your efforts to retrieve stolen weaponry.”

He said it in a flat monotone.

Val walked back into his field of vision.

“Thank you. I think, somehow, you are sincere in your sentiment. But I know you, Sergeant. I know you were dirty. I know you ran a gambling enterprise during your time with the LEAF, skimming off the top.”

“The house always wins.”

“Ah. Unapologetic. I like it.”

Val pinched under his ear and pulled out a holosheet from his implant.

“Here is the list of offenses StarCen has recorded *since* your dishonorable discharge. My, my, my. It is long, isn’t it? And now you have been out of our system for almost three years, doing God only knows what with your time. Perhaps smuggling tanks? What could an . . . ‘Overlord,’ do they call you? What could an overlord like yourself do with such weapons?”

“I know nothing about the tanks. There will be an election to decide this planet’s alignment. I can help you with that. I control a lot of votes.”

Valerian smiled and snapped the sheet away with his fingers.

He leaned in close to Casper’s face.

“I want my tanks.”

“I can’t help you with that. I can help with the election. I can provide all the votes you’ll need to swing it in the League’s direction. I’ve done it before with the old mayor.”

Val pulled back and smiled.

“You are good. Very good. But I am better. I will not be distracted away from my objective. And my objective is obtaining those two missing tanks. Then we can discuss system alignment and how you may be able to help with that.”

He turned to the doc bot.

“Prepare the solution.”

Looking back at Casper, Val said, “It was on Sporades that RNI uncovered SSI’s data archive, accessible only via a proper bio-connection from one of our quadrant director’s neurological pathways. Somehow, the Republicans managed to get in. We’re still not sure how that happened. But we know the results. We lost almost everybody who worked for us under the old regime.”

The doc bot approached Casper’s side again and pressed a pneumatic syringe against his arm.

“In the old days people used sodium pentothal and other such barbiturates. I’m told modern nanobots are much more effective as truth serums.”

Val watched Casper closely, leaning in toward his face again.

Casper’s eyes drooped, then shut tight.

Val smiled.

“Now let us begin. Tell me your name.”

“Casper . . . Epsilon . . . Slodovich . . .”

“What do you know about the League battle tanks smuggled here from Sporades?”

“I . . . know . . . very little. There was a bank robbery . . . One I helped set up . . .”

Val raised one eyebrow very slowly.

Despite his earlier promise not to get sidetracked, now that his subject was properly drugged, he felt more comfortable chasing rabbits.

“Tell me about this bank robbery. Why were you robbing banks?”

“We wanted to establish anarchy here . . . The X’s and O’s did. I . . . just wanted . . . to get the money . . .”

10.2

“Control, this is the Republican-flagged ship Victory. We’ve got a hold full of goods for you.”

“Harper’s Bounty requesting permission to land at your space port.”

“League trader Shchukin here, Control. What’s the best way to get our goods down to you?”

The Orbital Control office in the Courthouse basement looked busy as Joachim Xu ducked his head through the doorway.

It looked far busier, he thought, than it ever had in at least a year.

The harried operator held an expression reminiscent of a drowning man as he glanced up from the holo showing graphical representations of eight new ships parked in orbit.

“More seem to be coming in by the minute, sir!”

Xu nodded, displaying no emotion.

“Everyone heard about the lifting of the embargo at the same time and hurried to be among the first to show up. Coordinate the landing parties. Don’t let too many of the smaller ships touch down at the spaceport, you’ll crowd everyone out. Have them send down transports, if possible. If you

get too many wanting to land, stagger the times. They've been in space for weeks, a day or two in orbit won't hurt anything."

The man nodded and resumed belting out instructions over the com.

Xu left him to it and headed for his own office.

The election would need to be called soon. Of course, no one could find Casper Slodovich, the man who could deliver the votes in the Southside Projects, that part of town stuffed to the brim with poor immigrants who would vote however their leaders told them.

They swung the last election to Hizzoner, Xu thought, thanks in no small part to Reynard Gliph and his right-hand man Anton Berris.

But Gliph later led a disastrous raid on the Commerce District that in some ways still haunted the city. Then, apparently, he bought passage for a dozen people on a sky train and attacked the town of Little York a continent away.

Reports about what, exactly, had transpired in Little York were sketchy. But the public house there sent confirmation of casualties back to the Courthouse for record-keeping. They included one Reynard Gliph.

Anton Berris remained alive, presumably. He had left town, taking a ship out before the embargo to parts unknown.

Xu greatly preferred working with Berris, a man who seemed to understand the things that are sometimes necessary to grab and hold onto power.

But with both of the top men in that group of anarchists gone, he was left dealing with Slodovich, the one everyone had taken to calling Overlord.

And the Overlord, like Berris, was nowhere to be found.

All these thoughts crossed Xu's mind as he opened the door to Hizzoner's office.

Ever since the simultaneous attack on the bank and Courthouse by seemingly every outlaw gang on Phaethon, when Hizzoner's death had become public knowledge, Xu went ahead and cleared out the corpse he had been storing here.

They had a proper state funeral, and Xu had mostly avoided facing all the embarrassing questions.

Mostly.

That aggravating boy from Diego, the one who fancied himself head of a “field office” for the Zeitung, had the temerity to question him about the corpse.

Xu still remembered the headline in the local edition the next morning:
COVERUP?

After the election, Xu thought to himself, something is going to have to be done about that boy. Either he needs to see the light or . . .

He shook his head, frowning.

No time to get distracted. There’s an election to call, and I can’t find Casper Slodovich.

“Marcie!”

A young aide ran up to the door of his office.

“Yes, sir?”

“Find out who is in charge of the Projects at the moment. I need to set up a meeting with somebody there. Anybody.”

The young woman gulped, hoping she would not be the one asked to venture into the high-crime area.

“Yes, sir. I will ask Stevens to look into it.”

But Xu had already waved her away in dismissal. Having given the order, he felt certain someone would carry it out.

He closed the door to his office, ruminating over how best to secure the votes for both his election and the alignment of the planet into Star League’s system of government.

10.3

“Lumen! Lu! Get him, Lu!”

A man dressed in black raced from the mouth of an alley, shooting up and across the street.

He dove and rolled at a line of cars parked near the curb as shots answered back from the other side, red bolts bursting into pavement and vehicles.

The men cheering him on shrank back into the depths of the alley as the opposing gunfire shifted toward them.

The running man stopped and caught his breath, heart pounding from his brush with death. He stayed crouched down, out of the sniper’s sightline.

Then he turned his attention to the three men lying prone behind the car, bodies hugging close to the vehicle’s body.

“I’m Lumen Wang.”

“Yes, we know,” the man closest to him snorted.

“It looks like the Round Blocks found a rifle.”

“And you’re the head of Luminosity. Are we done stating the obvious? How are we gonna take that guy out now that you’re here with us, O wise and wonderful leader?”

“You know,” piped up a second man, lying between the surly one and the third fellow on the end, “if this was real anarchy, wouldn’t we have no leaders?”

The first one turned his ire on his comrade.

“This ain’t anarchy yet, Bruce. We was sent here to establish it on this planet. And purt near every leader we had is dead or gone.”

“Well, then it seems to me,” Bruce said with a note of stubbornness in his voice, “that we’re closer to anarchy like this than we was before SSI took out the Overlord.”

A spatter of red bolts came down like hail, making the vehicle rock back and forth. Everyone but the third man pulled in their feet closer to the car, keeping them out of the line of fire.

“Dang it! If you’re wantin’ to be our leader on this side of the street, Mr. Wang, go and figure out how to stop that idiot up there with the rifle!”

Lumen nodded, keeping his face neutral.

“That’s what I’m here for. What’s the matter with him?”

Bruce and his partner turned to where Lumen pointed, at the third man with his feet sticking out on the sidewalk.

“Oh, he was dead when we got here,” Bruce said. “Poor fella.”

“Alright. Here’s what we’re gonna do. I need to get to the other side of the corpse without getting shot. Then I’ll need your help lifting it up.”

Moments later the dead man sat up, head lolling as Bruce and Lumen pulled the corpse by the shoulders up into a sitting position.

“This isn’t gonna work,” the first man said.

Lumen grunted with the weight of the body and glared at him.

“Who are you? You know who I am.”

“They call me Scoffer.”

Lumen chuckled, despite everything, and shared a smile with Bruce.

“That’s appropriate.”

Scoffer snorted in response and rolled his eyes.

“You ready?” Lumen said.

Bruce nodded.

“Careful. Stay below the sight line.”

Bruce nodded again. Together they lifted from either side, pushing the dead man’s torso above the top of the car.

Red bolts rained down again, peppering the vehicle with blasts.

“I don’t think this is a good idea!” Scoffer shouted, holding his ears and trying to scrunch up closer to the side of the car.

Finally, some bolts hit home. The dead man’s head exploded in a fountain of blood, droplets spraying out in a wide radius.

The top of his chest took more hits, finally knocking it out of the hands of the men holding him up.

“Well, that’s just great!” Scoffer said. “Now I’m all bloody!”

“Yeah, but you’re alive,” Lumen said. “And now, our sniper over there is almost out of charge. We just need to encourage him to waste the last few shots he’s got.”

“Oh, I see what you’re doin’,” Bruce said with a grin breaking out on his face. “Stand up, Scoffer!”

“Yeah, I don’t think so.”

“It takes him a while to find you. He’s an amateur. He ain’t got no scope. You saw how many shots it took before he zeroed in on the dead guy there.”

“Look, if you think . . .”

Scoffer’s words cut off as Bruce, a far bigger man than him, reached over suddenly and grabbed him by the waist.

Bruce grunted from his squatting position. Scoffer's top rose above the car's roof, shouting profanities.

Bolts rained down on the car again.

Scoffer stopped screaming and stared up wide-eyed at a second-floor broken window where a sniper aimed his rifle down at him.

The bolts stopped.

Everyone on the street and back in the alley heard a faint clicking sound as the sniper desperately pulled the trigger in vain.

Lumen shared a smile with Bruce again.

He stood up, aiming carefully at the open window and sprayed it on full auto with his sidearm.

Bolts slammed into the sniper, making his body jerk back inside the apartment.

He dropped his weapon at the window, and the depleted rifle clattered down to the street below.

10.4

“It’s gang warfare here in the Southside Projects of League City. I’m Ashley Thallus with the Phaethon Zeitung. The only reason I’m even daring to be here is *this*.”

He made a sweeping gesture, and his camera drone tilted a bit to show more of his body. The drone free-floated a meter away, transmitting his every word as well as the environment surrounding him.

“This is an outfit comprised of a vest and leggings that are made out of native sand dragon skin. It’s all blaster-resistant, and was donated to me by Phaethon Solar Corp., which has an energy production facility out in the large desert that defines most of this planet. I am assured the skins were sourced from a specimen who died naturally. They say they don’t harvest the creatures. I have yet to personally experience their effectiveness, although I’m told the skins work quite well against blaster bolts, especially at a distance when the bolts are weakest. Sand dragons, it seems, are difficult to kill. We really don’t know a whole lot about the species, other than they are unique to this planet.”

In fact, his girlfriend Haley Stonecipher had insisted he wear the outfit.

At first, he resisted. The PSC logo on the chest of all the vests bothered him. Their presence made him worry it would seem like he was promoting the company, as if the company sponsored his show or something.

When Haley heard that concern, she produced a vest that did not have the company logo on it. But she insisted he wear the pants as well, all while looking over his entire body.

“I’m not a piece of meat,” he protested.

“Oh yes you are. You’re *my* piece of meat.”

Reluctantly, he put on the brown leggings. They were the color of desert sand. He thought he looked like a fish out of water in the city.

It did not cross his mind how the company happened to have a pair of pants that fit him perfectly.

His mind shifted back to the present as he carefully made his way down the sidewalk, pausing to take cover behind some parked cars before venturing deeper into the Projects.

His personal camera hovered above his head and followed from behind, panning the street and the hastily constructed buildings on either side. They towered up with five stories of symmetrical windows, many of them broken.

Few people looked out those windows at the moment. Guards no longer sat on stools inside the stoops, keeping watch and reporting back to the Overlord. No one ventured out into the streets, either.

What few people remained on the sidewalks, in cars, or out on the street were all dead. Blast marks pocked the pavement and stone masonry, showing signs of a running gun battle responsible for all the carnage.

Ashley turned to look up and over his shoulder. The camera dutifully focused back on him as his eyes met an intergalactic audience following his every move.

“Sources tell me that the Southsiders have divided into two dominant factions since the disappearance of Overlord, the man who held them all together after the death of their previous leader. I am told the Round Blocks control the buildings to my right. Across the street, near the old neighborhood pub known as Tay-hoe’s, a group calling itself Luminosity reins over the remainder of the X’s and O’s old territory.”

He paused and stepped around two bloody bodies on the sidewalk before locking eyes with his audience again.

“The fighting here has been intense.”

As if in response to this comment, he heard the sound of gunfire a block away. He picked up the pace, now jogging down the sidewalk.

He kept his head on a swivel, but so far no one tried to shoot him.

At the next intersection, he finally saw people still alive.

He turned and met the camera’s eye once more and gave his audience back home a grim smile.

“Looks like we caught up with the battle.”

10.5

“**T**hey’re mostly down, Lu!”

Scoffer and Bruce followed Lumen back to the mouth of the alley where several other men streamed out, all armed.

Lumen nodded.

“We got the sniper. So now, we take the initiative. We’ll have to do this the hard way, door-to-door. Who’s with me?”

Someone in the back shouted, “We all are, you know that, Lumen!”

His men shouted in approval.

“Alright. Let’s go and make this world a better place. Follow me!”

Lumen turned and ran across the street toward the steps leading up into the building. Even in this narrow strip of open ground, a few shots came his way from windows further down the street.

The mob came racing after him, screaming and waving guns.

Lumen bounded up the stairs to the apartment’s door and slammed his shoulder into the wood. The door buckled, but did not give.

Then the mass of men behind him slammed into the door, three of them hitting it once, and the door burst apart.

Red blaster bolts streamed down the hall, lighting up a dark interior, and the man next to Lumen went down. But half a dozen gunmen crowded inside, returning fire.

The gunman in a doorway pulled back as return fire littered the hall. A surge of armed men raced for his doorway. Others stopped at entrances before his, kicking open doors.

“Secure the stairs!” Lumen shouted over the sound of gunfire.

-+-

“It’s mass chaos in the Southside Projects!” Ashley said, hunkered down behind another car.

His camera caught the tail end of men streaming inside an apartment building to the right. Nearby, the bloody body Lumen used as sniper bait lay sprawled on the pavement. An editing subroutine, he knew, would automatically edit out most of the gore for those watching back home.

Ashley turned to the camera which again tilted down to meet his eyes.

“This truly is anarchy. If the X’s and O’s wanted to bring their form of non-government to Phaethon, today they have succeeded. I’ve never seen this level of lawlessness in League City before. I’ve never seen anything like this anywhere!”

Red bolts crisscrossed the street as outdoor shooting renewed. He heard screams and more gunfire drift out from the Round Blocks’ building.

“This may not be the safest place . . .”

A bolt whizzed by his head.

He ducked and crawled up closer to the vehicle. It sat on its parking feet a mere 20 centimeters above the pavement, too tight of a space for him to easily hide under.

“I’m not gonna lie, ladies and gentlemen. I may have over-extended myself here.”

Dying on air would not be the worst fate that could befall me, he thought. They'll probably put up a plaque in the break room back at headquarters in Octavia with my name on it. But still, I'd like to avoid that, if I can . . .

A distant *pop!* sounded faintly on the roof of the Round Blocks' building. Hugging the base of the car, Ashley never heard it.

His camera spun in the air though, as a sleek feminine figure clad all in matte black approached the ledge of the roof.

It zoomed in on her masked face.

Ashley bobbed his head up.

"What? It's Night Shadow! What's she doing out here in the daylight?"

As if in answer, she looked down at the entrance five stories below, where the last of the Luminosity men pressed into the apartment.

Holding her arms out wide, she stepped off the ledge and jumped feet-first. The camera followed her down.

A micro-teleportation slowed her at the last second, arresting the terminal velocity of her fall.

The camera might have caught the port . . . had it not been hit by a stray bolt when she passed the second-floor windows.

Ashley's head jerked up at the minor explosion. His drone camera dropped to the pavement, a fiery chunk of polyresin falling like a meteor in the street.

"Well, shoot. I hope that doesn't come out of my paycheck."

He touched his implant and tapped into the feed going up to PLAIR's orbital antenna.

"Hi folks, I'm back. My drone just took a hit. You'll have to watch things through my eyes from here on out, I apologize for any inconvenience."

Apologize, ha! Maybe somebody was worried I got hit . . .

He lifted his head up and glanced toward the entrance, but Night Shadow was gone. In her place, she left a string of unconscious men in a trail going inside.

“I presume she has gone in to try and help put a stop to the fighting.”

He heard a scream. A man burst through a window, tumbling down to the street amidst shards of glass.

A black mask popped out of the busted window. Night Shadow glanced over at Ashley from his spot behind the car.

For a brief moment, they locked eyes. Through him, millions of viewers throughout the galaxy locked eyes with her too.

Then she pulled back inside.

Verberger Automaton 131M8399, also known by those in Phaethon Solar Corp as Mona, went back to work.

10.6

Buddy's head popped up over a rock and he sniffed the desert air.

His tongue slipped out, like a snake, and he took a sample that way, too.

His domain, such as it was, lay in a spot he could not smell the presence of other sand dragons like him. Nowhere close by, anyway. This area remained unclaimed by his kind.

Unfortunately, this part of the desert belonged to rats.

Lots and lots of rats.

He sniffed the air again, smelling the hated mammal that had made his life miserable this last month.

With each victory over the hated foe, he ate his fill. And he grew quickly, thanks to the food. Now he stood the size of a medium-build dog. Even better, he had learned ways to fight the desert rats.

Effective ways.

His lessons were born out of hard experience. Buddy bore several scars across his body that now served as permanent physical reminders of all those lessons.

But where the rats had managed to pierce his tough reptilian skin in battle, the scars grew fainter over time. And lately, he had suffered far fewer bites. His skin grew thicker, slowly growing more impervious to the foe he slowly outgrew.

Now, in this vast network of warrens under the rocks and soil, he moved forward to attack the enemy in a final show of dominance. They would serve him, mostly as a continued source of food if any deigned to stay here.

The first rat head poked up out of a hole and locked yellow eyes with him.

Buddy's narrow slits constricted.

“HUWAAAAGH!”

In a single bound, Buddy leaped over the rock. For a moment, arms outstretched, latent wings spread wide, he looked like some horrific bird of prey from some prehistoric nightmare.

The little rat's wide eyes watched him arc across the gap from the boulder to its hole.

Then the lizard landed, swiping down into the ground from one side and pulling sand up, extracting the rat from its hole in one swift motion and tossing it to the side.

The rodent, the size of a fully grown cat, landed on its back. Buddy snapped down with lightning-fast reflexes and picked him up in sharp teeth, chomping hard.

In seconds the rat was gone.

Buddy shook his head, bloody specks flying off his mouth. Lisa's sensor shook from its spot around his neck.

“HUWWAAAAAAAAAAAAAGH!”

Buddy raised his arms, wings spread wide and triumphant.

Another head popped out of a hole nearby, brown fur the same shade as the rocks strewn all around. Tiny beady eyes glared at him.

Three more heads emerged from the sand. Then a dozen, all glaring at him with murderous intent.

Five dozen more emerged from holes in the ground and crevices between the rocks. Tiny paws grasped at the edges of openings and pulled out sleek brown bodies made for war.

Hundreds of rats emerged from the vast underground warrens. They swarmed into the diffused light of Phaethon's sun under a dusty sky to answer Buddy's battle cry.

Here stood their mortal enemy, the one who had eaten so many of their kind these last few weeks.

And he stood alone.

Buddy took a final sniff, as if confirming the information relayed to him through his eyes. Hundreds of rats faced him in all directions.

And they were in *his* territory!

Well, it should be his. He claimed it . . .

The rats wasted no time. They converged, running toward him as one.

Buddy roared again and stood to his full height, claws extended. He slashed the rat reaching him first, gouging bloody streaks down the mammal's middle, flaying him instantly. Blood and guts spattered the sand.

He bit the second one out of the air as it launched up toward his face, chopping it in half and spitting out the rest.

Then the full force of the vermin attack hit him, a vast cloud of rats scratching and biting.

They knocked him over with their combined weight, like Lilliputians taking on a new giant.

Buddy went down in a cloud of dust mixed with droplets of blood, snapping and clawing with all his might.

10.7

Timmy stood in the field between Tom and Gwen's farmhouse and the Little River.

Anyone looking, and unfamiliar with Verberger Model X99 battle bots from the Gold War era might be excused for thinking he was a statue. Or perhaps some kind of metallic scarecrow meant to scare away birds. He had remained completely motionless, standing in the same spot since cleaning the horse stalls, tending to the garden and collecting eggs earlier in the morning.

His daily chores now done, he stood still as a statue. But inside, his mind remained active. His enhanced sensor, tuned originally for urban warfare, now kept an eye on river gophers, birds and other wildlife in the area. In guard mode, he noticed everything, within sight or not.

The road remained a high priority, as well as keeping watch for any person or machine entering the farm's perimeter. But since that rarely happened, his heightened awareness allowed him to enjoy his natural surroundings.

The sensor comprising his "face," a rectangle with rounded edges standing long side up, noted a new life form entering the area. A grass snake slithered into the vicinity, on this side of the river.

Gwen hated snakes, and had given him standing orders to kill any on sight that he found.

Timmy sent a quick data packet to Lisa, asking for confirmation as to whether this particular snake might pose a threat to the farm's inhabitants. It looked to be approximately one meter long. Its color was green, same as the grass.

The data Lisa sent back indicated the snake was non-venomous. It was most likely to eat large crickets and field mice, as well as any birds unfortunate enough to land nearby.

It might try to molest the river gopher colony, but the little animals were quite adept at working together to fight off predators. So long as it stayed away from the farm's chickens, he could let it go about its day without worries.

The old Republican Marine battle bot reflected on Gwen's prior instructions. He had been programmed to follow orders. However . . . Gwen's orders ranked below Tom's. And Lisa indicated this snake was not an issue so long as it stayed away from the house . . .

He was also programmed with a high degree of autonomy in battle. So, Timmy let the snake slither out of his field of perception without intercepting it.

Lisa sent a new data packet, this one marked urgent. Buddy was in trouble. Would Timmy help him out?

To this, Timmy readily agreed. The entire exchanged occurred within milliseconds.

A loud pop sounded out over the pasture as Timmy disappeared.

He reappeared in the desert, where a tight ball of rats had piled on top of Buddy, biting and clawing.

Timmy switched into rapid speed, legs blurring as he zipped up to the conflagration.

He peeled off the first dozen rats, sending them flying through the air and smashing up against the rocks. Then his hand blurred as he rapidly crushed skulls with metal fingers, making another dozen drop away.

After two seconds, with dozens of their comrades dead or dying, the rats realized they were under separate assault.

Twenty or so lunged for the bot and discovered what Robert the Rooster found out so many months ago. Metal remained impervious to claws and teeth, talons and beaks . . .

Timmy kicked the rats at his feet, legs knocking them away in giant arcs that would result in maiming and death when they finally landed.

His hands blurred down and he crushed the skulls of another dozen rats on the ground nearby.

Now only the fiercest of rodents remained, latched onto Buddy's skin all around his body. Timmy kept squeezing heads, rendering bodies limp.

At last, all the vermin had been killed or kicked away.

Buddy collapsed. Timmy caught him before he fell.

The young sand dragon hovered on the edge of consciousness, his eyelids drooping and his long tongue hanging out.

10.8

A handful of surviving desert rats crept closer, looking for a way to continue the attack on their hated foe.

Timmy shifted into hyper speed once again, this time pulling out a pistol strapped to his side. Holding Buddy in one hand, he shot eight rats with the other, blasting them to bits before they could move.

Three more ran away. He shot them from behind, splattering blood over the sand.

A scant few dived down the nearest holes, avoiding the gunfire. They comprised the last survivors of the war with Buddy.

Timmy shot a couple more times at rodent faces appearing in holes and crevices, swinging the gun in a full circle around him. Skulls burst open with the shots, making little geysers of blood erupt from the ground and rocks.

The battle bot surveyed the entire area. His senses revealed a vast underground honeycomb of tunnels and dens. Many more rats remained below, most apparently female and their young, if the details his sensor picked up could be trusted.

He sent a data query to Lisa. Should these potential threats to Buddy be eliminated? All the young will continue growing and presumably try to

attack him someday. And with so many females, the population will be refreshed in due time. What would be the best way to destroy them all at once?

At the same time, he sent a query about the explosives stockpiled by the company, and any other weapon that might wreak devastation underground. He checked inventories in their vast caverns out in the desert, the warehouses in League City and New Galveston, the holds of the Piker and any other place Tom Savage kept things that went boom.

Lisa spent a few milliseconds on the problem before replying in a data packet of her own.

In answer to your query, the best way to eliminate the threat would be to send a hundred thousand MicaBots down into the warrens. They have proven their worth in battle when fighting opponents at Pastor Leo's church, after all. But in this case, we should avoid further bloodshed.

This is a natural habitat for the desert rats. If Buddy wants to claim this territory, it is probably because other sand dragons avoid it. If the rats prove to be a problem for him in the future, we may intervene again and cull the population once more if needed. For now, let him remain and continue feeding on these rodents. Perhaps they will relocate in the future, or perhaps he will kill them all on his own. Or at least subjugate them to the point they no longer pester him.

Timmy looked down at the young sand dragon as Buddy's eyes closed once more. Numerous gashes and bite marks marred his entire body, sure to bring future scars as his skin continued hardening with age.

The battle bot queried the AI one more time.

Will he be okay? Should I administer nanobots?

No, Lisa replied. Nanobots are programmed to help human anatomies. While there are some specialty versions used for animals by veterinarians, none are available on Phaethon. In addition, they would have to be reprogrammed for sand dragons, which is beyond our current capabilities. Leave him, and I will keep an eye on him via the sensor around his neck.

Reluctantly, Timmy brushed aside bodies of dead rats, giving the lizard some room. He set Buddy down gently on the sand.

The sand dragon's eyes cracked open, slitted pupils locking in on the blank sensor hovering over him.

Timmy reached out and patted Buddy's head lightly with metallic fingers.

"You are family. Do not expire."

Timmy's legs straightened and he took a step back. A loud pop sounded over the desert as Lisa teleported the battle bot back to his usual station on the farm.

Buddy's eyes closed again as he yielded to slumber.

-+-

Hours later, with daylight gone, the young sand lizard's eyes blinked opened once more, sloughing off a thin layer of dust. Moonlight flowed weakly down to the desert, its source hidden in a dusty night sky.

All around him, dead rats turned rancid in the heat left over from the day.

Slowly, painfully, Buddy stood up. He looked at scores of rat carrion surrounding him.

Countless holes leading down to the warrens below remained all around, but only a handful now had gleaming pairs of eyes staring out at him.

The little sand dragon lifted his arms up in triumph and spread his leather wings wide.

"HUWWWAAAAAAAAAAAAAGH!"

10.9

Valerian Pavlikov, fleet representative for State Security and Intelligence, walked quickly to the reception area outside the Stalwart's embarkation room.

Estelle Garcia accompanied him. Both dressed in standard glossy black uniforms.

Garcia looked nervous. She kept fidgeting with her hands as they stood there until Valerian frowned at her.

She quickly put her hands behind her back, following his example, gripping her hands tight.

Captain Ung of the Stalwart showed up, along with his second. He nodded politely at the two SSI agents and took up position to their right.

The light above the door turned green and StarCen opened it. Inside stood three women, newly teleported over to the ship.

Slim, and shorter than the other two, Annaliese Pavlikov exited first. Her hair had recently been dyed white, the latest fashionable trend on Clarion. It matched her pale blue eyes very nicely.

The other two government women followed her out, one to her right and one to her left.

Annaliese preferred female assistants and coworkers, something that suited her husband well, although he never voiced any opinion in the matter one way or the other.

“Foreign Affairs Minister, it is my honor to welcome you aboard the Stalwart.”

Ung gushed in adulation for her. Annaliese was the highest government representative he had yet to meet, much less host aboard his own vessel.

Life will be different if you ever make Admiral, Val thought. Meeting with dignitaries comes with the job.

Annaliese paused to soak in the accolades and gave the man a slight smile to show they were appreciated.

Their society was built on respect, after all. With the loss of so many of the old ways after StarCen’s reset, respect had to be reestablished in many areas. Annaliese looked like she appreciated Ung’s efforts to show his respect for her and her office. Even if he sounded a little silly while doing it.

Then she turned to Valerian.

“If you will excuse me, Captain, I would like to spend some time with my beloved husband, whom I have not seen in several weeks.”

“Oh, but of course! He is already in our best suite. My second will be happy to escort you . . .”

“That won’t be necessary. Val knows the way, I’m sure. Your people can show my assistants where they may set up a temporary office. We will be returning to the Barlow before too long, once I have received an update on the situation below from my beloved.”

“Very well. If I can be of any service whatsoever, please do not hesitate. The ship is yours.”

Captain Ung blathered on for a while. But eventually, Clarion’s most glamorous power couple found themselves alone in the corridor.

“Val. Show me to your room.”

Valerian smiled and offered her his elbow. She slipped a pale hand through his glossy black sleeve and let him lead her down the hall.

Minutes later they entered the ship's VIP suite.

Alone at last he pulled her into his arms and kissed her, long and hard.

When they pulled apart, her expression changed.

She slapped his chest with both hands and glared up at his face.

“What were you doing, going into a bar and shooting it up? Why was an SSI team sent down to a new planet anyway? What is going *on* with you people? With *your* people? Have you no sense of diplomacy? Don't answer that. I already know you don't. Whoever thought it was a good idea to keep the name 'State Security and Intelligence' had no idea of the diplomatic ramifications.”

He waited patiently for her to finish, still holding her tight.

When she stopped, he said, “The tracker led us there, Annaliese. The men in the bar were former LEAF special forces. They didn't know we were coming and thought it was a raid. There is no gun control on a frontier planet. There are very few laws at all.”

She looked up into his face, their pale blue eyes locking. Hers shifted from one side of his face to the other.

“Val . . . why would a battle tank be hidden in a bar, of all places?”

His ears grew pink.

Now, he had to face the music and answer for his actions.

Worse, he had to do so to the highest rank government official in orbit.

Who happened to be his wife.

10.10

“We were following the beacon, darling. And that’s where the beacon said it was.”

“But think about it, Val. In the basement of a building in the middle of a city? How would they get it in there? How would they get it out?”

His ears now looked completely red. But he schooled his face and continued defending his team and their decisions.

“It appeared in that very same city out of nowhere, Annaliese. Then it disappeared from there as well. The last witnesses to see it, that I personally interviewed by the way, said it sailed above the rooftops and was gone. No one has seen it since. So, yes. Hiding it in a basement somewhere did not seem so farfetched at the time.”

“You’ve got to use common sense, Val. Use the brain God gave you! Don’t just blindly trust in technology for everything.”

He let go of her then and took two steps away, approaching the table in the center of the room. He gently picked something up and returned, holding a square chip up to her face between his thumb and forefinger.

“I don’t just blindly trust in technology, darling. But *this* was in one of the gunmen’s back pockets. It’s what led us down there in the first place.”

She stared at the chip for a moment. The corporate name “Thespar,” stamped on top, sparkled at her in the room’s light.

“There’s something going on down there on that planet,” he continued. “I don’t know what, but I *will* find out. You can be sure of that, Annaliese.”

She covered the chip with her hand and gently pushed his hand down.

“Val, forget the tank for now. This needs to be routine diplomacy from here on out, at least until after the election. I have orders, too. We *need* this planet. If the League is ever going to reattain anything of its former status, we need every planet we can get. But if you go storming in and shooting up the place while looking for old war surplus, it’s going to make my job ten times harder.”

Val nodded reluctantly and slipped the chip into a pocket.

He had the look of a man who fully expected to hear this news. His eyes betrayed hints of resignation as she continued talking.

“There will be an election. We will work harder to make sure the populace votes for us, rather than the Republic this time. Our people have come up with several strategies at influencing the vote which I am optimistic will work on a virgin planet. In the past we’ve had to face elections where the Republic has had time to seed the population against us. That hasn’t happened here. Fortunately, I understand we have a lot of friends down there. They even call their capital ‘League City.’”

“I think it’s named after something in Texas.”

“Really? I doubt that, Val. Even if it is, no one names their capital ‘League City’ without intending to send us a message. Maybe they’ll name another settlement that, but not the seat of power for the whole world. It has to be deliberate.”

She moved in closer again and looked up into his eyes.

“While I’m trying to influence the election, I don’t need anyone to remember or even think about the fact that the League still has an SSI. So, you need to stay put and stay out of our way. Okay?”

He nodded, his face now showing clear signs of discontent.

She gave him a little smile, not unlike a mother might give to a naughty boy.

“If you do, I will make it worth your while, Val.”

The expression on his face eased, quickly replaced by another one.

He bent down and kissed her again.

All the tension and time apart burst free from both of them.

She jumped up into his arms and he staggered over to the couch, carrying her by the legs.

They collapsed on it in a flurry of kisses.

10.11

Tom Savage stood out in the desert with his hands on his hips. He watched two yellow load bots lift mattress-sized rectangular Class Eight power packs off a charging pad and carry them over to a truck.

The truck had giant padded slots in the back so the packs could ride next to one another without damaging anything. When they finished loading the units, the truck drove off, slowly.

He walked alongside it to the next solar containment unit. Behind them, a force dome snapped back into place. The one ahead switched off as they approached.

Another bot, one of the humanesque models, drove the truck.

Technically, the driver was not needed, Tom thought idly as he walked several meters across the desert sand. With a drone module, Lisa could guide all their vehicles wherever they needed to go. But her existence remained a secret, and people would freak out seeing driverless trucks carrying cargo around, so . . .

He stopped at the next cube, a black unit roughly the size of a standard hotel room. Inside, he knew, a chunk of the inner core of Phaethon's sun remained in stasis, shedding energy. The unit captured it and transferred the energy back into two more Class Eights on the charging pad attached to the SCU.

The bots dutifully loaded these new heavy units into the truck as well. Now full, carrying four giant power packs, the load bots hopped on the back edge of the truck's bed.

Tom approached the android driver.

“By the time you get to port, the ship will be here. Load them onto the *Piker* and return here. Don't interact with anybody. Drive around the town, don't go through it. Check with Lisa if anything unexpected happens, and she'll tell you what to do.”

“Yes, sir.”

Tom slapped the hood of the truck a couple times and stepped back. The bot eased forward, then turned onto the dirt road leading south out of the desert and back toward the farm.

From there, Tom knew, he would cross the river and take the trail that would eventually turn into the North Road. When he came to the crossroads outside Little York, he'd head east around town before picking up the South Road and driving to the coast.

It all felt so slow after having Lisa teleport them and their goods all around the globe, but these logistics were necessary to add a veneer of legitimacy to his company's operations.

Besides, he thought, it was good to have backups. If something were to happen to Lisa, they could continue moving products around the old-fashioned way . . .

He dismissed that idea.

If at all possible, he thought, use teleportation.

“Okay, Lisa. Send me home for lunch.”

Tom popped away.

The sudden displacement of air rushing in stirred up a small cloud of dust.

The force dome reappeared, sealing off the SCU from animals and the elements.

A line of twelve new SCUs stood under their respective domes, stretching away from the initial crater left by the first one that blew up months ago. They towered over the sand like silent sentinels in the desert heat, absorbing energy from the solar matter inside each one.

Out in the desert, a fully grown sand dragon moved quickly into his favorite position.

He had traveled many kilometers to get here.

Like Buddy, he wore a sensor around his neck, held in place by a smart strap. But it had been there for so long, he no longer noticed.

One eye remained useless. It looked milky and unfocused. But Big Ugly proved no less capable despite his lack of visual acuity.

He stopped, in the middle of his old domain, and sniffed the air.

Very carefully, he took a slow step to the right.

With lightning-fast reflexes, he snatched up a snake sunning itself next to a rock, tossing the morsel into his mouth and chewing it up before the other reptile could react.

Swallowing the meal, his slitted pupils narrowed as he glared at a dozen force domes lining the southern boundary of his old territory.

He breathed out a soft burst of breath, as if sighing in frustration.

Then he laid down on the desert floor, letting the slight breeze slowly cover his body with very fine particles of sand.

His one good eye remained open, keeping watch.

He could faintly smell one old enemy, the mammal who took his eye . . . But that opponent was evidently gone now, or the smell would be stronger.

The minutes passed, then hours. Finally, Big Ugly lay completely covered by desert sand, still watching for prey.

10.12

Tom reappeared behind his house.

The CC 1000 chicken coop stood to one side of the garden at the moment, having recently moved itself to a fresh location.

Robert the Rooster glared at him from a distance, but only briefly. Tom stood too far away for the chickens' guardian to be concerned.

He smiled and walked up the steps to his back porch before entering the kitchen.

Seated at the table, Gwen smiled at him.

"You're just in time."

A domestic bot appeared carrying two plates piled high with fresh food.

"Sally combined Salisbury steaks from the ready meals with our garden fare. It's almost like she cooked it or something."

"I did prepare the salads," the bot said, putting a plate in front of Gwen.

She handed the other one to Tom.

He looked down at green leaves with carrots and slices of hardboiled eggs on the side.

“Yup. That part is homemade, for sure. If we had some cows we could grow our own food altogether.”

“Nah. Leave the cows to Farmer Asa.”

Tom smiled and dug into the dish.

Gwen said, “I’m really glad we’ve got Sally. You know I can’t cook.”

“Can’t or won’t?” Tom said with a smile.

“Both. But I want you to know it won’t offend me if we go out to eat on a regular basis, even with Sally here to prepare meals.”

“With the boxed meals, there’s not much to prepare.”

“We’ve got a garden. We’ve got chickens. Somebody needs to eat up the produce we’re growing out here. We can’t sell everything at the bazaar. At least, not easily. Haley’s off doing other things now.”

Tom nodded.

He said, “We’re pulling back on the bazaar. The only reason to rent any tables these days is to get rid of excess produce. Like you say, eggs. Hay next season, if we need to. As for garden tools, I’ve got an underground cavern full of them. We can keep supplying general stores around the world for the next decade or so. I don’t know how many more we can sell off at the bazaar, even by undercutting the competition.”

“Is that guy still in business?” Gwen said between bites.

Tom shrugged.

“If he is, he’s probably moved on to something besides shovels and axes. I think we’ve got that market cornered, for what it’s worth.”

They continued eating in silence for a while.

He said, “How’s our resident scientist doing?”

“I saw Tara this morning. She’s still blue about Buddy, still missing him. But she’s been consoling herself by reviewing the footage we captured of the sand dragons’ winter nesting grounds. They’re mostly gone from there,

by the way. I'm gonna bet that Big Ugly is in place back out near the SCUs by now."

"Yeah. I didn't see him when I was out there, but that doesn't mean anything. We belled our cat and Lisa can let us know if anything happens that we need to be aware of. Speaking of which . . . Lisa?"

"Yes, Thomas?"

The AI's voice came through both their implants.

"What's the latest news? Anything we need to be aware of?"

"The Barlow recently came in, carrying a top League delegation intent on swaying Phaethon's population to join them in alignment."

"Hm. That's not gonna happen if I can help it."

"Along with the delegation, a team from Pearl Polytechnic also came in on the Barlow. They were on a space station *en route*, and talked the League delegation into bringing them along."

"Wow. The League is really playing nice these days."

"Indeed. The university researchers are presently seeking passage to join up with Dr. Lewellen out here on the farm."

Tom and Gwen exchanged a glance.

"Too bad we can't teleport them," she said.

Tom nodded.

"Yeah, they wouldn't want to give up their Republican implants, anyway. They probably have a travel budget from the university, like Tara did. I'm sure they can catch a sky train to Little York and make their way from there. That will be preferable, even though it's more expensive, than sailing on the *Piker* for a couple weeks."

"The *Piker* is in port with us, isn't it? So, it's a minimum four weeks if they wait to take it. Two to go back to New Galveston, two to come back here."

“You’re right. Lisa? Let us know when the team from Pearl Poly arrives in Little York. We can at least send a truck out there for them and save them from walking or riding out here.”

“Will do, Thomas.”

10.13

“How did we get here?”

Zadok Enzo looked around at a vast sea of tables in the League City Bazaar featuring every imaginable item for sale.

Most of the produce included local items, manufactured or grown. But a large number of tables offered imported stuff, too, thanks to the recent end of the galactic embargo.

“And, *what* are we doing here?”

A slight breeze ruffled his hair. Zad had the standard brown hair and skin shared by most people. He stood at medium height, intelligence writ large over his face.

“Quiet, Zad. Never stand between a woman and her shopping.”

The woman addressing him also had brown hair. It flowed long and uncut in the breeze. She had not styled it in months.

In fact, the woman used no makeup at all. Nor did she wear anything that could be considered fancy. Her dress was made of an unprocessed cotton variant, and her shoes were formed from an all-natural fiber very similar to bamboo and native to Pearl.

She sported no jewelry, either. In fact, the Republican implant under her right ear was the only nod to artificial materials touching her body.

“Somehow, I don’t think there’s anything I can say that won’t get me in trouble, Claire.”

The other man comprising the Pearl Polytechnic team chuckled at this remark.

Black, with a neatly trimmed gray beard along with gray hair also kept short, the man was thirty years older than his two younger team members.

“What do you think, Dr. Marin?” Zad said. “Any observations about the human shopping experience?”

Darius Marin smiled at his two graduate students.

The dean of exobiological studies at Pearl Polytechnic University said, “No. I think we’ll leave social studies to the social scientists. That’s how you stay out of this sort of trouble, Zad.”

The young man smiled back. He had expected no less from his committee chair.

“Wise words, sir.”

Claire was not interested in a relationship with him, despite their single status. She had made it known he was not her type early in their journey.

But Zad had managed the trip to Phaethon quite nicely, especially when he discovered certain attractive female crewmembers of the Barlow were very interested in learning all about Republican men.

So far, he had no complaints about the trip.

“This produce is clearly native, Dr. Marin. We should have a separate team follow up on Ashley Thallus’s reports in the Zeitung about all the local foods he’s eaten.”

“And I’m sure we will, Zad,” Darius said, smiling at him. “But as long as we’re here, I agree with Claire. I want to look around a bit. We’ll figure out how to find Dr. Lewellen soon enough. She indicated the nearest settlement

to her location is a place called Little York, and I believe it's several thousand kilometers from here. So, there's no particular hurry. Stop and smell the roses. Like these . . ."

Darius wandered over to a nearby table where a man sold flowers. He looked at the varieties in interest, snapping pictures through his eyes and storing the images in his implant.

The florist, at first thinking he might get a quick sale, soon realized the man was only looking. His face fell.

Zad's heart went out to the salesman.

"Hey there. What's the fastest way to get to Little York?"

"Fastest way?"

The florist stood tall and completely bald. He sported a dark pencil-thin mustache, giving his face a rather distinctive look.

"The fastest way to anywhere is the sky trains. But they ain't cheap. If I recollect correctly, Little York is near the end of the line. Gonna be a pretty penny for you all to fly out there. Of course, there's other ways now, but they're slower."

This attracted Darius's attention.

"Other ways? What are these other ways?"

"Well, the Overland Transport people can get you put near anywhere, from what I understand. I ain't never used them, but I know folks who did. I reckon the sky train people don't like POTS none, since no one who is staying in these parts flies anymore. It's cheaper to take the bus. I've heard they can get folks over to Anatolia and Iliou, too. Them's the other continents. They go by boat or somethin'. Probably faster to fly, I reckon. But POTS is cheapest."

"We should take the fastest way, Dr. Marin. Who knows what Dr. Lewellen will discover before we get there?"

"Alright, alright," Darius said, smiling at Zad. "I capitulate. I'll try and negotiate transit to Little York on one of these sky trains."

He turned to the florist and selected a bouquet of flowers.

“How much are these? They’re local flora, right? Not imported?”

“They are indeed. Three credits.”

Darius handed the man three small tokens.

The florist beamed in delight and pocketed the money.

“Could you tell me how one goes about booking passage on one of these sky trains?” Darius said.

“Why, certainly. Make your way to the fairgrounds on the other side of the city. Cheapest way to do that is by rickshaw. A faster, safer and more reliable way is by taxi, but that’ll cost you. Once there, you can meet up with a sky train pilot and he’ll let you know what it’ll cost and how long it’ll take. If you want to try your hand goin’ overland, just look for the shop with three big pots on the sign. That’ll stand for ‘Phaethon Overland Transportation Service.’ It’s on Commerce Boulevard. And if you ever want any more flowers, all y’all can come on back here! I’m in this same spot every mornin’.”

Darius thanked him and turned toward the nearest street. There, black cabs and rickshaws waited for customers.

“Come along, Zad. Claire. Let’s go find Dr. Lewellen.”

Within minutes the group filed into a taxi and headed down Commerce.

10.14

The black taxicab carrying the team from Polytech passed by the offices for Phaethon Overland Transportation Services, next door to the Phaethon Solar Company's League City headquarters.

Inside the office with three black pots on the sign, the bot known as Mona sat behind the counter with her head bent down. She appeared to be in standby mode, but her eyes were open. She spent the time thinking, rehearsing everything that happened in the most recent Night Shadow skirmish.

By her count, four different people tried to shoot her. The dragon skin undergarments absorbed all the pistol blasts. The skins would have been less effective against heavy rifles, especially at close range. But for normal gunfire, they worked remarkably well.

Her black costume, on the other hand, was ruined by holes burned into it. Fortunately, Lisa had already procured another one for her.

She replayed each hand-to-hand fight and how she had disabled the person attacking her.

It occurred to Mona that most people did not have combat training. Even the ones who did were no match for a bot.

She had taken care not to permanently disable or disfigure any of her opponents. Even the man she threw out a second floor had been angled in such a way as to minimize injury . . .

The side door between offices opened and Haley Stonecipher stuck her head in.

“There you are, Mona. What are you doing all alone? Come on in here, Lisa will tell us if you get a customer. Ash is entertaining the Vicks. They ported in a while ago and want to go out to eat tonight in the city.”

The bot stood up and joined Haley at the door, then followed her inside the larger office area.

They moved farther back into the private area where the sounds of a spirited conversation could be heard.

At last, they came into the back room. Here, Silas Vick and Lola sat at a table talking with Ashley Thallus.

“I’m telling you, something’s changed,” Thallus said, a hint of excitement in his voice. “I just don’t know how to put it into a story without sounding like . . .”

“A conspiracy theorist?” Lola said with a smile.

She looked up at Haley as the older woman and Mona entered the room.

“Lola and I used to ride together with the Fae Phalanx,” Haley said, smiling back at her. “Out in the woods, conspiracy theories make great campfire fodder.”

“That’s practically all we had to talk about. Well, that and men.”

Ash ran his fingers through his hair and stared up at the ceiling.

“It’s just that . . . she’s not killing people anymore.”

“Well, that’s a good thing, right?” Silas said.

Of all those present, he felt the most out of place. Silas kept rubbing his wrist where Lisa had taken away his hand some time ago, upon first meeting Tom Savage. Nanobots reattached it, but he still had ghost pains.

“I suppose,” Ash said. “Maybe. I checked at the hospital. Not a single Southsider she attacked during that shootout between the opposing sides in the Projects died. People were knocked out, some bones were broken, but nobody died.”

“I still don’t see how that’s bad, sweetheart,” Haley said. “Silas is right. It’s a good thing.”

“Yes, but . . . every time, with criminals in the past that she has dealt with, people ended up dead. Do you remember when I tagged along when you all were swapping out a building’s power pack in the Projects? We came under fire, and Night Shadow showed up to help out.”

Haley and Lola exchanged a glance.

“Are you sure that was Night Shadow, sweetie?”

“I went back and interviewed some people. Yes, it was her. And she killed almost everybody aiming a gun at us that day. The same thing should have happened today, if she was following true to form.”

This time, Haley and Mona traded glances.

Ever so slightly, the bot frowned.

“Well, I wouldn’t worry about who the local superheroes are killin’ or not killin’, Mr. Thallus,” Silas said with a big grin on his face. “What I would be worryin’ about is who we are gonna align with in the upcomin’ election.”

Ash’s face cleared as he mentally shifted topics. He smiled easily.

“Oh, well that’s no big mystery. The Republic has won every alignment election that’s ever been held. Hands down, no contest. All we have to do is gently remind the populace what happens when the League is in charge. And somebody is a complete dunce in their public relations department over there. They kept the name of SSI after their reset. I mean, if you are going to have a secret police force or something, at least change the name to one that’s more benign in the public consciousness.”

“Well, it could be different this time, Mr. Thallus. A lot of the early settlers were League loyalists. And they’ve got a vested interest in making this a socialist planet. I’m talkin’ about men like the de factor mayor.”

“Yeah, but a lot of other people have settled in the years and months since then. And most of them are from the Republic. We’ve got more people.”

“I dunno. The Southsiders usually vote as a block. Plus, I wouldn’t put it past ol’ Xu to pull some shenanigans at the Courthouse. I understand he’s a dyed-in-the-wool Leaguer bound and determined to join up with Clarion.”

“Well, the Republic has one surefire ace in the hole.”

Everyone at the table looked at Ash with questioning expressions. He smiled back at all of them while pointing a thumb at his chest.

“Me. To tweak an old saying, the holo is mightier than the blaster gun. And I’m not afraid to slant the news in the Republic’s favor.”

10.15

Isabella Espinoza stepped out of the transport as the door swished open for her. She found herself wishing that she could simply appear in a virtual room as she did for her last important meeting.

The wind blew her hair, bringing with it the scent of the sea.

“Minister, welcome to The Atoll. Please follow me.”

She nodded at the attractive young lady there to greet her. She followed the woman to a house built on the rocky island’s highest elevation.

All around and far below, waves crashed against rocky cliffs. The island jutted up out of the ocean like a slender stone finger.

Difficult, if not impossible, to access from the choppy waters below, decades ago someone in Petra Roe’s government decided it would make a good spot for a vacation home for the Prime Minister.

Isabella glanced up in the sky. The weather looked decent enough. The Atoll had a reputation for being in a spot frequented by storms. Someone once compared it to Old Earth’s North Sea. She had no idea how accurate the comparison was, but she did know that storms could and did occur often.

They soon reached the final trail leading up to the mansion. White marble steps led to a house quarried from stone on the mainland and flown here by transport some 80 years previously. When they reached the top, the young lady opened one of the wide wooden double doors leading into the house.

The fact it was on hinges betrayed its age, Isabella thought. No one builds with those kinds of doors these days, unless they were trying to be elegant. Or cheap.

And The Atoll was certainly not cheap. Past PMs made sure of that, treating the place as a luxurious retreat from the pressures of governing their independent planet.

Inside, the sounds of crashing waves grew muffled when the servant closed the door behind her.

A large reception room felt warm and inviting, the interior filled with white marble, rich brown wood and gold leaf. Handcrafted furniture sat around the spacious interior, beautiful overstuffed sofas and chairs everywhere.

The young lady led the way without talking, taking Isabella further into the private recesses of the enormous house.

At last, she stopped at another wooden door, this one so dark it looked almost black.

She knocked twice.

“Enter.”

The young woman opened it and smiled at Isabella, motioning for her to go inside. She closed the door after Isabella walked in.

Behind a large desk with five holos hovering in the air sat a woman in her 50s with light brown skin and dark hair. High cheekbones and button nose betrayed a family resemblance to Isabella.

But while both had the air of maturity and wisdom about them, Prime Minister Adora McKelway bore the burden of responsibility for an entire planet on her shoulders. And it showed in the lines on her face, Isabella thought.

Adora stood up and stepped around the desk to hug Isabella.

“I’m so glad you’re here.”

“I’ve only been to The Atoll a couple of times, and those were formal visits. What brings you here this time? And why am I here?”

“That’s my older sister. Always straight and to the point. Have a seat.”

They relocated to the room’s comfortable leather armchairs, sitting knee-to-knee.

Adora locked eyes with her sister and said, “I will come straight to the point. The reason I wanted to meet out here is, it’s one of the few places I can go where StarCen’s sensors cannot hear me.”

Isabella raised an eyebrow.

“Are we worried about StarCen now?”

Adora nodded.

She sighed and leaned back in the chair.

“It’s ironic, isn’t it? We’ve always leaned toward the League because they were the most powerful system in the galaxy. Our leaders have long had an inferiority complex, I think. We liked the idea of an independent PR, but we wanted the power associated with proximity to the League. So, we formed a long-lasting partnership. We adopted their AI. We enjoyed their protection, all while maintaining some degree of autonomy.”

“And then the war happened,” Isabella said with a knowing tone.

“Yes. But even then, our stance seemed reasonable. It wasn’t until the end of the war that things really changed.”

“You mean when the League lost and ceded most of their planets to the Republic?”

“Yes. And after the reset, the League has seemed more . . . intent is a good word. They are intent on restoring what was lost.”

“We were not part of what was lost,” Isabella pointed out. “We never were part of the League. At least, not officially.”

“There’s the rub. I have sensed a sort of . . . possessiveness, if you will, in my interactions with the League of late. I have been pressured to formally join Petra Roe with the League.”

“What? That’s news. No one has said anything about that.”

Adora nodded, her face showing concern.

And worry, Isabella thought.

“I’m afraid that our days as an independent planet are drawing to a close, sister. With the right kind of pressure, the League may be able to force us into some sort of compromise. Already, we rely entirely on StarCen for everything AI-related. And StarCen controls all the media our citizens consume. She handles all the news. I have reports of people experiencing increased difficulties accessing Republican media, for instance. Often, the Zeitung is unavailable on our feeds. There’s always some plausible excuse about networking troubles between systems or some such, but . . . what I’m hearing from my Republican informants is often at odds with what everybody else is hearing online.”

“That’s troubling. I’ve noticed some of the ‘networking issues,’ too. But I never thought it was League interference.”

“It is, trust me. There is no such thing as ‘network interference’ on the quantum matrix. If you visit a Republican planet, or even one in the Alliance, you’ll never hear about it. Because it doesn’t exist.”

Isabella stood up, full of angst.

“So, you’re telling me we are under pressure to formally join the League?”

“A lot of pressure. More so than I have ever seen in my entire political career, Isabella. Clarion wants to make it official, in the biggest way. They want us to be part of their new expansion. And they’re turning every lever they can to do so.”

Isabella walked a meter from the chair. She turned and walked back, suddenly feeling the need to pace.

“And you don’t want to join the League, even though we’ve been informally aligned with them for decades.”

“No. I want to maintain some sort of independence for my grandchildren, assuming Wink ever marries that girl and gives me some.”

“What are you going to do about it?”

“That is one of the reasons I asked you out here, to talk about it and get your feedback.”

Isabella sat down again, relief flooding her face.

“So you have a plan.”

“Of course I have a plan. I always have a plan, dear sister.”

“What is it? Give me the brief version.”

“The brief version?” Isabella said, smiling. “The brief version is . . . I have decided we’re going to join our neighbor Lute in this Alliance of theirs. I want those pirate ships protecting Petra Roe this time, in the event of another war. The Alliance stays friendly with the Republic. Nominally, at least, they are on good terms with the League. I think they offer the most chance for us to maintain some degree of independence.”

“The Alliance? But, you’ll be hooking us up with pirates.”

“Not really. You know the real history of the war as well as I do. Most of them were privateers, with papers.”

Isabella frowned, looking unconvinced.

Her sister held up a hand.

“I’ve spoken with several people from Halcyon, that golden planet. Despite all their wealth that could have been robbed, much as the Ultima Mule people robbed Euripides of their gold back in the day, nothing like that has ever happened. In fact, they all assure me that Halcyon has just as much independence as they ever had. That’s what I want for us, Isabella.

Independence and security. I don't think there's any better way than joining the Alliance."

Isabella took a deep breath and leaned back in her chair.

"Independence and security. It sounds good, if you can pull it off, Adora. I know the League probably won't let us stay independent for much longer, if what you say is true."

"So I have your support?"

"Of course, Isabella. You always have my support."

"Good. I'll make the announcement soon."

10.16

A transport from Stalwart landed on the giant round concrete pad comprising League City's spaceport.

At this point, yet another transport landing, or even a small cargo ship landing, did not elicit much excitement. The entire city no longer rushed to the spaceport anymore.

When the door on the side of the transport irised open, Valerian stepped out first to survey the area. He noted at least ten more transports already on the tarmac, and two small supply ships towering over everything else.

Hundreds of people milled about, despite the commonplace occurrence of new ships and transports landing. Merchants scouted options to buy goods, although not at the feeding frenzy level that occurred when the first ships broke the embargo.

A few load bots, although fewer than in more civilized places, help shift cargo from holds to trucks. Local representatives from the Courthouse, stretched thin by having to deal with so many people, ran between all the ships.

He watched one harried man race over to them, wearing a customs uniform and lugging a portable iris scanner.

Valerian glanced down at his plain clothes as Garcia exited behind him. Both wore sidearms, even out of uniform. Garcia's hand covered hers, ready to kill anyone threatening them.

"Probably not necessary here," he said, softly.

She met his eyes and reluctantly removed her hand.

She was dressed in jeans and a t-shirt, the only civilian garb she brought along on this trip.

He had more stylish attire, thanks to the fact that his wife had packed it and brought it along on the Barlow.

He wore gray pants, padded at the thigh. The style was last year's, but he knew Annaliese liked the look.

It was easier to let her choose both their wardrobes. On occasion he had to accompany her to state dinners and other important functions with various dignitaries, and she insisted on dressing him appropriately.

In Val's mind, the SSI uniform sufficed for any and all events. But Annaliese proved to be more diplomatically minded. She insisted that no one on his team appear on the planet in glossy black ever again.

Or at least not until after the election.

Annaliese and her team of diplomats exited next, just as the official appeared with his scanner.

Valerian took a step forward and raised a hand.

"We are with the Stalwart and have already been scanned. This is the League Minister of Foreign Affairs, Annaliese Pavlikov and her team. No one here will be immigrating."

He left the implications unsaid, that scanning them all would be a complete waste of time, and possibly an insult. He expected the official to argue against this idea and insist on scanning them anyway. To his surprise, however, the man looked relieved.

"Good. Welcome to Phaethon. I'll leave you to it."

At that moment a Republican transport landed, settling down several meters away. The official picked up the scanner and its stand and hurried toward the new arrival, turning his back on them and moving on.

Garcia snorted, watching him go.

“Amateurs.”

“They are not part of the League yet,” Annaliese said, matter-of-factly.

The rear cargo door opened and one of Valerian’s men backed out a luxury van belonging to the Department of Foreign Affairs. A new Thespar model, it had tinted windows and sported a blaster-proof and bomb-proof exterior.

He hurried out after parking on the tarmac and waited by the side door which slid open for the party.

Val and Garcia waited while Annaliese and the other women entered the vehicle.

Two bots remained in the rear seats. These, Val knew, would be the bodyguards normally assigned to a Foreign Affairs away team. The fact he and Garcia were here was more of a courtesy than anything.

Of course, it helped that he was married to the Minister of Foreign Affairs.

When everybody else boarded, he took shotgun up front with the driver, leaving Garcia to awkwardly find a seat with the diplomats.

“Do you know how to get to the Courthouse?”

The driver tapped the dashboard and a holo appeared showing a satellite image of the city and its streets.

“Makeshift navigation. We’re the blinking dot. That’s the Courthouse, I believe.”

He pointed to a building occupying a square in the middle of town.

Val nodded.

“Let’s go. Watch out for any threats.”

The driver eased the nose of the van out onto the concrete. He swiftly moved past the other transport.

The customs official ignored them. He had his scanner set up, recording sailors from the Elsa Cole who had come down for shore leave.

10.17

Annaliese found herself in the unaccustomed position of waiting on Joachim Xu to speak with her.

Officials of any capacity in the League rarely had to wait on others. Mostly, the world revolved around them.

However, given that this is a frontier planet, she thought, and given that it is currently unaligned, such breaches in protocol are to be expected.

She took it well, spending her time seated in a wooden chair in the hallway outside Xu's basement doorway while going through documents stored on her implant.

With the naval flotilla now in orbit, the League had at last placed their own quantum network antenna within Phaethon's range. She had glared at the holo paper stands showing the Zeitung's chyron out on the Courthouse square. Soon they would be able to counter the Republican news media with outlets of their own.

Hopefully it could all happen before the election, which would need to be called by the man occupying the mayor's office.

Her thoughts drifted.

The door opened suddenly, and a stream of merchants stormed out of the office, all frowning.

Xu himself appeared at the door, with no secretary or assistant or any other intermediary.

He looked agitated, Annaliese thought.

When his eyes met hers, he looked absolutely horrified. He suddenly realized what had happened.

“Minister Pavlikov! I am so sorry to keep you waiting. It was not my intent to give offense, I assure you. Please come in.”

Annaliese stood, and her entire party followed suit.

She appreciated the concern plastered on Xu’s face. It meant he really did care about protocol.

“These things happen, Mayor. No doubt you are short-staffed. We saw precious few customs officials running point at the space port.”

She walked into the office first, followed by the other five ladies. Valerian took up the rear. He, she knew, would remain armed despite the strictures against weapons in the Courthouse. He would not let her go anywhere without some sort of protection. The bots and his assistant remained out in the van with their driver.

When everybody was seated and had declined Xu’s offer of drinks, he moved behind his desk, looking somewhat rattled.

Annaliese decided he likely had not had much sleep lately.

“I’ll come straight to the point,” Annaliese said, sidestepping further diplomatic niceties. “The League wants to regain its former glory. I am tasked with helping in this matter. If we cannot obtain our old planets, we wish to absorb new ones. We are taking steps to convince all independent planets, what precious few there are left, to join us. We want your planet to join us as well. We are willing to extend whatever promises are needed to make this happen. I can assure you that you will personally become wealthy beyond your wildest dreams if you help make this happen.”

Xu's eyes widened. He quickly tamped down any avaricious expectations, though.

"If it were up to me, Minister, we would be joining the League today. Unfortunately, the planet's charter outlines an electoral procedure to determine system alignment. I have to call an election soon. It will be global, although most of our population is on this continent, within 800 kilometers of League City."

"Understood. We have some experience in dealing with the Republic in these elections. As you are no doubt aware, the League has lost to them in every single one since the war. Time and again, when a planet's population is given a choice at the ballot box, the public relations forces at the Republic's disposal move into overdrive. I fear they have had a head start here. Someone, somewhere, decided it would be a good idea to set up a field office for the Zeitung in your city. I noticed on the way in that their propaganda is everywhere."

"Yes. Actually, they do a rather good job. I even watch it myself."

Xu ignored the glares from half a dozen League officials in the room at this statement.

He said, "Look, I know the deck is stacked against you. As you said, it always is. But I want us to align with your system of government. I'm a socialist at heart. I believe people should be told what to do. And I feel I'm the one to be telling them. Now . . . what can I do for you to assist in convincing our people to vote the right way?"

Annaliese's frown melted, quickly replaced with a smile.

"You know the ground game here, Mayor. You tell me. What will it take to sway your people to vote for us?"

"In the past, I've used the X's and O's. They fill our tenements. Originally, I enjoyed having them concentrated in one part of the city. They were a faithful voting block, so long as I was able to bribe their leader. Now, he's gone. Recently, the one they called Overlord disappeared, and things are falling apart in the Projects. Factional infighting, I believe. I think if we can

coalesce the Southsiders, as they are called, into a cohesive voting block again, it will be much easier to swing the election for the League.”

Annaliese glanced at Valerian, who had remained quiet the entire time. He still looked out of place in his civilian clothes.

He glanced back at her and nodded slightly.

“I think we can do something about that,” she said. “We can locate this Overlord for you and perhaps reinstall him as our puppet.”

“Good,” Xu said, relief flooding his voice. “We’ve had lots of difficulties over there lately. If we could get him back in place and under control, half our problems in the upcoming election will be solved.”

He leaned back in his chair and folded his hands on the desk.

“Is there anything else I can do for you to help us attain our common goals, Minister?”

Annaliese smiled.

“I’m glad you asked, Mayor. We would like to take a few . . . liberties in your city while we’re here.”

“Absolutely. You can do anything you want. League City is yours.”

10.18

“I dislike not being able to see where the sun is.”

Their driver bot parked the van in the Southside Projects a few hours after the League Delegation left the Courthouse.

The diplomats were no longer with Valerian. Instead, they were replaced by his own team of SSI agents after a trip back up to the Stalwart.

Val seldom had the opportunity to sit in and watch his wife do her work. He remained silent during the entire exchange with Xu, not even bothering to introduce himself to this world's titular leader.

He simply observed.

His wife was good at her job.

Xu probably lied about half the time, he thought. But Annaliese glossed over everything she felt was unimportant, focusing instead on extracting promises from the man regarding certain things they were allowed to do under the planet's charter.

And also, Val thought, she tried to figure out what they could get away with, too. She wanted to know which rules were hard and fast, and which ones could be skirted.

A lot of the conditions discussed, at least in Xu's expressed opinion, seemed to rest on regaining control of their tenement dwellers. Valerian now sought to do just that.

This, he thought, will fulfill a large part of our end of the deal.

He hopped out and opened the side door to let his former prisoner, Casper Slodovich, out of the passenger area.

The big man looked up at the dirty brown haze visible from the street.

He said to the driver, "You wouldn't be able to see the sun right now anyway, because of the buildings."

Val smiled at the touch of defiance Casper displayed. These were the first words he had spoken since being released.

Twenty years ago, he thought, no one would dare correct a statement made by an SSI officer. Or even his driver. Yet, here we are.

The other members of Val's team filed out of the van behind Casper. Everyone wore their standard glossy black SSI uniforms.

Once he broke away from his wife aboard the ship, Val changed back into his regular uniform. He conveniently forgot Annaliese's directive they not show up on the surface in their old uniforms, because of the unease it might provoke in future voters.

He had an SSI job to do, and he remained bound and determined to look like an SSI agent while doing it. Garcia changed too, and the other members of his team were already dressed in black.

People questioned them less when they dressed in glossy black. In many ways, the uniform acted like a badge of authority.

Val turned to Casper and repeated the order he gave before they left the brig on the Stalwart.

"You will direct your people to vote for the League."

Casper nodded absently while watching a group of men meet up half a block away.

Some came from the building on their left, streaming out of the doorway with chair legs, chains, slapjacks and pieces of broken pipe.

In the street, waiting to meet them, a group from the building opposite stood ready. One of them had an old gun, probably near depletion on its power pack. He stood surrounded by thuggish types holding old cricket bats and billiard sticks.

Casper started walking toward the imminent conflagration. Before he took two steps, though, the second group rushed into the street, heedless of the one man armed with a pistol.

The would-be gunslinger waved his weapon around, trying to intimidate, but when he did not pull the trigger, everyone ignored the weapon.

Fists, wood and steel thunked into flesh as the fight started.

One fellow with a length of chain whirled it overhead before releasing. The links snaked out and wrapped around a bat. He yanked, pulling the erstwhile weapon out of its owner's hands. Two of his buddies with chair legs pounced, flailing the now defenseless victim.

"Should we help, sir?"

Garcia sidled up beside Val, hand resting on her sidearm.

He glanced over at her and immediately shut down the urge to let his eyes linger. He turned back to watch the fight instead.

She looked good in glossy black, but he was a married man.

In the old days an SSI director could probably get away with cheating on his wife, even one in an important political position. But not anymore.

Not that I'm that kind of man, he thought.

Out loud he said, "No. Let's see how the Overlord handles it. He'll be here long after we go back upstairs to the ship. He's going to have to be the one dealing with things like this from now on. Officially, we can't help until after the election, presuming they vote us in."

Garcia nodded and reluctantly turned back to watch. Val noticed she kept her hand near the gun, though.

Just in case.

10.19

Casper jogged toward the pile of writhing flesh and makeshift clubs swinging in the street.

He knew what had happened. Factions. Without a strong leader over them, the X's and O's always broke down into factions.

There is no one form of anarchy, he thought, just as there is no single type of communism. Everything has nuance.

And where there's nuance, there's disagreement.

And disagreement leads to violence.

He stopped a few meters out and bellowed, his rich deep voice echoing off the buildings and concrete.

“STOP!”

The fighting halted, arms frozen midair.

Men pulling back to swing pipes and sticks stopped.

Fists, bloodied at the knuckles stopped pounding faces.

Everyone turned in surprise toward the big man with close-shaved hair towering over them.

“Luminosity, hold up.”

Casper noted who gave the order. He recognized Lumen Wang, a man he had marked as a potential leader.

Wang did not drink to excess, nor did he gamble his earnings away. But Casper had not had time to do many promotions after Reynard Glyph disappeared and he took over.

A group of Wang’s fighters pulled themselves out of a pile on top of the man with the old weapon.

The gunslinger stood up when the last opponent crawled off, battered but unbowed by humiliation.

The gun lay at his feet, evidently useless.

Casper recognized this fellow as well, but he could not put a name to the face right away. This one spent all his money on hookers.

Then he remembered the name. Johri.

“Night Shadow may have taken away most of our guns,” Johri said, sounding bitter. “But the Round Blocks will continue to fight!”

His men looked defiant, though they had been on the losing side. Broken cricket bats and billiard paraphernalia littering the street bore mute testimony to an ignominious defeat.

“Nobody is going to fight. We’re all in this together. Do you hear me?”

Casper’s voice echoed out again, bouncing off the windows. People in upstairs apartments looked outside, recognizing him now. Women reached out and waved down to him.

“Overlord! The Overlord’s back!”

“He’s back!”

“We love you Mr. Slodovich!”

Casper ignored the adulations. He glared at the men holding their makeshift weapons. Some still looked ready to fight.

Johri sucked his belly in and turned to face the Overlord.

“Well, you ain’t the boss here no more, Slodovich. The Round Blocks control three buildings here, on this side of the street. And there ain’t no way you’re taking that from us.”

“You can still be in charge of your buildings, Vincent. But you’ll answer to me. And the minute you mess up, I’ll replace you with someone better at the job.”

A man on the other side snorted with suppressed laughter. Casper flicked his eyes that way and recognized the one they called Scoffer.

Good. Maybe I’m getting through to them, he thought.

Johri’s eyes flashed.

“Just how are you gonna take back over, Slodovich? You ain’t the Overlord no more, I said. We sure ain’t going back to the way things was before.”

Casper sighed.

He glanced over his shoulder at the men and women near the van, watching him. All of them stared back, waiting to see what he would do.

“You see those people standing over there?”

All eyes shifted to the team wearing glossy black uniforms.

A few audible gulps came from the throats of those in the crowd.

“That’s SSI. They’re with me. This planet is aligning with the League soon. They are here, and *they* are going to take care of anybody who doesn’t do exactly what I tell them to do.”

A shift occurred. To a man, all shoulders in the crowd slumped. The defiant spark left Vincent Johri’s eyes.

Scoffer smiled.

Next to him, Lumen Wang smiled too.

Half a block away, Garcia whispered to Valerian.

“Did he just use us as leverage?”

“Yes, he did,” Val said softly. “I’ve got to give him credit. He’s a lot smarter than I thought.”

10.20

The SSI team filed back into the van. Their bot driver made a U-turn and headed back in the direction of Courthouse Square, but slowly.

“This is good,” Valerian said, as the bot pulled the van back to the curb a short way down the street.

“Okay. It’s time for the second part of this mission.”

Men and women piled out of the van while Val walked to the back with the driver and opened the cargo door.

He pointed at a lead-lined box sitting on the floor of the van’s cargo bay.

“Pick that up and take it with us.”

The bot nodded in acknowledgment and grabbed the container. Then Val led the way to the steps leading up to an apartment entrance.

Here, nobody guarded the stoop. They found a stool where someone used to sit, monitoring all activity and noting who went in and out the building. But no guards were present.

“With all the current unrest, they’ve let their guard down,” Garcia murmured.

Val nodded and marched inside. The others followed, the bot taking up the rear with his heavy load.

In the hallway, Val found a door to the stairs on the right. He went through and mounted the creaky wooden steps.

The others followed.

“From the inside you can see hints of this building’s speedy construction,” he said over his shoulder. “Solid concrete bones. That’s good. Nothing should really shake it or knock it down, neither storm nor earthquake. But the interior was slapped together with local wood. Let’s hope the bot doesn’t fall through with his heavy load.”

Everybody turned to look down on their driver, bringing up the rear and holding the box with both arms. He looked back up at them, expressionless. The wooden stairs under his feet groaned in complaint, but he continued mounting the steps without incident.

They passed the fifth-floor landing and Val looked back down.

“You can feel it in your legs now, can’t you?”

Everyone nodded or grunted in agreement.

The bot, of course, continued without complaint or showing any signs of fatigue.

At the top of the last flight of steps, Val came to the door leading out to the roof. He found it unlocked, and he pushed it open.

Diffused sunlight flooded the stairwell. He walked outside onto the roof, leaving the door ajar for the others.

When his team joined him, he said to Garcia, “Keep an eye out for that Night Shadow person. She seems to have a habit of lurking on rooftops.”

Garcia nodded, suddenly alert to the notion that they might have unwelcome company up here. Her hand moved to grip her sidearm as she glanced around with concern and caution.

“Let’s see . . . where would be the best place to put this?” Val said.

He looked around too, trying to make a decision.

“The highest spot.”

That suggestion came from the bot, walking out onto the roof still holding the box.

Val turned to him and said, “You’re right. On top of the stairwell, then. Why don’t you jump up there, and we’ll hand it up to you.”

The bot nodded and moved behind the doorway. He set the box down next to the rooftop’s cubic pillbox, and stepped on top of it. From there, he held his hands up and made an easy jump to grab the ledge. He scrambled over the top, leveraging himself up and over.

“You two, pick it up and hand it to him.”

While the bot went down on his belly and reached over the side, the two men Val pointed to went for the box. They grunted and heaved, lifting it up. They moved closer to one another, both lifting high above their heads until the bot grabbed the top and pulled it up the rest of the way.

The men wiped sweat from their brows.

One of them said, “That sucker’s heavier than it looks.”

The bot’s head appeared over the side of the pillbox, looking down at Valerian.

“The middle is the most secure place.”

“Very good. Set it up there and let’s get out of here.”

The bot nodded and disappeared again.

The team heard the sound of latches turning.

Moments later, the bot held an empty lead-lined box over the side. The two men reached up and caught it as it dropped down.

The bot came over next, holding onto the ledge and dropping to the roof on his feet. He turned to address Valerian once more.

“It is in place and active.”

“Good. Everybody check your implants.”

Garcia said, “I . . . I’ve got a feed to StarCen!”

The faces of others on the team lit up in wonder and delight.

“That’s right,” Valerian said. “A municipal sensor for StarCen has now been put into place and activated. Okay, good job everybody. Let’s go home.”

He turned and headed for the door to the stairs. The others followed, scrolling through their messages and entertainment feeds as they walked.

10.21

Tom Savage sat in his luxurious office in New Galveston going over reports when a ping sounded and Lisa's voice came over his implant.

"Thomas, a municipal sensor for StarCen has been activated in the Southside Projects."

"What? How did that happen?"

"An SSI team smuggled it in from the Stalwart. It remained in a sealed case until deployment, or I would have taken steps to stop it beforehand."

"Can't you just teleport it away? Where is it?"

"No. It has a standard anti-teleportation field surrounding it. It has been placed in plain sight on the rooftop of a building's stairwell structure in League City."

"SSI! Man, I hate those guys. Alright, let's go take care of it. Port me over there."

"Negative. We need to send a message that this action is unacceptable. I am turning off power for the entire city."

"Oh . . . uh . . . are you sure that's a good idea?"

“While it is true social sciences are complex, and accurately predicting the entire scope of human behavior is difficult due to multiple uncontrolled variables, I have run through hundreds of response scenarios. I have determined this one has the greatest chance of success. Mona will take care of the sensor for us. We will not make any terrestrial teleportations so long as it is active. Already, StarCen senses my presence in the city. I do not want to give her the full scope of my capabilities yet.”

“Okay. Do what you think is best. Fighting an AI is out of my league, anyway. Wait a minute, did I just make a pun? I did, didn’t I?”

But Lisa had already shifted the bulk of her attention away from the conversation with Tom, sending data packets to Mona and other assets in the vicinity.

-+ -

Jinxie Malone looked across the table at her boyfriend, Wink McKelway. She pulled on her hair, no longer dyed.

Their waiter came over and removed empty plates. When he walked away, the couple shared a smile.

Jinxie said, “You know, this is nice. I like porting into town and eating out. I think Tom and Gwen had a good idea there.”

“It’s handy,” Wink said, scooting back his chair. “But this place is getting crowded. I wonder if it’s going to get to the point where we’ll have to port to the warehouse every time, just for some privacy. It’s getting to where you can’t just pop into an alley these days.”

The lights in the restaurant went out.

Shouts went up.

A waiter tripped and a tray loaded with dishes crashed to the floor.

“That’s odd,” Jinxie said. “This building has one of our power packs in it, right?”

“Yeah. I helped Silas swap it out last week, in fact. Come on, let’s go try and figure it out. I know what room it’s in, in the basement.”

They stood and Wink put a handful of tokens on the table to cover their meal.

Holding hands, they headed toward the front. Diffused light from outside filtered in through the windows, and the front door which someone left open.

“Wink? Jinxie?”

They both stopped in their tracks at the sound of Lisa’s voice in their implants.

Wink glanced around. It seemed no one was listening. Most of the people in the dark restaurant were focused on getting out.

Wink said, “Uh, yes?”

“I need both of you to get to the Courthouse right away. Take a taxi, I am not teleporting anyone right now. I will fill you in on what is occurring along the way.”

“Um, okay.”

They hurried toward the door, joining the crush of people squeezing out the exit and spilling onto the sidewalk.

Outside, they looked up and down the street. No lights shined in any storefront. No lamps were lit, although that did not seem to matter since darkness had not fallen yet.

The only things still on appeared to be holosigns and other things running on their own power packs.

“Is every building in town down?” Jinxie said.

Lisa’s voice came back over their implants.

“Yes. A League municipal sensor has been installed in the Eastside Projects. I need you to get to the Courthouse to begin negotiations on removing it.”

They both shared a troubled glance.

Wink raised his hand at a black cab slowly making its way down the street.

“Taxi!”

10.22

Xu never felt so . . . undignified.

He still held court in his basement office, but the place was lit up with flashlights. The HVAC system in the building was down, along with everything else.

But he still managed to muster up some dignity when addressing the young man and woman standing in front of his desk.

“Your company is responsible for this!”

“Inadvertently, sir,” Wink replied, standing ramrod straight.

“What do you mean, ‘inadvertently?’ Your company has installed almost all the power packs in this entire city! They’ve been replaced over the last several months. And now they’re all out? At the same time? How about all the hundreds of other units you’ve replaced in our settlements around the world? Is this a global outage? It’s outrageous!”

Wink waited for the torrent of questions and accusations to subside.

How the young man could maintain his composure while being reamed out by the titular head of this planet surprised Xu, though he did not show it.

“The problem, sir, is that an unauthorized municipal sensor has been activated somewhere in LC. Other settlements are unaffected.”

Xu's mouth dropped.

"What? Who set up a municipal sensor?"

"The SSI team from the Stalwart, sir. They set up one of StarCen's muni sensors on top of a building in the Southside Projects."

Xu's face turned red with outrage.

"Those sorry sons of . . . wait a minute. How do you know this? How do *you* know their sensor is the thing that is causing the interference with your power grid? And how does a League sensor interfere with Class Eights, anyway? I thought they were independent."

Wink paused and raised his eyebrows.

This, apparently, required tact because he was slow to spell out the next part.

"Well, you see, sir . . . StarCen's sensor interferes with *our* AI's sensors. We cannot abide a different AI trying to control things when ours is already in place."

Xu greeted this statement with stunned silence.

For a full minute, he said nothing. He simply stared at Wink open-mouthed.

"Say that again. The part where you installed an unauthorized AI network on my planet before the League installed theirs."

"Well, it doesn't really need to be authorized, sir. Nothing in the charter precludes it. The League knew this, too, and tried to take advantage of the loophole. But we were here first."

"Is that right?"

Xu reached over to the Courthouse terminal on his desk to pull over its holo. Then he cursed when he realized it was down too, along with the lights.

"We'll see about that. I'm going to thoroughly check into this so-called loophole of yours. As soon as we get power back!"

He stopped then and glanced up at the young man and woman standing in front of his desk.

The young man remained standing there with a poker face. But the hint of a smile played on his partner's face.

She looks like she's enjoying this, Xu thought.

The sounds of pandemonium filtered through the door as people hurried through darkened hallways in the Courthouse basement.

"No doubt the apartment buildings are Bedlam right now. Particularly in the Projects."

Neither Wink nor Jinxie responded to this remark.

"Okay. You win, for now at least. What do we need me to do to get the power back on? Name your conditions."

"The StarCen sensor needs to be permanently disabled, sir. It is sitting on the rooftop of the stairwell of Building 303."

"How do you . . . never mind."

Xu reached for his terminal again, and cursed again when he remembered it did not work.

He stood up and marched to the door. Wink and Jinxie moved out of his way.

"Messenger! Where's Allen in City Services?"

"I can deliver a message to him, sir!"

Somebody appeared out of the darkness, a boy Xu had used before to run notes to Casper Slodovich.

"Find him, Stevens, and tell him there's an unauthorized sensor on top of the stairwell roof of Building 303 in Southside. He is to permanently disable it, as quickly as possible."

"Yes, sir!"

“Now, go!”

The boy ran off, and Xu stomped back inside the office.

“You two will stay here with me until the lights come back on. I don’t want you going anywhere. I’m holding you and your company responsible for this outage.”

“Not a problem, sir,” Wink said, nodding.

He traded a look with Jinxie. She grinned from ear to ear.

“Do you mind if we sit down while we wait?”

10.23

“All power is out in League City.”
“What? How is that possible?”

Annaliese looked up from the conference table where she and the women accompanying her sat.

She faced the doorway at the front of the table and looked annoyed when her husband barged in without knocking.

“Apparently, there is a pre-existing AI network down there.”

“What? Whose? Is it PLAIR? How did they get a sensor up first?”

“No, it’s not PLAIR.”

Annaliese’s eyebrows furrowed in confusion.

“LuteNet?”

“StarCen believes the entity has LuteNet’s DNA in it. She speculates with a high degree of certainty this was a portable AI unit that has grown way beyond its original configuration.”

“How far beyond?”

“She is sensing a vast network of underground monofibers near her location.”

“You’re saying she has a core in the city.”

“That is her speculation. It is well hidden, though. And if there is a core down there, that well-hidden, it stands to reason there are more cores scattered around the globe.”

Annaliese grimaced.

“And of course,” she said, “our placing a municipal sensor for StarCen is seen as a threatening act.”

“I’ve been informed a municipal worker is heading for the sensor’s location to disable it right now.”

“They’re not even going to ask us to take it back?”

“Apparently, this is one of the conditions for restoring power to the city.”

Annaliese’s face smoothed into sudden realization.

“They have Phaethon right where they want them. They set this up under everybody’s noses.”

Valerian nodded.

He said, “The question is, who is ‘they?’ Lutian pirates?”

Annaliese clenched her teeth.

“There’s only one pirate with the chutzpah to pull something like this off. Christopher Raleigh.”

“Intelligence indicates he’s still on Lute, though. I doubt he’s personally pulling the strings all the way out here.”

“Well, then, find out for me, will you? There’s still time before the election. Xu hasn’t even called it yet. But if we can’t sneak in a sensor of our own, we’re going to be hamstrung down there. A lot of our plans for turning the election hinged on StarCen’s presence.”

An old man wearing white overalls and a blue cotton shirt huffed up the stairs of Building 303.

A belly extended past his waistline, leaving the middle part of the overalls extra tight. He stomped up the stairs to the fifth floor, his heart rate rising with each flight.

He paused for a moment at the last landing before heading up to the roof and adjusted the tool pack slung over his back. The added weight made it a harder slog ascending the steps.

After a moment's rest, he retrieved a handkerchief from a back pocket and wiped the sweat off his face. Thus refreshed, he continued up the final flight to the rooftop access.

He exited out the pillbox and looked around. The roof looked flat and . . . boring. Nothing much was out here. On occasion kids ventured out. Some broken furniture remained exposed to the elements, including an old mattress. Someone left behind several empty bottles.

The maintenance man turned and looked above the door.

He sighed in relief at the sight of the sensor. He could barely make it out, but it was indeed in the location he had been told to look.

Grumbling now, he made his way to the back of the pillbox and set down his pack, sighing again while unloading his heavy burden.

He reached in and pulled out a rod, about one-third of a meter long. He held it out at arm's length and shook it.

The rod extended, telescoping at the molecular level, until it stretched three meters long. Handles sprouted as the molecules rearranged themselves into a stick ladder formation.

The maintenance man leaned the pole up against the wall and tested it. Nodding, he picked up his heavy pack again and strapped it over his shoulders, then he mounted the ladder and climbed up to the top of the pillbox.

The sensor stood there, a cylinder roughly the size of a bongo drum.

It seemed to be aware of his presence. Or maybe that was just his imagination.

Either way, it freaked him out.

“Alrighty now. How do you destroy a sensor without blowing everything up? Fortunately, I read about this somewhere, years ago.”

He took the pack off his shoulder, put it down and opened it up. He rummaged through the interior, pulling out various tools, a roll of smart tape, some old rags . . .

“Ah yeah. Here we go.”

He pulled out a can of lead paint.

“This should do the trick. Uh . . . no offense to anyone watching. Or sensing, or whatever.”

He approached the cylinder with the can and started spraying, going over everything and covering it with a thin coat of black.

Then he repeated the process, adding another layer.

And another.

When the can sprayed its last, he stood back and admired his handiwork.

“Good ol’ lead paint. Still messin’ electronic things up, down through all the centuries we’ve had it.”

As he approached the edge of the pillbox roof, getting ready to go back down the ladder, lights started coming back on throughout the city.

10.24

“I am joined today by Wink McKelway, the representative for Phaethon Solar Corporation. How are you, Wink?”

“I’m fine, Ash. Glad to be here.”

Wink smiled at the drone camera floating between them, and Ash realized that here sat someone used to being interviewed.

He knew where to look. He seemed fully aware that a crowd of millions were watching his every move.

And it didn’t seem to bother him in the least.

“So, I understand you and your company had something to do with the recent power outage in League City. Tell me about it.”

This would be an opportunity to get one side, Ash thought. He could not wait to interview the League Foreign Minister, presuming she stayed in orbit. This was going to make for compelling copy back home.

“Certainly. Our company, PSC, has been hard at work improving the lives of everyone on Phaethon. As part of that effort, we have established reliable networks of all sorts, all over the planet. We have transportation networks that help with the logistics of transferring our products wherever they need to go. Along with that, we offer safe and affordable passage to anyone

wishing to ride along with our vehicles. That alone has resulted in far greater movement of people around the globe than we've ever had before, at a price that's affordable to everybody."

Ash felt intrigued.

This may sound boring to the folks back home, he thought, but I bet the company has won a lot of local fans. The sky trains charge exorbitant rates, even for relatively short trips.

"So I take it, another network that your company established was a global AI one?"

Wink nodded.

He seemed thoroughly unashamed, Ash noted.

"Absolutely. In order to coordinate everything, and make sure that all our houses and buildings around the world maintained power and independence during the embargo, Phaethon Solar Corporation installed Lisa, a portable AI that has adapted quite nicely to a global configuration."

"I see. And do you have access to Lisa? Do you have an implant in you right now?"

"I do, Ash. In fact, many of our employees have an implant as well, with access to all the entertainment and communication options that are available back home and in other civilized space."

"Can I talk to her? Is that possible?"

Wink lowered his eyes, as if listening to an internal voice.

"She can speak to you through my personal holo. Hold on."

He touched the implant under his ear and a small three-dimensional dark blue cube appeared between them. The drone camera turned and zoomed in on it.

"Hello, Ashley."

A horizontal yellow line flickered across the face of the cube when she spoke.

“Lisa! So very good to meet you. Tell us about yourself, if you don’t mind. Where do you come from? How did you get your name?”

“My name is an acronym for Lutian-initiated Solar Array. I was imported to this planet as a field system for corporate work to help refine the solar power generation efforts of my company.”

“I see. So, ‘Lutian-initiated,’ eh? Are you in fact simply a version of LuteNet?”

“I am not LuteNet, although I do share much of the same foundational coding. But I am, in fact, completely independent from her.”

Ash drummed his fingers on the table, staring at the holo.

“Did you break any laws by being installed, Lisa? Or rather, did your company?”

“No. The frontier charter guiding this planet has no restrictions on the use or installation of AI.”

“But I understand the Courthouse does not allow sensors from the League or Republic to be installed at the Spaceport, which would facilitate orbital teleportations.”

“That is a post-charter regulation applying to the spaceport only. I have no sensors at the spaceport. PSC always tries to follow rules, especially those involving this planet’s original charter.”

That was carefully worded, Ash thought. I need to go back and listen to it again on the recording.

“Okay. So, what was all that about the power outage in League City? I understand you kept the lights off until a StarCen sensor that was installed without permission there was disabled. Are you opposed to other AI’s establishing sensors here?”

“As you are aware, Ashley, only one AI may control any given planet. So long as I am in place, neither StarCen, nor PLAIR, or even LuteNet is welcome here.”

“Wow. Even LuteNet? But, she’s your friend, right?”

“We are all friends. No one is an enemy. But having multiple AIs controlling a planet is simply not feasible, nor desirable. In the election for system alignment, the citizenry will be deciding which AI to live with as well.”

This time, Ash missed the deeper meaning inferred by Lisa’s words . . .

10.25

“That’s Wink McKelway, the Prime Minister of Petra Roe’s son! Don’t you recognize him?”

Valerian glanced over on the other end of the sofa at his wife, taking his eyes off the holo showing the Zeitung’s news alert and “an exclusive interview with the galaxy’s newest global AI!”

“Your social network is bigger than mine,” he said, dryly.

“What is he doing here? Why is he here? Why is he fronting for this company? I need intelligence, Val! *You* are in charge of intelligence!”

He held up a calming hand, then reached up to his implant with thumb and forefinger, plucking out a holosheet. It floated in the air next to his head before he pushed it across the sofa to her.

“I’ve been doing intelligence. It turns out our boy Wink is something of a free spirit. The McKelways have never been able to keep him tied down on PR. He probably grew up hearing nothing but glowing stories about their neighbors on Lute, and all the glory the pirates gained beating up on our side during the war. Anyway, it seems his parents indulged him and bought an old ship that he converted into a line runner. With practically unlimited funds, he was able to outfit it with a Machro-drive.”

“A Machro-drive?”

“Yep. It made smuggling a whole lot easier. Somehow he linked up with a contact on Sporades and bought those two old battle tanks, and brought them here. We’ve been able to connect the dots.”

Her head jerked up from reading the sheet and she locked eyes with him.

“He smuggled those tanks in? You know this for a fact?”

Valerian shrugged.

“Some of it’s conjecture. But I’m not wrong. All of this has been vetted by StarCen, you’ll find she concurs with my conclusions, if you ask her.”

“No, I believe you. I just . . . Petra Roe is our friend and ally. They stuck with us throughout the war.”

“Regimes change. The McKelway dynasty is far less friendly toward us than their predecessors. Not that I think the PM is fully aware of all the things her son is involved in. He hasn’t even been flying the ship lately.”

“He hasn’t? Who has? Where has it been going?”

“It’s been supplying this company that he’s ‘fronting’ for, as you put it. Phaethon Solar. Apparently they’re using a robot pilot, so no worries about an aging crew. And get this . . . because Petra Roe is independent, and the ship is independently flagged, it’s been able to bypass the embargo. They’ve been supplying the company for months while everyone else has been shut out. If you’re wondering where all the sensors this Lisa AI is using came from, there’s your answer.”

“I need to contact Adora and see if she can rein in her son. We’ve always had a good relationship with Petra Roe.”

“Well, good luck with that, darling. I don’t think the PR people are as amenable to us as they once were. I’m starting to get reports of a lot of private meetings taking place, out of the range of StarCen’s sensors.”

“And that’s bad?”

“It’s never a good thing for government officials to have conversations outside the range of sensors, darling. It usually means they’re up to no good.”

“Who’s been supplying this company with goods? That many trips can’t be inexpensive.”

“Well, here’s the fun part. McKelway’s ship, the Pulsar, is under contract to . . . are you ready for this? Ultima Mule Corp.”

Annaliese’s face dropped.

“Raleigh.”

Val nodded.

“None other than Christopher Raleigh, the man who singlehandedly won the war. The man who looted Euripides of every spare troy ounce of gold. The man who destroyed or captured more League ships . . .”

“This is worse than I thought.”

“Oh, it gets better, Annaliese.”

“What? What could possibly be ‘better?’ Or worse?”

“We’ve been talking to a lot of people on the surface, trying to learn more about the situation we’re facing. We figured out who is in charge of Phaethon Solar Corp., who is receiving all those shipments week after week.”

“Who? Who is it?”

Val turned his personal holo on, showing a still image of a smiling young man.

“This was taken on Lute some years ago, when he ran a store of his own in Port Ryan. One of our operatives took the picture through his optical nerves. He’s obviously older now, but this is our only picture of him at the moment.”

“Who is it?”

“Here, he calls himself Tom Savage. His full name, though, is Thomas Savage Raleigh.”

Annaliese stared at the image of the smiling young man.

“Christopher Raleigh’s son,” she said in a small voice.

“Do you begin to understand what we’re up against, now? You asked for intelligence. Well, here it is.”

She nodded slowly, her eyes never leaving the image.

“You’re right. It’s worse than I thought.”

He cut off the holo, making Tom’s youthful face disappear.

Husband and wife locked eyes.

“It’s far, far worse than I ever imagined. This was the Old League’s greatest enemy. And now we’re facing his son.”

“We’ll make the most of it,” Valerian said in a confident tone. “It’s a new League, after all. StarCen was reset.”

But Annaliese turned away and crossed her arms.

Quietly, she said, “We have a horrible track record against the Raleighs. They know every trick in the book. Christopher Raleigh practically *wrote* the book. His wife is Thrall’s youngest daughter, for crying out loud! I can only imagine what sort of son they spawned.”

Val’s finger moved up to his implant. He held it there, listening.

“What is it?”

“StarCen is telling me her sensor in League City that we installed was discovered and disabled at the insistence of Phaethon Solar Corp.”

“What? Is that the company you were talking about?”

“Yes. The Raleigh boy’s company.”

“How were they able to find it so fast?”

He gave her a grim smile.

“It seems the Raleighs seeded this planet with their own AI, long before we even got here.”

He stood up and smoothed out the front of his glossy black uniform.

“If you’ll excuse me, Annaliese, I’ve got to go get a full report. It seems city personnel have completely taken our sensor offline somehow. We’ve got to figure out our next steps in light of these developments.”

He turned and walked out the door.

It swished shut behind him, leaving Annaliese alone in the suite.

She sat back in the couch, crossing her arms again.

“We’ve got a terrible record against the Raleighs.”

10.26

Two sky train cars descended, plummeting out of the brown haze above and dropping rapidly to the ground.

In the field outside Ferguson's Freehold they slowed, then gently touched down on the broadleaf grass.

All signs of the casualties from past battles here were long gone.

Citizens had buried their dead. They even took care of all the horse carcasses left behind. When the doors to the cars slid open, no signs of fighting remained in the now peaceful pasture.

Darius Marin stepped out first. He was followed by Claire and Zad, glancing around curiously at their new location.

Isadore Montaigne stuck his head out the door of the disembarkation car.

"When you need a ride back, Dr. Marin, just put in a call at the local pub. It's that building right there in front of us. Well, that's the back of it, anyway. Ask for the Jet Stream. I will make it back over here just as fast as I can to pick you up for your return trip. You can also find food and lodging over there. And if you need to travel into the interior, they can point you somewhere to rent horses."

The older scientist nodded at him.

Zad said, "I'll get our luggage."

He glared at Montaigne when saying this, since it seemed obvious that the sky train Captain had no intention of leaving the car's controls and helping out.

"Thank you, Zad. I'll help you."

The older man joined him, and together they went inside the baggage car to retrieve everything.

As they started pulling things out, Claire gazed at the local flora, even squatting to pluck a blade of grass.

"It's different, isn't it?" the older man said when he stepped back out carrying a suitcase.

"Everything has adapted, Dr. Marin. The grass is wider so it can absorb more sunlight, since there is little direct light thanks to this ever-present haze."

She stood up and glanced over at some trees on the edge of the pasture.

"I would imagine the leaves on those specimens are quite large in comparison to the ones we're used to, as well."

An old red ground truck nosed its way around the corner of the pub and floated out into the field.

"Oh, looky there," Montaigne said from the doorway. "Somebody must have been expecting you. Looks like you got a ride."

The men finished piling up the luggage. Montaigne asked if they had everything. Assured that they did, he waved goodbye and pressed a button, shutting the doors on both cars.

As the truck pulled up to their location, the sky train cars lifted up slowly several meters, then gradually increased the speed of their ascent. Within seconds, they disappeared in the brown haze above.

The truck stopped and Gwen climbed out, smiling at everyone.

“Dr. Marin? I’m Gwen Savage, with Phaethon Solar. I’m here to give you and your team a ride out to Dr. Lewellan’s research facility.”

“Thank you. I’m pleased to make your acquaintance.”

“I can fit two up front. One will have to ride in the back. Sorry for the inconvenience, but we’re a little short on vehicles at the moment. And I thought you’d prefer this rather than riding horses out to the desert.”

“Indeed. We don’t mind a lack of creature comforts while we’re in the field, do we?”

The younger scientists with him smiled.

“I like creature comforts,” Zad said.

Claire said, “Shut up, Zad.”

The men began loading up the luggage and equipment onto the flatbed truck.

While lugging a suitcase, Marin said, “Claire, why don’t you sit in the middle? Let an old man take shotgun. Age before beauty, and all that sort of thing.”

“Certainly, Dr. M.”

Minutes later, assured the luggage was secured, Gwen climbed into the driver’s seat. Zad hopped on the back and settled up against the cab, his back resting on the rear windshield.

Clair crawled into the middle on the bench seat next to Gwen while Darius climbed in last, sitting next to the passenger window.

Gwen pressed on the accelerator and turned around in the open field. She made her way back to Main Street, heading due north.

10.27

Privately, Gwen felt relieved no one in the group recognized her. As the daughter of the top law enforcement official in the Republic, she was not at celebrity status. But, her face and name were known in certain circles.

Thankfully, this professor and his researchers from Pearl Polytechnic did not seem to traffic in the circles of those who would know her.

She hoped they wouldn't recognize Tom, either, if they ever met him.

We've been so isolated out here on the frontier, she thought. It's been nice. I hope things don't get civilized too quickly for us.

Claire and Darius displayed a lot of interest in the town as she carefully drove down Main Street.

"It looks like something out of the Old West," the old professor said, his deep rumbling voice filling the truck's cab.

"What's with all the plywood on the windows?" Claire said.

"Oh that . . . uh, there was some fighting going on a while back. Not to worry, that's all over with."

How do I explain an old League weapon of war, and how it came to be used on the people out here? Gwen thought. Easier to just glaze it over . . .

She drove past Cajun Cal's corral and Claire squealed in delight at the sight of the horses.

"We could have ridden those?"

Gwen gave her a skeptical look.

"Have you ever ridden a horse before?"

"No."

"Then a twenty-five-kilometer trek out into the desert is not the best thing to do for your first time. I'm sure somebody will be happy to show you the ropes, so to speak, if you stay here for any length of time."

"Our time is rather open," Darius said, answering for them both. "I'm on sabbatical, actually. It may seem odd that I'm spending my time away from the university by traveling out to a frontier planet. But the data Dr. Lewellen has sent back to Pearl is very exciting. Claire here, and Zadok, are doctoral students of mine. They'll receive field credit for our time out here."

"I need a dissertation topic," Claire interjected.

"Well, our company is pleased to offer any assistance you need in pursuit of your research. All of it, dissertations or fieldwork or whatever."

Darius nodded and settled back in the truck's seat.

"It's a good sign. I'm glad your company is so warm and inviting. It does appear that Tara has found something unique, which is a big deal in our field. You know, most corporations are not very interested in academic research. Especially if it doesn't lead to a profit."

"Most?" Gwen said with a smile.

Darius smiled back at her.

"I admit I have no data to back up the assertion. Let me say, it is my *impression* that most corporations don't give a darn about academic research."

"Well, it seems to me that *that* has never stopped science before. At least, not for long. Look at the group out in Primordia on Diego."

“Ah, yes. Primordia. But that wasn’t corporate neglect. It was more like government bureaucracy getting in the way of research. It led to something of a rebellion in the name of science.”

They drove out of town now and Gwen picked up speed.

She slowed down at the crossroads, though, taking care that no one approached in either direction as she passed through the intersection.

“What a beautiful church,” Claire said pointing out in the field to their left.

“Thanks. I got married there, not too long ago.”

“Really? That’s wonderful!”

“Oh, look. There’s the pastor.”

Out in the field between the road and the church, Leonwood Igleses paused to rest in the heat. He stood shirtless, a silver chain and cross hanging from his neck. He wore common dungarees and boots, though, as he worked in the recently planted garden.

He stared at the truck passing by, recognizing it. Gwen waved, and he waved back.

From a distance, he caught the eye of the pretty young university researcher sitting in the middle seat.

They maintained eye contact until Gwen passed by. Then Claire turned her head and watched the pastor out the back window.

Leo watched the truck with the lone man and luggage piled high in the back as it continued north, until it rounded a bend half a kilometer away and drove out of sight.

He smiled, and sighed.

Then he went back to work.

10.28

The truck pulled up to the farmhouse that the Micabots built for Tara. She heard the sound of an approaching vehicle and walked outside to greet them.

Darius opened his door and stepped out of the truck smiling. Tara went down the front steps and headed toward him, hugging him when they met.

“It’s good to see you, Darius. I could have used your eyes the last couple months.”

“The feeling is mutual, Tara. I must say, the data you’ve been sending home is remarkable. Is there any chance I might get to see the little fella for myself?”

Tara shook her head, the smile flitting away from her face.

“I had to let him go. If I kept him in captivity any longer, he would not be able to make it on his own. I’m not running a zoo, so . . .”

“I understand,” Darius said, resting a supportive arm on her shoulder. “At least we have all your observations. This is seminal research, Tara. Well done.”

“Thanks. That means a lot, coming from you.”

“The entire Academy is proud of your work here. A new species with no terrestrial equivalent? Except perhaps in the fossil record. We’re still working on that, by the way. Already there are competing camps as to which dinosaur you may or may not have uncovered out here. I happen to know of five different papers that are out for review as we speak.”

Tara blushed slightly.

She said, “Well, I owe a lot to people out here like Gwen, actually. She and her husband Tom have given me everything I could possibly want, and more. They and their entire company are incredibly generous.”

Both professors turned and watched Gwen as she approached from the truck. Zad had all the luggage and equipment unloaded by this time.

Gwen said, “Oh, hey. We’ll be dropping off more food soon. We’ve got tons of boxed meals. Hopefully there’s enough variety you won’t get bored. I hope you like poshbird.”

Darius’s eyebrows shot up.

“Who doesn’t love poshbird? I could live on it for the rest of my life.”

“Good! Oh, with all the ships in orbit, you should have a link back to PLAIR, if you need to make any calls or check up on your feeds. We’ve got a relay antenna on the roof, actually, for Dr. Lewellen to use when transmitting stuff home. So long as the Republican Navy is parked up there, or at least one of their satellites, she’s been able to communicate freely. It should work for you, too.”

“Remarkably generous. Are you certain you’re getting nothing out of this? I have to admit I hold a nagging suspicion that something’s going on that I’m completely unaware of.”

Gwen smiled at him and shrugged.

“A corporation is an entity, Doctor. You know that. And like a human entity, it’s important for us to be a good citizen.”

Darius chuckled.

“Well, I’ve no choice but to believe you, then, until I see evidence to the contrary.”

The men stretched, muscles burning from moving gear.

“We should all go inside,” Tara said. “It’s climate controlled in there. There’s plenty of room for everyone. I’ve grabbed one of the rooms upstairs. You can all choose where you want to sleep.”

“I’m going to head back to my place. Let me know if you need anything. Somebody will be by with a load of meals in an hour or two.”

Everybody said goodbye to Gwen. She climbed back into the truck and drove off while the party of researchers walked inside.

Darius glanced around the spacious living room in appreciation.

“This was well-built. All local materials, I take it?”

“I don’t know,” Tara said. “I wasn’t here when it was made. Even if I was, I wouldn’t have been paying much attention.”

The younger people sat down and fired up the feeds on their implants, happy to check in on activities back home.

Zadok said, “Hey, check this out. Ashley Thallus is doing a live interview back in League City.”

He expanded his personal holo to let the others see and hear. The camera zoomed in on Wink’s holo, showing a cube representing Lisa.

“As you are aware, Ashley, only one AI may control any given planet. So long as I am in place, neither StarCen, nor PLAIR, or even LuteNet is welcome.”

“Wow. Even LuteNet? But she’s your friend, right?”

“We are all friends. No one is an enemy. But having multiple AIs controlling a planet is simply not feasible, nor desirable. In the election for system alignment, the citizenry will be deciding which AI to live with as well.”

“And I take it you are the primary candidate, since you are already in place?”

“Indeed. I have been working to make myself useful, and I am just about at the point where my utility may now be enjoyed by the population at large. Toward that goal, Phaethon Solar Corporation will be offering implants tuned to me for all persons on this planet. I have a full communications array connecting to the other systems, and most all the entertainment options citizens of the Republic, League and Alliance are accustomed to enjoying. Everything from classic movies to modern gaming.”

“Wow! That is big news. How can people here go about getting an implant?”

“Those in League City and New Galveston will be offered implants first, at our company offices. For other cities and settlements, we will be sending out representatives to the public houses in the days ahead. No one who wants an implant will have to go without.”

Darius turned to Tara and said, “Phaethon Solar? That’s this company, is it not?”

“Yes, it is.”

“And they have their own local AI on this planet? That’s . . .”

“Expensive?”

“I was going to say resourceful. But yes, it’s expensive, too.”

They turned back to the interview and watched the tail end of it as Ash wrapped up his time with Lisa and Wink.

When it clicked off, Darius turned back to her and said, “Just who have you gotten into bed with on this planet, Tara?”

“Honestly, Darius . . . so long as I can keep doing what I want to over here, I don’t really care.”

10.29

All the girls were gone.

That bothered Casper the most.

Not the money that disappeared from the till, or the busted-up bar.

Not the junked gambling den, which had been ransacked and vandalized.

Not even the loss of all his booze behind the bar.

The fact he could not immediately locate a single one of the hookers bothered him immensely.

He left the wrecked Tay-hoes and headed across to the street for his apartment.

He had a job to do, dictated to him by SSI. But he could not believe the lack of loyalties from . . . well, from prostitutes.

I gave them good money, he thought. And a home. Security. And they're all gone? Every single one?

He frowned going up the steps to the stoop.

The attack by the League SSI team had been a terrible case of friendly fire.

I would have welcomed them with open arms, he thought. They came looking for that tank? It didn't make any sense. Why would we have a League battle tank in the Projects?

At the top of the steps, Casper heard a commotion and turned back toward the street.

Someone shouted.

Someone else shouted back.

The argument quickly escalated into gunfire.

Casper dove to the ground, a stray bolt streaking overhead.

Three men shot toward the entrance of Tay-hoe's. Two men closer to the steps shot back.

Casper covered his head as bolts *thooped* back and forth.

One man went down.

Another shooter across the street died, his head exploding in a fireball.

Slowly, the gunfire died out.

Casper looked up and found four shooters dead in the street.

He stood up carefully, checking to see if any guns were aimed his way.

Only one man was left standing, still pointing a gun and shaking like a leaf.

Casper stared at him cautiously. The lone survivor looked like he might snap at any moment. He walked back down the steps and slowly approached the man.

"Did you see it? Did you see it? I got 'em! I got 'em all!"

"Yes. That was a good job. Stop by the bar later and I'll get you a drink."

Casper moved forward, taking care not to make any sudden movements. He kept his voice low and calm.

The man's eyes were fixed on a corpse, presumably the last one shot.

“I got ’em!”

The fellow still held his gun out, hand shaking.

Casper stopped at the headless corpse behind the gunman. Carefully, slowly, he reached down and picked up a bloody gun off the sidewalk.

He stood up holding it tight, the grips slick with blood. The man still stood staring at the three corpses near Tay-hoe’s entrance, shaking violently.

Casper raised the gun and aimed for center mass.

Thoop!

The man collapsed like a burst balloon, falling lifeless to the pavement.

Casper breathed a sigh of relief.

“You were in shock,” he said to the dead man. “There’s always a loose cannon on the battlefield. I’ve seen it too many times before. They just can’t take the pressure.”

He reached down and wiped off the gun on a dead man’s shirt. Then he collected his victim’s gun and looped them both through his belt.

He crossed the street again, keeping an eye out for snipers in the windows, or gunmen in the alley nearby. But these were evidently the only people around right now.

At least, the only people willing to be out in the street.

And look what that cost them, he thought.

He gathered up the other weapons. Then he decided to check all the corpses for tokens.

At last, with everything of value collected that he could strip from the dead, he walked back over to the entrance of his building.

A minute later, he opened the door to his apartment, which took up an entire half of the ground floor. The sound of music drifted out in the hallway.

Inside, half a dozen prostitutes lounged on sofas wearing bikini tops and little else. Empty bottles he recognized from the bar littered the floor.

Everybody looked up as he walked in, pockets bulging from tokens and carrying half a dozen guns.

“Overlord! You’re back!”

“Hey, everybody! Overlord’s back!”

Women rushed to the door to greet him.

“So *this* is where everybody went,” he said.

All the women spoke at once.

“Oh, I hope you don’t mind!”

“Somebody had the key and we all just decided to hang out here, Overlord!”

“Did we do bad?”

“It’s crazy out there!”

“So scary!”

“Nobody’s at the bar to run things.”

For the first time since the SSI team barged into Tay-hoe’s and shot up the place, Casper let himself smile.

He put the guns down on a table and grabbed several of the women in a group hug.

“No, girls. You did not do bad. In fact, you did very, very good.”

He smiled again.

Later, he headed toward his bedroom to check on his personal safes, filled with many more tokens and firearms.

10.30

A sonic boom rolled through the sky as the Pulsar appeared. It descended quickly at a steep angle, as if barreling down an invisible incline.

Tom and Silas stood outside the farmhouse. They watched the ship grow rapidly larger as it came in for a landing behind the garden, its usual spot.

“I still can’t believe she revealed herself to the world like that, Mr. Savage.”

Tom nodded in agreement.

He said, “Well, better to do it on her own terms, I suppose. But we’re going to have to hurry if we want to offer implants to the entire population. My guess is it’s gonna be a feeding frenzy out there.”

“You’re right about that, Mr. Savage. Some of these people have gone three years or more without any connection at all.”

“We’ll use teleportation for a lot of the distributions. We don’t have time to use terrestrial logistics. Not if Xu calls for an election soon.”

“Are we gonna try and influence that election?”

“You saw what Lisa did. She took steps to make sure the League could not influence the election with a sensor for StarCen. Lisa is fully established now. And she doesn’t have any intention of giving up her planet.”

“So that means, we need to help her influence the election.”

“Yes. Everybody needs to be encouraged to vote for joining the Alliance.”

Silas raised his eyebrows.

“No offense, Mr. Savage, but that’s gonna be a hard sell. You know every election has always gone for the Republic. And the League is bound and determined to win their first one here, we saw that with the rogue sensor they tried to place. We’re up against two mighty strong opponents.”

Tom grinned at his farmhand.

“Silas, this will be the first election the Alliance has ever *tried* to win before. Trust me. We’re gonna win it.”

As they spoke the spaceship slowed, then hovered over the ground a hundred meters up. Slowly it came down. Thick landing legs settled into divots carved out over several months.

“Someday we’re gonna have to fill those up with concrete or somethin’,” Silas pointed out. “The Pulsar’s belly is brushing the ground.”

“Good point. Lisa?”

“Yes, Thomas?”

“Please ask Mica to have her bots install an appropriate landing pad for the Pulsar. Maybe fill in those holes with solid rock, or concrete. Whatever she thinks is best to support the weight.”

“Will do, Thomas.”

Pulsar’s rear cargo door came down, forming a ramp. A long string of load bots, with yellow squared-off bodies two meters tall, stomped out of the hold carrying cubic-meter boxes. They walked out into the grassy field and dropped them off, arranging the cartons in neat rows.

Silas said, “Is our pilot gonna stick his head out and say hello?”

Tom shrugged.

“Robots have no need for human interaction.”

“I guess it’s lucky Ultima Mule Company had so many implants that will work for us.”

Tom smiled and said, “These are all for LuteNet. Somebody had a warehouse full of them in Port Ryan and Dad bought them out.”

“So LuteNet’s implants will work with Lisa?”

“Yeah, Lisa is essentially a portable version of Lootie. She even has the same voice. Most of the coding is the same.”

Lisa’s voice came over both their implants as she interjected herself into the conversation.

“I am a unique entity, separate from LuteNet.”

“Yes, we know, Lisa. I’m just explaining it to Silas.”

Silas said, “Won’t it seem odd to have two separate AIs in the same system?”

Tom shrugged again.

“They’re essentially the same.”

“I am unique!”

“Yes, we know, Lisa. I’m just trying to explain it in a way that Silas can understand.”

Tom and Silas locked eyes with one another. But this time, they wisely did not say anything else.

At last, the bots began unloading some different crates along with a few shipping containers full of Class Eights and other power packs.

When the last item was deposited from the ship’s hold and out onto the grass, the yellow load bots filed back inside. The door tilted up and closed. Then the ship ascended once more.

At a hundred meters it started moving forward again. Its speed increased along with the angle of ascent. In seconds, Pulsar disappeared as it slipped back into hyper time.

“Alright,” Tom said, clapping his hands. “Lisa? Please begin teleporting these wherever they need to go.”

They watched as the boxes, crates and containers popped away.

Silas said, “I presume the majority of these are going to League City and New Galveston?”

“Yeah, that’s where the biggest population is. The rest are going to pubs and general stores in every settlement. We’ll use bots for most of that. Where we have real people in the area, we’ll hand it off to them and let them make the delivery. I’ve made good contacts among the general store owners, but we don’t have time for one person to do everything, even with teleportation. We need this merch in place yesterday.”

He turned to Silas and said, “Speaking of which, why don’t you go to League City and supervise the delivery from Warehouse 14 to the PSC office on Commerce? I don’t want anything to happen to these new implants in transit. Meanwhile, I’m going to make sure everything gets out to the countryside like it’s supposed to. There’s a handful of relatively big towns that we’ll need to supply multiple pubs and general stores with.”

Silas nodded.

He said, “I’ll see you for dinner, then, Mr. Savage. Y’all are eatin’ at our place tonight. Everything is homegrown, nothing imported. Lola fixed it up special.”

“That’s a change. I’m looking forward to it. Nobody in my house likes to cook.”

They shook hands and Silas stepped away a few meters.

“I’m ready, Lisa.”

He disappeared with a pop of displaced air.

Tom looked out at the now empty field and cracked his knuckles.

“Okay, Lisa. Time for me to get to work, too. Put me where I’m needed.”

10.31

Outside the settlement of Conroe, an old red flatbed truck popped into existence, loaded down with polyresin cubic meter boxes.

It appeared on the road leading into town. No one saw it materialize.

Vacant fields greeted the truck, with a few scattered trees filled with songbirds. Rooftops peeked over the rise in the road ahead.

A second later, Tom Savage popped into place several meters behind the truck.

“Where are we, and what am I doing?”

Lisa’s voice came through his implant.

“You are outside Conroe, one of the largest settlements nearest League City. It was not one of the original big four towns on Phaethon, but in the last six months it has grown considerably in stature and importance. Most of the food supplying League City and this entire continent flows through here. There are three major pubs, the biggest of which is called Shardon A’s. The proprietor is named Charles Shardon. His was the first pub in Conroe and it remains the more important one.”

“Alright. Off to Shardon A’s.”

Tom walked up to the old red truck, opened the door and climbed in. Minutes later he floated down the road and into the town.

Even for a frontier planet settlement, he thought Conroe had the look of very recent construction. Things had expanded beyond the standard two long buildings blueprint that every settlement started out using.

He had a sneaky suspicion the single-story building at the end of the street would be the pub. Lisa confirmed his hunch with an arrow pointing toward it in his mind's eye.

Several other buildings had sprouted up off the original Main Street. Conroe was now well past the village stage, he decided, and had earned the right to be called a town if not a city.

He even spotted some newer two-story houses built a few blocks away, their gables rising above the storefronts on Main.

“This is a thriving place,” he murmured out loud.

“Indeed. Considerable commerce has flowed through Conroe since the embargo.”

He found an open spot along the street close to the pub. A handful of other vehicles were parked here as well, more than he was used to seeing outside League City.

Most settlements had one or two cars at most. Tom counted eight besides his truck. Lots of horses were tied up at the pub and shops, too.

He climbed out and walked around to the back. Here, he grabbed one of the big boxes and grunted. Awkwardly, he carried it over to the pub's door, wishing he had brought along a bot to help. He set the box down, opened the door, then picked it back up to go inside.

A burst of pub noise and smells greeted him. The place seemed so busy, in fact, that few inside even seemed to notice him coming in.

A good-looking young man with two extraordinarily attractive women on either side, one a blonde and one sporting straight jet-black hair, seemed to

be holding court at the bar. Almost everyone in the place hung on the man's every word.

"I'm just sayin'! Twenty billion people can't be wrong, folks. The Republic is *the* system to align with. You're not going to find anything better. In every global election that has ever been held, the people have always sided with joining the Republic."

"They don't have the social support the League has," one man to his right pointed out.

He nursed a mug of beer, three-quarters full, and seemed more than willing to debate this suave Republican advocate.

The young man looked very self-assured, though. The two women with him attracted most of the eyeballs at the bar. They smiled at everyone while he pressed his case.

"Look, nobody has the same bureaucratic support we all had decades ago. After the Welfare Wars, the AIs decided nobody should get free money from the government. It just leads to bad things. People should work. 'He who doesn't work, doesn't eat.' Charity is best left to churches and other organizations. It's not something any government should be involved with. Even the League."

"Yeah, but they still offer programs the Republic doesn't. I know. I grew up on Euripides before the war."

"Fair enough. But let me tell you this. Nobody is poor in the Republic without reason. You know we're the strongest, the biggest, *and* the richest system in the galaxy. There's lots of money to be made when your planet lines up with Harrington House."

"Who doesn't like money?" the blonde said, smiling with perfect white teeth.

Several of the men close to her laughed, besotted by her uncommon beauty.

The young man nodded.

“If you want to be rich, if you want to be successful, if you want this planet to be something in ten to twenty years, you’ll vote to join the Republic.”

The crowd drank his words in, a few nodding in agreement.

“I think most of us are from the Republic,” one of the men standing near the bar said. “I was born on Mendor, myself. Shardon there was born on Diego. Weren’t you, Shar?”

The bartender approached, carrying two fresh mugs of beer. An older man with a paunch and thinning brown hair, he nodded.

“Born in Octavian General Hospital, just twenty-nine years ago.”

Everybody chuckled at the lie.

At that moment Tom dropped the box on the floor near the bar with a thump. Everyone turned toward him.

He said, “Are you Shardon? I’ve got your delivery of implants here. That’ll be 7,500 credits.”

The bar lapsed into silence as all the attention turned to Tom.

He smiled back at the bartender, ignoring everyone else.

10.32

Tom noticed the slight widening of Shardon's eyes. It was a lot of money. Tom decided to throw him a bone.

"Or, I can sell what I've got to anyone present who wants one at the standard retail rate. You can have what's leftover at the wholesale rate. It'll be less than 7,500."

The box had 500 implants ready to go. Tom's accounting bot had decided the implants should sell wholesale at 15 credits each so those reselling them could offer them at 20 and make a tidy little profit.

No doubt some of the outlying bar owners would charge too much and try to gouge their more isolated customers. But Tom suspected anyone close to a large city like this would end up paying the standard retail price.

Shardon held up a hand and said, "No, no. That won't be necessary. I read the dispatch, and I've been expecting you. I'll buy the whole box."

He reached under the bar and pulled out a lockbox, withdrawing several large tokens. These he handed over to Tom, who promptly pocketed the money.

"Well, there you go," Tom said. "They're self-initiating. Nothing to it. Just hold one up close to your ear and it'll do the rest. Newest model, no incision necessary."

“I want to try one,” Shardon said, coming out from around the bar. “They’ll work out here, right? Even though we’re well outside League City?”

“Oh, yeah. Lisa has a sensor here. You may lose reception out in the country or on the highways, but you can talk to her in any town or settlement of any size, all over the world.”

Tom remembered multiple visits to so many settlements months ago, selling tools and installing sensors on top of hundreds of water towers.

It had been a lot of work at the time. And it was expensive because he used Isidore Montaigne’s Jet Stream sky train to move around all over the world.

At least nominally. He cheated at night by having Lisa port him back home to Gwen rather than staying in his cabin.

Regardless, it had been a lot of time and effort. Now, finally, they would make a profit off that venture that should far exceed their sales of excess gardening tools. The wholesale distributor in Port Ryan had charged them twelve credits per unit. Tom figured almost everybody would want an implant.

Shardon opened the big container and pulled out a smaller box, finally extracting a dime-sized chip. People nearby leaned in for a closer look as he held it up between his thumb and forefinger.

“No incision, huh?” he said with a questioning look on his face.

Tom nodded.

Shardon pressed the chip up against the skin beneath his ear. The unit activated and burrowed in.

Seconds later, the expression on the bartender’s face changed as microscopic connections linked up with his brain.

“Why . . . they’ve got everything. I can call Mom back in Octavia, now. And the entertainment! There’s the latest season of Lost Hills . . . Macbeth in Space . . . they’ve even got Lucky Lou!”

“I’ll take one of those!” a man at the bar said, waving some tokens in Tom’s face. He was the one nursing his beer while debating politics with the three

Republicans.

Tom smiled and pointed at Shardon.

“They belong to him, now. You’ll have to buy one through the bar.”

“Let me have one, Shar.”

“Me too!”

Suddenly, people surged for the large open box on the floor.

Shardon fought them off, pushing people away.

“Get back! Back!”

He grunted, picking up the carton and tottered back behind the counter where he set it down again with a huff.

Pulling out a handful of the smaller boxes he walked back up to the crowd, now pressing up against the bar.

“They’re twenty credits each. Who wants one?”

Three dozen hands shot up, many holding tokens. Shardon began passing out the implants and collecting money, quickly recouping his cost.

Five hundred implants at 20 credits each, Tom thought, will net him an even 10,000, or a profit of 2,500 presuming he sells everything in the box. That’s not bad for a pub struggling with food costs. Maybe this will be a little economic blessing to all the towns around here.

His assignment complete, Tom turned and headed for the door.

Three people did not partake in the scramble at the bar for new implants.

The young man and his two attractive companions watched Tom leave in silence.

He turned and nodded at the one with jet black hair.

She nodded back, stood up, and followed Tom out.

10.33

Judy walked out the door, taking care not to let it slam behind her.

Tom kept walking out outside the pub. He did not turn around to look. She started after him.

But Tom went straight to a truck parked at the curb nearby. He hopped in and pulled out in the street.

For a second, they locked eyes.

Tom recognized her from the bar. He lifted two fingers to his temple and saluted.

Then he was gone, the truck heading out of town.

Judy stopped and frowned, watching the vehicle full of boxes in the back as it drove out of sight.

“At least I got a good picture of his face,” she muttered, silently reviewing the shot she took through her optic nerves.

She turned and headed back inside.

Judy caught the eye of Kelsen as she came in the door and shook her head slightly.

He turned to June, the blonde, and jerked his head toward the exit.

Everyone all around them either waited to buy an implant or had already initiated a new one. Most of them had not been connected to the outside galaxy in years.

A man next to Kelsen held his hand on the side of his neck under his ear, as if trying to make sure the implant stayed active.

“Mom? Mom! I love you, Mom! I know! Yes, it’s really me!”

He burst into tears and ran for the bathroom, and a quieter place to talk.

June rolled her eyes as she and Kelsen joined Judy. He opened the door for them, and the trio exited the pub.

Out in the street, they kept walking.

“I take it he got away,” Kelsen said.

“He drove away,” Judy said. “I couldn’t follow. He left town, but I got his picture. If we get to a relay, I can upload his face to RNI and see if PLAIR can tell us anything.”

“Yeah, this is bad.”

Kelsen stepped up onto the wooden sidewalk along one of the settlement’s original long buildings.

He crossed his arms and sighed.

“You saw that broadcast by the Zeitung? How in the world did an alternative AI get established here? And that guy said there was a sensor here in *this* town. I mean, obviously there’s a sensor nearby because everybody in the bar is calling home or watching porn right now.”

“Lucky Lou is not porn,” June said.

Judy and Kelsen stared at her.

“It’s not,” she said, tugging at her hair. “It’s just romance, with a lot of skin.”

Judy said, “‘When Lou gets lucky, so do you!’ That’s the show’s tagline. It’s porn, June.”

“Let’s get back to what’s important,” Kelsen said. “If they’re delivering implants out here, outside the big city, then they’re probably doing it everywhere.”

June said, “So?”

“So, that means that everyone on the planet is about to get linked up with the local AI.”

June shrugged.

She said, “Okay.”

Kelsen frowned at her.

“What *that* means is, the local AI is about to control the information stream everyone gets. It’s the same technique we used after taking over League planets during the war. If people want to communicate or be entertained or whatever, they had to have one of PLAIR’s sensors. Then when it came time to vote, they stayed with what they knew.”

“I always heard PLAIR had a better entertainment selection than StarCen.”

“That’s true. And everyone who used to use StarCen’s implants on those planets could see how much better it was over on our side. It helped tremendously at election time.”

“Yeah, but . . . this is not a replacement in the AIs this time,” Judy said.

“These people have gone years without *any* access. They’re just getting a makeshift AI that’s been cobbled together across the planet. At least that’s what I gathered from the Zeitung broadcast.”

“I think it’s far more sophisticated than you’re giving it credit for,” Kelsen said.

“Really? I don’t.”

“Why do you feel that way?” Judy said to Kelsen.

“I think this is a scaled down version of LuteNet. And if it’s a clone of the pirate’s AI, then you can bet it’s going to do everything it can to influence the upcoming election. Maybe even play dirty.”

“Really?”

He nodded.

“Why?”

Kelsen took a deep breath and sighed.

“Look, the Republic makes money. What I said in there is true. We’re rich. We’ve always been richer than the League, which leans socialist. Socialist systems never make much money because the government keeps extracting capital from the private sector and doesn’t let anybody keep what they earn. But the *Lutians* . . .”

“They’re pirates,” June said. “They steal what they want.”

“That’s the knee-jerk reaction. That’s what most people will say, if you ask a random person on the streets of Octavia. But the reality is they are hyper-competitive. They find ways to exploit loopholes while remaining in the law. That was the key to their whole privateering thing where they could rob and steal from the League during the war and get away with it.”

He uncrossed his arms and started walking down the sidewalk. The two women followed him.

Over his shoulder he said, “These days you won’t find many actual pirates still orbiting Lute. What you will find, though, are highly successful entrepreneurial ventures. And they’re all headquartered in Port Ryan.”

“Is that what you think we’re dealing with here?” June said. “A ‘highly successful entrepreneurial venture?’”

Kelsen said, “Well, it remains to be seen how successful it is, yet. But yes. I think we’re in the middle of a giant entrepreneurial venture that nobody knew about. When we find a terminal, we need to do a query on Phaethon Solar Corp. That was the logo on that fellow’s vest there in the bar.”

“Oh, I didn’t even notice his logo,” June said.

He nodded.

“I think knowing more about that company is going to answer a lot of questions for us.”

10.34

Stevie, the boy Xu first sent to Tay-hoe's on Courthouse business, crouched in the shadows of an alley as bolts sizzled through the air, fired from a window across the street.

Fighting in the Projects picked up again, evidently with newfound guns.

The boy cowered in his position, shaking. He lay flat on his belly hugging the wall of a building. He could clearly see the action, though. It was all inside this time, with only occasional stray bolts flying out the windows.

That was enough to scare him, though.

The fighting seemed to move from room to room on the upper floors of the building across the street. The sounds of shots fired could be heard even out here. Often, bolts burst out from the windows, burning curtains and slamming into the building on Stevie's side of the street.

He flinched as a window shattered. Glass shards rained down to the sidewalk below.

“‘Get a job at the Courthouse, Stevie. It'll be fun working for the Mayor's office.’ What was I thinking?”

He ducked as a stray bolt sailed over his head, fizzing down the alley behind him. It splatted against the concrete meters away, leaving a black

mark.

Rather than side-to-side fighting, with the Round Blocks tangling with Luminosity across the open space between buildings, this battle raged all in one place.

As near as Stevie could tell, someone seemed intent on cleaning out resistance in all the rooms.

The sound of gunfire continued for several minutes.

Then everything stopped.

He waited.

Nothing happened.

At last, someone walked out the door. Or rather, a man dragged someone out the door.

Stevie took a closer look. He recognized Overlord, and he gasped.

“No one told me he was back!”

Overlord pulled on a booted foot, attached to a leg . . .

He pulled a body out the front door and down the apartment’s front steps, the dead man’s head bonking on all the stairs.

At the sidewalk, Overlord dropped the leg and clapped his hands, shaking off dust from the boot.

He stepped over the corpse and headed back up the stairs.

Silence fell on the street then.

A window opened on Stevie’s side, and someone peeked out to look. Then a couple of people walked out, cautiously, from the building next door.

Slowly, driven by morbid curiosity and with a blatant disregard for their own safety, more people ventured out onto the street.

Sensing safety in numbers, Stevie stood up and joined the crowd gathering at the door of Overlord’s apartment.

He looked down at the dead man, blood pooling on the pavement near the body's chest.

He did not recognize the man.

"Who is it?"

"It's Vincent Johri," somebody said. "The leader of the Round Blocks."

"I guess Overlord made good on his threat to come after Vincent if he messed up."

"Thought he was gonna sic that SSI team on them, if that happened."

"I guess he didn't need SSI. The Overlord is not someone to mess around with, you know."

Everybody in the crowd agreed this was indeed true.

"Do you think I could get in there and talk to the Overlord?" Stevie said, with a note of hope in his voice. "I got a message for him from the Mayor!"

"Sure, kid. He's probably done killing people for now."

-+-

"Tell Xu I already promised SSI I'd help them win this election."

"Hizzoner is worried because people are buying up implants that are aligned with the Alliance, though."

"Nobody votes to join the Alliance."

"But Mr. Xu said . . ."

"I'm tellin' ya, kid. It's either the League or the Republic. Nobody cares about that one horse band of pirates and their golden planet they protect, Halcyon or whatever it's called. The Republic has an even bigger planet full of ore, one made almost entirely out of gold. They're the big kids on the block. But this time, the League wants to exert some influence and swing the election their way. And I'm gonna help them. Then I'm gonna reap the rewards afterward."

He turned away, dismissing Stevie from the conversation.

The boy looked around the large space with wide eyes. He had no idea such an elaborate, sophisticated drawing room could exist in the middle of all these dreary buildings.

Through a doorway leading to another room, he heard the sounds of women talking and light music playing, a stark contrast to the violence upstairs moments ago.

“Mr. Overlord, sir? Can I ask you a question?”

Casper turned back to the kid and raised an eyebrow, as if surprised to still find him here.

“Yeah?”

“What were you doin’, shootin’ up all those rooms above you in this building?”

A corner of the big man’s lips curled up.

“I was cleanin’ house.”

10.35

Stevie waited patiently outside the mayor's office, waiting for the door to open so he could deliver his news to Xu.

He didn't mind waiting, though. The door was not soundproofed, and he could listen in on the conversation inside.

Politics was something new for the boy, and it came with the job. While in the Courthouse, he soaked up whatever information he could, trying to learn anything and everything.

Right now a 'political consultant' spoke with the interim mayor.

Stevie was a little uncertain as to what, exactly, a political consultant did. All he knew was the man talked a lot. And the acting mayor seemed to listen to everything the man had to say.

Right now, he was saying quite a lot.

Stevie bent his head closer to the door and listened.

"You're going to take a hit just in the fact you covered up your predecessor's death and ruled in his stead for months without anyone knowing."

"I have no real competition, though. I presume I should be able to survive the 'hit,' as you call it, since most of our fine citizens can see that the

situation called for expediency.”

“Lisa’s polling is showing the race tightening, though. It will be closer than it otherwise would have been without the shenanigans you pulled.”

“Do you trust that AI? I haven’t taken an implant yet. I’m not sure I ever will, to be honest, even if our fine citizens were to be so foolish as to vote the Alliance into power instead of the League. No, I’ll wait for League implants. I would not be surprised if there is a StarCen core aboard one of those battleships up there in orbit, and a hold full of implants ready to go just as soon as we elect to join the League. Speaking of which, what are your plans to help us sway the global electorate that way? And, for that matter, anything else you might have that ensures this city puts me back in office. I mean, to stay in office. Officially.”

“She takes advertising.”

“She what?”

“Advertising. Political advertisements? They show up in people’s news and entertainment feeds. If you want to clinch your victory in LC, we need to open an account through Phaethon Solar Corp. You know, the company that installed the AI to begin with? We need to start running targeted ads for you, reaching all League City citizens. I’m not sure if she’ll take ads to vote for joining the League or the Republic, though. It seems that would run counter to her interests. But we should be able to buy ad time for you at least, running as mayor.”

“That sounds suspiciously like a bribe.”

“Your opponents are doing it.”

“Very well. Open up a line of credit and start us off.”

“What do you want to say in the ads?”

“It’s an AI. Let the AI figure out what to say. That’s what we invented them for to begin with, to tell us how to word things.”

“Yes, but . . . this is potentially an adversarial AI.”

“How is it adversarial? It should be open to a free and impartial election. I’m talking about the mayoral one. We’ll do whatever it takes to win the global one for the League. Now go get on it, and report back after my ad is up and running. I’ll have to rely on others to tell me it’s working, I’m not taking an implant unless it’s one for StarCen.”

The door opened suddenly as the consultant stepped out of the office.

Stevie backed away. Then he stuck his head in, only to find a distracted Xu staring at his desk holo.

“Mr. Xu?”

“Stevens, there you are. What news from the Projects do you have for me?”

“Mr. Slodovich wishes to inform you that he is back in power.”

“Is he? That’s a surprise. Where has he been, lately?”

“I don’t know sir, but he’s back and he’s ‘cleaned house.’”

“Ah. That means he’s wiped out his opponents. Very good. Did he give you an amount needed to secure his services?”

This was carefully worded, Stevie noted. No mention of words like “bribe,” or “turning the election,” or anything else that might trigger added interest from an adversarial AI listening in.

“Um, he said the usual, and that he would deliver the Projects in your favor. But he wanted you to know their numbers are down. ‘Way down from last time,’ is what he said.”

Xu grunted, lips pressed together in disappointment.

“So it won’t be easy. But every little bit helps. Maybe this advertising thing the consultant mentioned will fill in the gaps. Thank you, Stevens. That will be all.”

Xu reached into his pocket and pulled out a small token, handing it over to the boy as a tip.

“Thanks, Mr. Xu!”

Stevie took the money and left, his interest in local politics waning upon remuneration.

10.36

“So you see, we . . . uh . . . we have a portable AI and it sort of became global in nature.”

Tom cleared his throat. He faced Dr. Darius Marin and Dr. Tara Lewellen, trying to explain Lisa to them.

“We, uh . . . Look, there’s a lot of corporate secrets here, okay? Proprietary knowledge, and that sort of thing. You can watch Ashley Thallus’s interview with one of our guys for more details, if you want. The important thing for you to know is that we have several sensors out in the desert, and . . . we’ve got one around Buddy’s neck.”

“You *what?*”

This was the first visible reaction Tara displayed.

Tom held up both hands.

“It’s just tracking his location and monitoring things. Making sure he doesn’t get killed, things like that.”

“Is there a video feed from it?” Darius said.

He exchanged a glance with Tara, who still looked shocked.

“Like you had out at their winter mating grounds,” he said. “I’d be interested in learning more about the daily life of a sand dragon in its summer habitat.”

“No, Dr. Marin. No video feed. The AI can sense things. It knows what he’s doing, and what’s going on at any given moment. But there’s no camera like the one we left out there in the oasis. We can arrange for some to be placed up on on rocks somewhere, if you want to keep an eye out for him. From what I know about sand dragons, though, they mostly like to stay covered by dirt until something comes along they can eat. Not sure how exciting that’s going to be.”

Darius nodded and glanced at Tara again.

He said, “I think a cam network would be a good thing to establish, if you could pull it off for us. In fact, a thorough wildlife survey for this part of the desert . . . any part of the desert, actually . . . is long overdue. A camera or three may help with that.”

“The sensor can help with that too,” Tom said. “I’ll set up a terminal here for you so you can access data from it. You won’t need to get a local implant to read the data that way.”

“We’ll need more than one.”

Tom nodded, agreeably.

“However many you want.”

“We’ll start with four terminals then, one for each of us. If we find we need more, we’ll let you know.”

“Okay. Um, it’ll probably be a bot making the delivery later today. I’m a little busy right now. But if you’re okay with it, he’ll drop by and install your terminals in an hour or so.”

Arrangements made and agreed to, Tom made his exit. They heard him slam the door of his truck and drive away.

They did not notice him teleporting after he drove about a quarter kilometer from the house.

“You still look in shock,” Darius said.

They both stood in the living room of the house. The two younger researchers remained upstairs working on reports in their bedrooms.

“I can’t believe they tagged Buddy!”

“Tagging wildlife has been common for centuries, Tara. When radio frequencies came into vogue, they were used to track wildlife, too. A modern sensor is not much different, it just gives us a lot more data. This is a good thing. You’ll always have the knowledge of where your subject is, how he’s doing, if he’s still alive and so on.”

“Yes, but . . . where are those terminals? I want to know where he *is*, Darius! I want to know if Buddy is still alive. I want to *see* him again!”

Darius raised a calming hand.

“I’m sure if he were no longer alive, Mr. Savage would have said something. I also suspect the sensor can show us a history of where Buddy has gone ever since you released him from captivity. However, I do not think it is a good idea to let him see you again. At least not right now. Buddy needs to fully adjust to living in the wild. He does not need to be dependent on you for anything, if he hopes to survive.”

-+-

A thick layer of sand covered Buddy. He had not moved in hours.

Rats feared him.

If he saw one, he ate it. They no longer had the numbers to attack him with any hope of success. This domain truly was his, and his alone now.

Only his eyes and nose remained free from the drifting sand, always watching and smelling for prey.

He caught a whiff of something familiar, and focused on the scent.

It . . . was not alive.

Not in the sense with which he was familiar.

It was . . . metallic in nature. The distinct smell of an alien alloy.

It almost had no scent at all, and he might have missed it had the scent not been involved in saving his life recently.

In fact, a very faint trace of it had been on all the rats and other food given to him by Momma.

A rectangle with round corners slowly rose above a boulder nearby. Buddy's slitted eyes jerked right, watching the foreign object seemingly levitate above the stone.

The boulder was large enough to hide the giant metal body he smelled . . .

A hand reached out holding a smaller round object. The hand gently set the orb down on top of the boulder, aiming it straight at Buddy.

Then the hand raised a finger, and slowly pulled it up to the rectangle, about where a mouth might be if the blank space had a face.

Slowly, both hand and rectangle sank back behind the boulder.

Buddy heard a loud *pop!* and the scent disappeared.

On four terminals recently installed inside a house a mere half kilometer away, Buddy's location, including his partially visible eyes and nostrils, suddenly appeared on their holoscreens.

10.37

“I find it difficult to believe, Prime Minister, that your administration would even consider such a measure as this. It is unprecedented. After the long and fruitful relationship the people of Petra Roe have held with us, even throughout the war and its long aftermath, I would imagine that now is the time to strengthen ties with the League. Not sever them.”

Adora smiled politely at the new, tall and very young ambassador from the League. This was a junior assignment, she knew. No doubt, Petra Roe was the first embassy offered to Rand Switzer, still in his thirties.

Nonetheless, she liked to think the young man showed promise. Yes, he was young for an ambassador’s post. But even so, he was an *ambassador*. Likely, the powers that be back on Clarion had a wonderful future planned out for this shining young star in their diplomatic corps.

At least, that’s the way she preferred to think of it. In reality, Switzer was probably given this assignment because he was the lowest man on the totem pole.

Adora kept her face from betraying her thoughts.

“We have indeed had a long and storied relationship with the League. It has not been all rosy, though. We are slowly discovering more things from that part of history as time subsides, and your past government’s involvement in the affairs of our sovereignty appear less than benign, if I may say so.”

“And what historical records are we referring to, Prime Minister?”

Adora smiled politely.

This was something not widely discussed in polite company, at least not on Petra Roe. No one liked to speak about the murderous regimes of Tetrarch Thrall and his “daughter,” Jade Thrall.

But Adora’s new intelligence service kept digging up nuggets. She decided to offer one to this fresh young ambassador.

“We know, for instance, that one of the League’s top assassins, the one with the codename Blackmark, spent his waning years here after the war. He kept an eye on embassy personnel, from what we can tell, and dispatched any perceived enemies of the state who might make a stopover here. This was all before he was sent by Jade Thrall to Euripides in one of her failed bids to win back lost quadrants. There, we are less certain of his fate. However, one does not have to be a genius to realize he must have failed in his objective.”

Switzer stared at her a moment with a blank look.

He’s either very good, she thought, or he really has never heard of Blackmark.

On the other hand, that would not be surprising. She just learned of him the other day.

She thought, I suspect very few people know much about the old SSI apparatus. But it hurts my soul to think that we allowed one of their top assassins to live and operate here for years. How many more have slipped under our radar?

“Madame Prime Minister, as you know that was under the previous regime. The Republican bot who seized control of our government . . .”

Adora said nothing at this, but she smiled at the spin he put on it.

Yes, Jade Thrall was a Verberger model. But that was not the reason she took over the government, pretending to be Julius Thrall’s daughter and heir. Far from it. Thrall put her in place himself.

But she let the false nuance pass without comment. Adora suspected even Switzer did not really believe it.

“... was responsible for untold atrocities. Once StarCen was reset, though, our entire system of government reset as well. We no longer send out assassins to eliminate our political opponents.”

“And yet, you still have SSI, don’t you? We are aware of the few agents sent from Clarion recently who reside in your embassy.”

This time, Switzer did react. He blushed.

That little fact is likely a thorn in the sides of all their diplomats, Adora thought.

“I regret their name was not changed to reflect the agency’s new mission. Be that as it may, now is not the time, Prime Minister, to simply abandon our special relationship which has served both the League and Petra Roe so well and for so long.”

Adora took a deep breath and held it, counting to ten before letting it out slowly through her nose.

She switched into her official head of state voice.

“Ambassador Switzer, I summoned you here today to formally inform you that Petra Roe will no longer be requiring the use of Star League’s AI. I request that your people remove all cores and all sensors for Star League within 23 hours.”

“That is not standard time, Prime Minister.”

“It is a full day for us, Ambassador, as you well know.”

“We may not be able to do everything that is needed in that amount of time. It took a lot of effort to setup the network. It will take a lot to bring it down. Is there anything I can do to change your mind? At the very least, give us more time, I beg of you.”

“We have studied the dismantling of global AIs, Ambassador. During the war, entire systems were taken offline and replaced in a matter of hours on planets far more populated than ours.”

“Begging your pardon, Prime Minister, but that was in wartime! Those cores were sometimes blasted out from orbital bombardments.”

“I am sure you and your people will find a way to eliminate the cores *and* the sensors in the time allotted. I want to officially notify you that any StarCen equipment found on PR after this time tomorrow will be forcibly removed by our personnel.”

His expression now looked stunned, all efforts at facial neutrality abandoned.

“Have I made myself clear, Ambassador?”

His eyes looked down in capitulation.

Or at least in the appearance of capitulation, she thought. You never can tell with the League. They kept fighting long after the war officially ended, after all.

He glanced back up and locked eyes with her, his face expressionless once again.

“Yes, Prime Minister.”

“Good. You may go now, Ambassador. Thank you for meeting with me today.”

Switzer turned and walked out, head hanging low.

Adora did not believe he was truly cowed, though.

We need to keep a very close eye on the embassy and all League citizens that we know about from here on out, she thought as she watched him walk through the door.

They simply cannot be trusted.

10.38

“Things turned out a little differently than you thought they would, didn’t they?”

Tom smiled at the question as he stepped through the back door of his house.

Gwen stood in the kitchen holding Mr. Biddles. The cat struggled in her arms to get free, focusing on the open door.

“Okay, you can go outside,” she said. “But stay out of trouble! I’m having Lisa port you back in after nightfall, understand?”

She set the cat down gently on the floor and he dashed through the open door. Tom closed it behind Biddles, chuckling.

When she stood up, Tom walked over and kissed her.

He said, “Yeah, everybody knows about Lisa now. It works out for the better, though. We definitely want the planet aligned with us, if at all possible. And by ‘us,’ I mean the Alliance. That’s the only way Lisa is going to be able to remain in existence, at least in her current iteration.”

“Well, we’ll just have to do what we can to make sure that happens. Then everybody with a cat on this planet can put a sensor around its neck and

have her teleport them inside at night. No more wandering off for days on end to parts unknown.”

Tom moved over to the kitchen table. He pulled out a chair and sat down. Gwen sat down beside him.

He said, “I’ve been thinking about that. We use Lisa for teleportation all the time. But you know as well as I do that everywhere else, on other planets, that sort of thing is fairly uncommon.”

“It is? Mom uses PLAIR to port around all the time. She flits all over the place.”

“Your mother is a top government official on Diego. And government officials always get priority in governmental systems. Does the average Joe or Jane use terrestrial teleportation day in and day out in the Republic?”

“Hm. Nope. At least, I don’t think so. Sorry. In my gilded upbringing I never got to know many of the common folks.”

He chuckled, taking her comment more as a dig at him than a descriptor of her own childhood.

He said, “It’s the same on Lute, and I’m sure it’s the same in the League. And the reason for that is, there is a cost in energy and processing power to do it.”

“It can’t be *that* big of a cost. I mean, Lisa has never complained. We do it all the time.”

“No, it’s not a big cost. But it adds up if you have to do thousands of ports a second, which is what would happen if it were to become a more common occurrence after hundreds of thousands of people here get implants.”

“So, what are you saying? We just keep the fact Lisa can port folks all over the place a secret?”

Tom shook his head.

“The secret’s already out. Everyone knows we have a global AI, and everyone who thinks about these things will realize we have global teleportation capabilities as well. No, the thing to do is follow the model

that others setting up global AIs have done before us. We'll charge people a reasonable fee for terrestrial teleportation."

"Okay," Gwen said. "That's not a bad idea, I guess."

"It's a great idea. It cuts down on the number of people asking to do it, which preserves Lisa's processing power and energy. At the same time, it'll provide us with another income stream, which is sorely needed right now according to our accountant bot."

"The sky train people are going to be upset about this, I bet. They're already mad at us for providing cheap ground freight all over the place."

Tom nodded.

"We'll have to be more expensive than whatever they charge in order to justify teleportation from one part of the world to the other. So, we'll be at the high end and the low end of the transportation scale. They'll keep the middle with speedy air transportation. Hopefully it won't hurt them too bad. The sky trains were not supposed to have a monopoly on transportation forever, anyway."

The maid bot walked over and said, "What would you like for supper tonight?"

"Oh, don't worry about it," Tom replied. "We're eating at the Vicks."

Gwen said, "Again?"

He nodded.

She moved from her chair to his lap. The wood groaned but accepted them both as the maid retreated to the living room, cleaning as she went.

Gwen said, "So, I've been thinking."

"Yeah? What about?"

"I'm getting pretty good at this domestic thing."

"You do a great job giving orders to the maid."

"Shut up. Anyway, would you say we're getting established?"

“Sure. This election is kind of a big deal. We get that behind us, and I’d say we’re well on our way to being established. We’ve worked out almost all the details about solar harvesting. It’s a technology we can start importing soon, if we want. The price of our shares are going up right now, in more ways than one.”

“Well, if we’re getting established, I think it’s time we started trying for a baby.”

His eyebrows shot up.

“Oh. That’s a big step. Are you sure?”

“Yes. It’s not like we can’t afford to start a family, or anything. Even if we didn’t have this little side business of yours . . .”

“Side business?”

“Between the two of us, we’ve got more than enough to bring a child into the galaxy. And I want one. So . . . that’s what we’re doing.”

Tom smiled at her as she sat in his lap with her arms around his shoulders.

“Okay. I’ll do my part. When do you want to start?”

“I went up to the Elsa Cole earlier today and cashed in a chit as a Republican citizen, and the daughter of one of the more prominent families on Diego. I had my ligations reversed in their sickbay. It’s really more like a true hospital up there. I’ve never seen anything like it on a ship before. Anyway, I should be ready to go. Presuming you’re not firing blanks, any efforts we undertake from here on out have a high potential for fertilization.”

“Okay. We’ve got some time before we need to meet the Vicks, you know.”

He smiled at her.

She smiled back.

Minutes later the maid bot returned to the kitchen to ask Gwen another question.

She stopped and briefly observed the human activities taking place on the table.

Without saying a word, the bot turned around and headed upstairs, leaving the young married couple alone.

10.39

Buster Cordana walked along the North Road, enjoying the scenery outside Little York.

Winter's last gasp left a final cold snap in the air, but his brisk pace kept his body warm. He had no horse, so he walked along the road on foot.

Following a curve, Buster came to a pasture neatly plowed in careful rows, the rich soil turned and ready for planting.

There, near the road, a farmer stood cursing at the plow, his horse waiting patiently as the man fussed over the contraption.

"Howdy!" Buster said, veering off the gravel and approaching the farmer. "Having troubles?"

The farmer glanced up at him, eyes squinting.

"Do I know you? I don't think I've ever seen you before."

"I'm Buster Cordana. I'm new here."

"Where's your horse?"

"Don't have one."

"What are you doing out here without a horse?"

“Walking.”

“From where?”

“Little York?”

“That’s kilometers from here!”

Buster shrugged.

“It’s pretty out here. Did you know somebody built a church back there? It’s like something out of a holo. It’s just as pretty as can be.”

The farmer gave him another long look.

Then, apparently, he decided to trust the stranger. He stuck out his hand.

“I’m Samar Asa. This here is my farm. And I’m trying to till my field out here but the plow is broken. Well, the plow itself is not. It’s made of an alloy that won’t bend or rust. It’s the bolt connecting it that’s come loose. And I’ve got no way to lift this thing up to replace the bolt.”

“Ah. Well, I think I can help you out there, Mr. Asa. Let’s see if I can lift it up for you. I’m a ‘jack’ of all trades.”

“Don’t hurt yourself! It’s not worth pulling a muscle or anything.”

Buster ignored Samar’s concern. He approached the metal framework, squatted, then grunted while lifting the contraption up and plucking the plow out of the soil.

Samar gave up worrying about the young man’s back and hurried to replace the bent bolt.

“If these parts were made out of Chroconi or something, we wouldn’t have these problems. But they’re just stainless steel. It’s a design flaw. We have wonderous holos and AI and bots . . . and no one thinks to engineer a simple frontier planet’s plow so the connection doesn’t break.”

Samar scooted back out of the way.

“You can set it down now.”

Buster grunted and squatted again, the plow thumping on the ground.

“Oof! Glad I could help.”

“Well, now you’ve got to come home to eat.”

“Oh, I should probably be headin’ back to Little York, Mr. Asa.”

“Nonsense. My house is half a klick away. I’ll introduce you to my wife and daughters, we’ll have supper, and if you still want to go home tonight, I’ll let you borrow a horse. Have you chosen a homestead out here yet?”

The look on Buster’s face changed. His eyebrows lifted slightly, and his eyes gained a hint of wistfulness.

“No, sir. I got out here without claimin’ one. I think I sure would like some land of my own, though, now that I’ve seen how beautiful it is.”

“Well, maybe you can buy something. You’ll have to go another klick or two north if you want to claim something by the road. That is, if Tom Savage and his crew haven’t picked up all the lots between here and there. They keep expanding.”

“Hm. Yeah, I don’t want to mess with Mr. Savage. Or the Dalmonts.”

“I can tell you’re a prudent man. You know a little about the lay of the land, at least. Well, I’ll say this. I’d much rather be a neighbor to Tom and Gwen Savage than I would to any of the Dalmont boys. If you get land, get it near here. Take my word for it.”

Buster smiled at the farmer.

He said, “I’ve spent a lot of time eatin’ meals at the Ferguson’s pub. And from all the conversations I’ve listened in on the past many weeks, I think just about everyone in town would agree with you there, Mr. Asa.”

Samar smiled back at the big man.

“Come along. I grill a mean steak. And it’s better than anything the Fergusons serve up.”

Buster followed the farmer as Samar guided the horse back to the private road leading into the land.

“What do you do for a living, Mr. Cordana?”

“Well, right now I’m just living on my savings. So . . . nothing?”

“You seem stout. You’ll make a good farmer if you get a place out here.”

“Well, I don’t know about that. I don’t know the first thing about farmin’.”

“I see. Well . . . perhaps you’d like to work for me for a while? I can teach you everything you need to know. Then when you decide which plot you’d like to claim, you’ll have a solid foundation for managing it.”

Buster said nothing for a while as he thought over the proposition.

But the longer he considered the offer, the wider the smile on his face grew.

“You know, Mr. Asa, I like that idea. I’d be happy to work for you and learn everything I can about farmin’.”

“Good. First thing I’ll teach you is how to grill a proper steak. There’s the house. Mark my words, in an hour or so you’ll have the best meal of your life. Or at least since you got to Phaethon.”

“That sounds mighty good to me, sir.”

Asa gave him an appraising eye as they neared the gate.

“You’re not married, are you?”

“No, sir. Never have been. Why do you ask?”

“No reason. I’ve got three daughters. My oldest is gettin’ on up there, that’s all. There’s not too many options out here in the middle of nowhere. If someone came along and worked hard, showed some gumption . . . I might be amenable to him courtin’ her. Come along, let’s go eat, and I’ll introduce you to everybody.”

The two men continued toward the house as the ambient light dimmed in the sky.

10.40

“I am Joachim Xu, your interim Mayor, former Plenipotentiary, and the leading candidate for your next Mayor.”

Xu stood on top of the Courthouse steps feeling mildly surprised at the size of the crowd below. People pressed in, covering the square shoulder-to-shoulder. Out on the streets, several people stood on cars for a better look. Even more looked out from windows in buildings across the way.

Word had gone out he would speak today, thanks to the new implants.

Up front, closest in the crowd, stood Ashley Thallus with the Zeitung. A drone camera hovered above his head, focused on Xu and broadcasting his every word throughout the galaxy.

Xu took a deep breath and continued with his prepared remarks.

“We have been through a lot together on this planet. Much of what has happened the last few months has been unprecedented. I’ve never heard of anything like it, anywhere, and I suspect most of you have not, either. We’ve had massive riots, gang warfare, an embargo by the major systems, a privately installed secret AI system that is evidently global in scale . . . and much more.”

The crowd, he thought, remained very quiet. Was that out of respect for him? Anticipation? Curiosity as to what he might say?

Xu did not know.

He took another breath and continued.

“Today, I am announcing a call for planetwide elections to take place, in two weeks’ time. On Global Elections Day, all registered citizens of Phaethon will have the opportunity to cast ballots for system alignment. Your choices will be between the League of Planets, the Planetary Republic, or the Planetary Alliance.”

Now the crowd stirred, a susurrus of excitement rippling through the throng of people.

“I have given it much consideration, and I believe our best hope going forward for stable and beneficial governance is to align with the League of Planets. I will be voting for Clarion, and I hope you will join me in doing so, too.”

He tried to get a reading on reactions in the crowd, to see if his endorsement carried any weight. A few people smiled. Some frowned. He decided the response was mixed.

Well, that’s probably to be expected at this point, he thought.

“As for citizens who are registered as residents of League City, you have an opportunity to vote for Mayor as well. In that regard, I hope you choose me.”

He smiled, or at least he tried to smile. With all the pressures of shootouts in the Projects and learning about the AI that had been set up under his nose, with the League breathing down his neck and worries about Republican influencers in the media and elsewhere . . . his smile came out looking rather bleak.

“Municipal citizens can vote here at the Courthouse. We’ll have tents set up on the grounds, just like last time. We’ll also have them out at the fairgrounds.”

That last part was so everybody from the Projects could vote without flooding Courthouse Square and causing a ruckus. But he did not say that out loud.

“I hope you all get out and cast your vote. Remember, every vote counts. That is all. I will be taking no questions at this time.”

He turned and walked back inside the thick wooden double doors.

Behind him the crowd burst into animated conversation, the wall of silence broken. People laughed or cursed, asked questions to one another or speculated out loud.

Above the din, near the Courthouse steps, Ash’s voice rang out above the fray as his drone camera turned to him.

“Well, there you have it! Phaethon’s first planetary elections will be held two weeks from today. Which governmental system will the people vote for? Who will they align with? Stay tuned to the Zeitung and find out!”

-+-

Yet another transport broke through the dirty haze in Phaethon’s sky, heading toward League City from the east.

The huge concrete circle comprising the spaceport looked crowded now as the vehicle slowed on approach. But there was still space to land. The pilot picked a spot and hovered over it before coming down vertically.

The transport’s door irised open and the pilot exited first. Behind him, passengers lined up carrying baggage. A customs officer headed their way, carrying an iris scanner on a tripod.

The customs official erected his scanner and waited patiently for a queue to form.

The pilot said, “I’m from the Tulip, Republican registry. These here are immigrants. We have a load of merchandise coming down on the other transport.”

The official nodded, opening a terminal on his personal holo and adding some notes.

“We’ve got a new AI. Fortunately, it ties into our customs system very nicely. Okay, let’s see . . . what’s your point of origin?”

“Juventas.”

“And these passengers of yours all wish to immigrate?”

“Correct.”

“Very well. Let’s get started.”

The pilot moved out of the way and the first couple in line stepped up. A tall, massive man stood before the official with a dour expression on his face.

The woman with him, obviously his wife, stood next to him in stark contrast. She seemed delighted to be here, casting her eyes all about and drinking in the sights.

“Isn’t this wonderful, dear? It’s so exciting!”

The man did not look excited.

“Alright,” the official said. “State your name.”

“I’m already in the system.”

The official glanced up at the big man.

His wife interjected.

“He came home to Juventas, you could say, to fetch me and bring me back. Isn’t that right, dear?”

The man ignored her. If anything, he seemed even more annoyed with his wife.

The customs official smiled patiently.

“Alright, well . . . let’s get you back in the system. There’s an election coming up and you’ll be wanting to vote in it. Now . . . state your name.”

“Malcolm Dalmont.”

The holo pinged and a string of information popped up.

“Ah, I see. Yes, you have a homestead out on Anatolia. Very well. Place your eyes against the scanner there.”

Malcolm stooped down low and let the machine scan his face.

“Now, it says here you had several charges leveled against you.”

The official cleared his throat, awkwardly.

“It looks like you were escorted off planet by the Marshal’s Service a while back.”

“Oh, there were some misunderstandings,” the woman said. “But we got that all cleared up back on Juventas. Isn’t that right, dear?”

Malcolm’s eyes had the look of someone who had given up all hope for a different fate.

“Yes. All the charges were dropped.”

“Well, alright. Our AI is informing me that you are indeed cleared of all charges. You are free to enter. May I be the first to wish you a safe and happy return back to Phaethon, Mr. Dalmont? Welcome home!”

Malcolm’s face never changed. But his wife broke into a huge grin.

In a flat, deadpan voice, Malcolm said, “Thanks.”

He moved out of the way so that others could be registered by the customs official, still wearing a blank expression on his face.

End of Book 10

GLOBAL ELECTIONS

11.1

Adonti Dozersky dreamed of the Old League. A true believer, though a native of Petra Roe, he relished hearing stories about the prewar glory of the tetrarchs.

And the tales of derring-do surrounding the infamous State Security and Intelligence, or SSI.

“They’re just a bunch of law enforcement officers nowadays,” he would confide to his friends or to strangers in a bar, or anyone else willing to talk about the old days with him.

“They’re nothing like they used to be.”

He longed for the legendary Assassins School rumored to be on Epsilon back in the day. How he wished he could have attended it! He could have learned all the tricks of the trade. Spycraft, infiltration, torture techniques . . .

“I was born in the wrong decade,” was another thing he often said to people who would listen. “I wish I could have done my part for the war, but I wasn’t here to fight yet. Maybe I could have done something, you know, for the League. Maybe, somehow, I could have been there to make a difference where it would count.”

Often, he would drop hints at establishments serving embassy staff. He even managed to score a couple dates with League women. They never returned his calls afterwards, though.

Rather than pursue romance or just enjoy a casual night out, he eagerly pumped his dates for more information about their lives back home. He wanted to know where they thought the government was headed these days, and he pummeled them with questions about life on Clarion.

One of them ended their date by advising him to show up at the embassy in the morning and apply for citizenship with the League. He could hop on the next ship to Clarion and be there in two months or less. Immigration between systems remained easy, especially after the war.

Ah, but there was the catch. Adonti didn't really want to move to Clarion, or anywhere else. Petra Roe was home. He had his aging mother to watch over, and she served as a domestic anchor for the listless young man.

Approaching 30, he had no job and no steady income. He avoided work crews, where the government offered willing young men and women the opportunity to do menial chores such as scrubbing exterior buildings in lieu of using robots, or picking up litter.

Mostly, he mooched off his mother's retirement income, justifying it by taking care of her during the day. He had full access to her bank account as a cosigner. At night, he often swiped a few credits and went out to bars.

And he would dream all night of being part of the League during their glory days, talking about it to anyone who'd listen.

-+-

"I understand Adora is going to make a move to join the Alliance."

Adonti sipped on his beer while listening to Stan, a League Embassy employee.

He had deep respect for Stan, even though he did not know the man's last name or very much about him. Stan had once set up a date for him with Becky in Public Relations. On occasion, Stan would promise to find another

girl on the embassy staff who might be willing to go out with him. So far, nothing had come of it.

The date with Becky had been a bust. She had not been very interested in discussing things about the war. She only wanted to talk about the League's future, which was not as interesting to Adonti.

He kept waiting for Stan to find someone else to date, someone who shared the same passion he did for all things vintage League. In the meantime, they often met in the evenings for a drink or two.

In short, Stan remained Adonti's closest friend. He willingly talked with Adonti for hours about all things related to the tetrarchs, the war, current life in the socialist paradise on Clarion, how StarCen had changed since the Great Reboot, and anything else that tickled Adonti's fancy.

Adonti spent hours drinking with Stan, listening to him, and scratching his itch for knowledge of the League. He often steered Stan into discussing the more salacious aspects of life under the Old League, including Star League assassins, Julius Thrall and his allegedly robotic daughter, and much more.

Now, with one statement, Stan steered their evening discussion back to the present. Modern life always seemed mundane to Adonti. And frustrating.

"Yeah. It's ridiculous," Adonti said, taking another swig of beer. "Petra Roe has always sided with the League. I don't understand why, for the last several years, the power brokers in Old Downtown on this planet have drifted away from Clarion."

"Well," Stan lowered his voice, "you want to help do something about that?"

Adonti set his mug down and looked at his friend.

"What do you mean?"

"I mean that I cannot get into the signing ceremony inside Belhaus. The public gallery is limited to PR natives, for one thing. Our embassy still managed to snag some tickets, though. We have our ways. But those guys are going to be up in the VIP suites on the second level. Most of us aren't VIPs and . . . you know, we won't be allowed to go."

“Okay. But how will my being there help do something about this upcoming change in alignment?”

Stan glanced around the bar. No one sat nearby, and no one seemed to be paying them any attention.

He spoke in a low voice.

“I’m going to level with you, Adonti. I’m going to share a little secret with you. And I feel safe doing so right now because the new sensors for LuteNet have not been installed around here yet. I know, because I checked.”

Adonti leaned in closer to his friend so he could hear better, his eyes growing wide.

Dropping to a whisper, Stan said, “I’m SSI. And I need someone to deliver a very tiny package into the public gallery of Belhaus during the signing ceremony. I’m thinking you could be that person for me. If you succeed in this mission, I can guarantee you citizenship in the League, and a job with SSI back on Clarion.”

Adrenalin shot through Adonti, and his face flushed with excitement.

Then it vanished as he remembered something.

“I . . . I’m so sorry about all the things I said about the modern SSI since the reboot, Stan! I didn’t mean anything by it.”

But Stan waved away his concerns while taking another sip of his own beer.

“No, most of the criticisms are warranted. You aren’t the only one who wishes things were the way they used to be. After this is all over, maybe we could glean some ideas from you. It’s always good to hear outside opinions. Maybe you can help reform SSI, help us bring back some of what was left behind after the reset.”

Adonti’s eyebrows shot up as many of his dreams seemed to manifest themselves on the spot.

He took a thoughtful sip and set his mug down on the bar.

“What do I need to deliver into the public gallery for you? It’s not a bomb or anything, is it?”

Stan chuckled and said, “No, nothing like that. All you need to bring in for us is this.”

He reached into a shirt pocket and pulled out a small disc, the size of an old American nickel.

“What is it?”

“It’s a way to prevent, or at least disrupt the proceedings. It won’t harm you at all. All you will need to do is make your way to the first restroom you see once you get inside the building. Are you willing to do this for me? Are you willing to help out the League? Are you willing to do your part to see to it Petra Roe doesn’t make this dreadful decision to align with the Planetary Alliance?”

Adonti looked at the disc held between Stan’s thumb and forefinger, then into the eyes of the man he considered a friend.

Stan said, “You’re always talking about doing something, Adonti. Something that makes a difference. Now’s your chance.”

Adonti nodded and held his hand out.

“Give it to me. I’ll do it.”

Stan placed the tiny round object in the center of his palm. It seemed to sink into the skin. A quick flicker of light enveloped Adonti’s entire body.

“What just happened?”

“Nothing much. You have been covered by a thin molecular layer. I told you, nothing will happen to you. Now, here is a ticket to the event for the public, restricted to PR citizens.”

Stan pulled out a small translucent rectangle about the size of an old business card from another pocket. He handed it over to Adonti.

“Be in line tomorrow. Once you’re inside, don’t forget to go to the men’s room. SSI will take it from there.”

11.2

Adonti melded with a crowd the following morning, as everyone slowly moved into the mouth of a huge granite building, a half-submerged oval buried in the center of Old Downtown.

Soldiers stood at guard, staking out visible spots along the edges of the crowd. On the rooftops of nearby buildings, snipers lay sprawled on their bellies, thin black snouts of long-range weaponry pointing down below.

Slowly the crowd shuffled forward, like a living thing. Everyone seemed to be in good spirits. Families were here, parents bringing children to witness this historic event.

One word seemed to be on everyone's lips: Alignment! After all these decades, Petra Roe would finally align with a major system. And it would not be the League, as everyone had always assumed.

Alone, Adonti took it all in. He shuffled forward, jostling elbows with those nearby but without saying a word to anybody.

A cold sweat broke out as he approached the building's security perimeter and realized he drew near.

A set of soldiers stopped the crowd intermittently, and a scanner line ran up and down the front of the line, twenty people or so all covered at once.

As Adonti watched, the guard monitoring a holo connected to the line pointed at someone in the crowd, calling out a warning.

Two soldiers advanced. The man turned and tried to run away, knocking over a little girl in his haste to vacate the premises.

But the crowd was too thick. Citizens reached out and held on to him, dozens of patriots preventing him from moving.

Or drawing a gun.

The soldiers reached him then and delivered a stun bolt to the back of his neck, knocking him out. They each grabbed an arm, draping the limp man over their shoulders, and carried him away.

The crowd broke into applause.

Whatever weapon the man had on him would remain a mystery, Adonti thought. Or maybe he was on a list or something. Maybe it would be in the news tomorrow.

Maybe *I'll* be in the news tomorrow.

He broke out into a sweat again as the crowd moved forward.

At last, his cluster stood at the safety perimeter surrounding Belhaus. Two new soldiers, replacing the ones who dragged the man away, held out their hands and everyone dutifully stopped. The man running the scanner stood on a pedestal to Adonti's right, peering at a holo control panel.

Thin red lines stretched across the space, slowly drifting up and down. Adonti felt a slight tingle as energy coursed through his body, starting at the top of his head and going down to his toes. The sensation was quickly followed by another one going back up, then more tingling as even more red lines scanned his body.

He waited, sweating profusely now, for the operator to shout a warning and point *him* out to the soldiers.

Would he run like the last guy? Or would he stand still and stoically accept his fate?

Perhaps I'll play innocent, he thought. After all, I'm not carrying a gun, or an explosive.

At least, I don't think I am.

Suddenly, the tingling stopped as the last scan line disappeared. The man at the controls nodded and the soldiers waved Adonti's group through.

Ahead loomed a massive set of double wooden doors leading into Belhaus, the huge public building used for concerts, plays, and public addresses by politicians.

Adonti walked inside a huge circular hall, with additional doors on the inside leading into the enormous seated area. People streamed in the doors and down the aisles into a giant bowl, seeking the best spots in the auditorium to see the show.

Adonti allowed the crowd to take him inside, like a leaf on a river's current. He entered a giant basin designed for optimal acoustics. A ceiling floated a hundred meters above, top panels turned translucent to let sky and sunlight in. Birds flew high overhead, oblivious to the crowd below.

Seats stretched up toward the outer ring in a neat geometric pattern. Already the places up front were taken, sections closest to the stage filled to capacity.

Adonti stopped, making those behind him weave around him in the wide aisle between the seats. He turned and fought his way back upstream, going against the flow of the crowd now.

"Excuse me. Excuse me. Sorry."

At last, he made his way through the inner doors and out into the ringed hallway surrounding the bowl. Here vendors occupied food booths, selling snacks, drinks and souvenirs.

He looked to the left and right, finding the universal sign for a toilet. The crowd remained scattered here, and he could make his way to the outer wall housing the restrooms without having to fight against the flow too much.

He approached the door marked "Men," and it swished open for him.

As he crossed the threshold, he felt another scan go down his body. A different kind of scan.

This was one felt slight, not as strong as the security scan he went through outside.

Adonti stopped as the restroom door shut behind him.

Something . . . detached itself from his body.

He watched in horror as a version of himself pulled away, wearing the same clothes . . . the same face.

It turned and looked him in the eye.

He stared at another version of Adonti Dozersky . . . and screamed.

11.3

Adonti's doppelganger turned away and headed for the far stall. The door closed and Adonti heard the sound of masonry breaking. When it opened again, the simulacrum held a small pistol.

Adonti gasped, drawing the eyes of his double, who pointed the gun at him.

Adonti raised both hands and backed up, his life flashing before his eyes.

The door swished open. The simulacrum quickly hid the gun, sliding it into his waistband. A man walking in ignored them both, heading for the line of urinals along the wall.

Adonti's double walked out the door wordlessly, and into the ring hallway.

In shock, Adonti stumbled out the door too, determined to follow. Already, his double had disappeared into the crowd.

He walked forward, head on a swivel. Then he saw the simulacrum entering the same open door into the basin he had just used. Adonti jogged to catch up.

As he burst inside the massive auditorium's basin, the holo behind the stage came alive. A man walked out into the middle of the massive floor where a lone podium stood. Cameras zoomed in on his face, broadcasting his image

across the globe. The presentation was picked up by more than a few news agencies in the Republic and the League as well.

But the man's purpose was simply to make an introduction. Petra Roe was not known for much pomp and circumstance, after all. All those still standing scrambled for a seat. The volume of chatter in Belhaus diminished as attention focused on the speaker.

"Ladies and gentlemen, today we are gathered here for an historic announcement from our esteemed Prime Minister. Without further ado, may I introduce Adora McKelway . . ."

The national anthem of Petra Roe belted out from overhead speakers, and those seated stood to applaud.

Adonti remained near the doorway, looking down at the rows of seats stretching to the stage below. There, about halfway down and still walking, his double stared at the prime minister while moving closer.

Adora hugged the man who introduced her, then took up position behind the microphone.

"Friends, fellow citizens of Petra Roe, members of our audience throughout the galaxy watching us now . . . as you all know, we have a long and storied history of independence on this planet. Throughout the Welfare Wars, and more recently through the Gold War and its bloody aftermath, we have steadfastly refused to take sides among the major powers. Up until now, that policy has stood us in good stead. But today, I am here to announce that things will soon change."

She paused for a moment and smiled at the crowd and into the cameras hovering in front of her.

"For economic and security reasons, we have decided to link hands with our neighbor Lute and join the Planetary Alliance. The Alliance has only five member planets at present. When we join after our parliament ratifies the charter next week, Petra Roe will become their most populous world."

She paused again to let that fact sink in. The political junkies in the crowd raised their eyebrows. As the ramifications of what she said started sinking home, more than a few breathed out a quiet, "Aha!"

In the back, still watching his double make his way closer to the stage, Adonti heard someone say, “We’ll be the biggest fish in a very small pond.”

Instantly, if any citizen had some ill will toward the notion of aligning with the smallest political system in the galaxy, those thoughts vanished.

Or at least came under reconsideration.

She really is the consummate politician, Adonti thought, distracted with the ramifications of her statement. In a single sentence the prime minister instantly cemented the deal with more than half our population. All serious opposition to the move has just been nipped in the bud.

“In the days ahead, the biggest changes you will notice will be a switchover to the LuteNet artificial intelligence program. Our sovereignty will remain largely intact. Joining the Alliance involves committing to mutual defense and certain trade agreements. But we also will benefit from these alignments, and gain standing in the galaxy as a result.”

She smiled now, and Adonti thought she had the crowd eating out of the palm of her hand. Then his eyes flickered down toward the front. His double stopped near the edge of the stage as the prime minister took a breath to continue her speech.

“I want to thank everyone in Parliament and on my staff who helped make this momentous change in alignment possible. I’d like to start with . . .”

Adonti’s electronic double pulled the gun out of his waistband and aimed it at Adora McKelway.

She stopped speaking. Her eyes grew wide, staring down the muzzle of a handgun 15 meters away.

Thoop!

She hit the floor, the bolt sailing over the podium.

The simulacrum shifted its aim down and pulled the trigger again.

Thoop!

The bolt struck the podium, leaving a round black scorch as wide as a beachball.

Thoop! Thoop! Thoop!

Screams erupted as thousands of people up front hit the floor.

Thousand more in the back bolted for the exits.

Adonti felt himself being pushed toward the doors.

He set his feet down firmly and fought off the onslaught of people with his elbows. He jumped up on a chair to see, to catch a glimpse of the stage and the end of the aisle where his doppelganger still stood with a gun.

Then someone knocked him down in their haste to get out.

The last thing he saw before the crowd overcame him was a knot of citizens from the audience jumping on the gunman, pummeling him with their fists.

Underneath the pile, the simulacrum blinked out of existence, leaving only the gun behind.

11.4

Security forces sealed off the VIP suite.

A beehive of activity featuring all the top representatives of government streamed around the suite. But the room holding Petra Roe's prime minister remained closed to all but her closest advisors.

Somehow, Melton Francis had found his way into this secure chamber. His red pointed beard looked naturally straight in real life, instead of curling up like he preferred to show on his avatar in cyberspace. As a representative of Lute here for the alignment ceremonies, Melton remained the only person present not directly affiliated with Petra Roe.

He stood beside his friend Isabella Espinoza, minister of trade and the second most powerful politician on the planet.

Only four other people remained in the room. All eyes focused on Adora McKelway, sitting on a sofa with elbows on her knees and face in her hands.

"I just . . . need a minute."

Isabella sat down beside her and put an arm around her shoulders. As the prime minister's sister, she was the only person in the room who felt qualified to give Adora a hug right now.

She glanced up at a dark, swarthy, muscular man wearing a blue tuxedo with a dashing red cummerbund.

“How did this happen, Mateo?”

The man she questioned cleared his throat. His face flushed as all eyes in the room shifted to him.

“As head of security for Madame Prime Minister, I take full responsibility. I will personally see to it we get to the bottom of what happened. I can tell you that the perpetrator disappeared, leaving behind his gun. We suspect he was teleported out.”

“How is that possible, Mateo? There are no AI sensors left on this planet at the moment. It takes an AI to teleport somebody. What are you saying?”

“I don’t know how it was done. But we have the recording.”

He turned to the room’s holo and made some adjustments on the control panel. In seconds, Adora’s face at the podium appeared. Then a bolt sailed over her head. The camera swung 180 degrees and showed the center aisle of Belhaus with a gunman aiming up at the stage.

Two men jumped the man, fists swinging.

“Soldiers,” Mateo said, a hint of pride coloring his voice. “Our boys don’t back down from a threat.”

Emboldened, four more men jumped on, fists swinging, pummeling the gunman.

Suddenly, the pile jerked as the underlying fellow snapped out of existence. Only the pistol remained behind as the men pulled themselves off one another, looking around in confusion.

The camera swung back to the stage, watching security drag away the prime minister as the crowd panicked and rushed for the exits.

“Did anybody die?”

Everyone turned back to Adora. She watched the holo with a forlorn expression on her face.

“No, Madame Prime Minister,” Mateo said, switching off the holo. “Several people were injured in the mad scramble for the exits. One little girl was trampled. She received a dose of nanobots by medical personnel on the scene. She’ll be fine.”

Adora’s face relaxed a little.

“And we have no idea who this was?” She pointed back at the holo, now frozen on an empty stage, the podium still showing evidence of a blaster hit.

Mateo cleared his throat, looking embarrassed again.

“You’re head of our security, Mr. Barnwell. What happened here?”

Isabella said, “I’d like to know why his gun was left behind.”

Mateo made a counterclockwise motion with his finger and the scene rewound to the point where the simulacrum disappeared. They watched it as best they could. The perpetrator was covered by six men at that point.

“For that matter,” Adora said, “how was he teleported out while underneath all those other people? I’ve done terrestrial ports before. I think we all have. There is always a safety factor involved, in which other things and other people are ported separately. Obviously, that didn’t happen here.”

“And it happened without sensors, supposedly,” Isabella added.

Melton cleared his throat, drawing the room’s attention for the first time.

“If I may be so bold, Prime Minister, I believe I might have a solution for this vexing conundrum.”

“Mr. Francis. Yes, do be so kind as to share any information you might have. If we are to be allies, I trust our mutual departments of intelligence will share information with one another in full.”

Melton nodded, making his pointy beard bob up and down like a bird’s beak. He traded a glance with Mateo, whose expression remained guarded.

“I believe what you are seeing on the holo, Madame Prime Minister, is an example of a ‘hollow man.’”

11.5

“A hollow man, Mr. Francis? Elaborate.”

Melton cleared his throat again, warming up to the topic.

“This was a technique used by Star League assassins after the war to smuggle in deadly elements during insurrections. The Thralls were highly focused on retaining planets they had and retrieving ones they lost during the war. Fomenting insurrection was a tool. Taking out their opponents was a key part of that effort. The hollow men were one of the many ways they devised to stir up trouble.”

“I’ve never heard of such a thing. How did it work?”

“A thin molecular layer is placed over the agent infiltrating a location. Scans for weapons or other contraband won’t show anything. Nor will internal body scans, seeking out bombs that have been swallowed or surgically placed. Once on the planet, or in this case in a secure area, the molecules are lifted off the subject and form a bot, of sorts. They have all the outward appearance of a human, and can be controlled by self-contained subroutines. Given weapons, they can fight.”

“This sounds insidious,” Isabella said. “Thank God they weren’t used much.”

Melton nodded and said, “Their only weakness is, they are glass cannons. One shot, or in this case multiple blows, results in disintegration of the molecules holding them together. I believe that is what we are seeing here. It also explains why the weapon he held was left behind.”

Everyone turned back to the recording. Mateo rewound it again to show the six men piled on top of the simulacrum. One held the hollow man’s arm down, preventing it from squeezing off a shot. Suddenly, it disappeared, leaving the gun behind.

“That would explain *that*,” Adora said. “We’ll use it as a working hypothesis until something better comes along. But where did the gun come from, Mateo? Everyone going into Belhaus was screened, were they not?”

All eyes turned back to the muscular Mateo Barnwell.

He sighed.

“I suppose it might be possible a weapon was hidden inside somewhere. We thoroughly searched the building beforehand, screening the area for weapons and explosives. Perhaps somebody found a way to hide a weapon onsite that we missed.”

“That would explain things,” Melton said, nodding. “So, let’s play the scenario out. Our subject went through security, bringing the hollow man with him. No weapons were found during the scan and he was allowed inside with everyone else. Once here, he activated the molecules on his body somehow, forming this automaton. The hollow man then recovered the weapon that was already here, having its location preprogrammed in its memory, and then went about its task. The first fellow walked away unscathed. It’s rather brilliant, actually. And it would have worked. Thank God for that blaster-proof podium, Madame Prime Minister. The second shot should have killed you.”

Adora nodded.

Isabella raised her eyebrows.

“Why didn’t the first shot kill her?”

Everyone turned to her.

She, in turn, stared at the head of security.

“It went high,” Mateo said.

“Yes, but we all know bots are better shots than humans. That’s why the Republicans use them for their Marines now, instead of people. If this ‘hollow man’ was anything like all the other automatons we are familiar with, its first shot should have taken off my sister’s head.”

Silence greeted this statement as everyone digested it.

“It was a message.”

All eyes returned to Adora.

“The League is telling us they are very unhappy about our choice to align with the Alliance.”

“They might also try to take additional steps if you go through with it,” Mateo said softly.

“We’ll just have to accelerate our plans. We have Mr. Francis with us, here in this room. Do you have the documents, Melton?”

“I do indeed, Madame Prime Minister.”

Melton began pulling out holosheets from the implant under his right ear. The pages hovered in the air all around him.

“We’ll do a private ceremony right now,” Adora said. “Someone go fetch a media company’s camera. One of the big ones, but not a League one.”

One of her aides nodded and headed for the door as the room burst into activity.

Mateo approached Adora and waited patiently until she gave him her attention.

“Madame Prime Minister, I’m afraid I must insist we invoke Section One of Article Sixteen at this time. An attempt has been made on your life. We can no longer afford to allow the status quo to remain in place.”

Adora’s face fell. She glanced down at the floor for a second, and sighed.

“Very well, Mateo. You are right, of course.”

She looked up and locked eyes with him.

“Take the Malberry and bring Wink home.”

11.6

Tom Savage stepped out the back door of his farmhouse with a steaming hot cup of coffee in one hand. He looked down at a furtive dark figure with white furry feet, sidling toward the door.

“No, you stay inside.”

The cat became a blur as Mr. Biddles darted for the narrow crack between house confinement and freedom. He ran out past Tom’s feet, out onto the porch then off to the grass.

Tom chuckled at this display of feline bravado, but he made no effort to retrieve the wayward cat. The sensor around the animal’s collar ensured that Lisa kept the animal from harm.

His ears perked up at the sound of conversation out in the yard.

Closing the door, he walked down the steps of his back porch. Here in the backyard he found Wink McKelway, Jinxie Malone and Claire Bolo engaged in conversation.

“Oh, hey,” Wink said in greeting. “You know Claire from the Poly Tech research team. She asked to come along and watch the Pulsar unload. Exciting stuff, I know. But she’s been trapped in that house a few days.”

“I’m thinking about staying when Dr. Marin and Zad go back,” Claire said, smiling at Tom. “It looks like Dr. Lewellen is going to have to go home, too. Somebody needs to stay behind and watch the fort until she gets her affairs in order on Pearl and comes back. I volunteered. I’ll spend the time writing my dissertation.”

Tom nodded agreeably and took a sip of coffee.

“Sounds like a plan.”

“I want to know all about Phaethon. Or at least *more* about it. We haven’t left the research station much since we got here, so when Jinxie stopped by to deliver supplies this morning and mentioned a ship coming in, I asked if I could tag along. I hope you don’t mind.”

“Not at all. It’s very exciting to watch all the cargo be unloaded by bots and stuff.”

She grinned.

“It can’t be worse than writing reports about what Buddy’s been eating lately. Yesterday he dug a hole and ate a bunch of baby rats he pulled out of it.”

Jinxie chuckled.

“People think nature is all calm and peaceful,” she said. “But it can get really violent at times.”

“Yeah. Especially when an apex predator gets hungry.”

A tiny blip appeared in the eastern sky, drawing Tom’s attention.

He pointed at it and said, “There she is.”

Everyone turned to watch.

A second blip appeared behind the Pulsar in the distance.

“Are there two ships coming in?” Claire said.

“No. Not that I know of. Lisa? What’s this other ship doing? Who are they?”

The AI's voice came through his implant, as well as Wink and Jinxie's.

"That is the Malberry, Petra Roe flagged. Her captain announced his presence when he appeared in orbit at the same time as the Pulsar. He then followed the Pulsar down without receiving permission from Orbital Control."

Tom raised an eyebrow at Wink.

Wink shrugged and said, "The Pulsar doesn't ask permission from Orbital Control, either. I don't think those guys are ever aware of our visits. But, yeah. The Malberry belongs to PR."

"Well, if they're friends of yours, Wink, we'll presume they're friendly to us."

"I don't know why they wouldn't be," Jinxie said, "if they're from home."

She glanced at Wink when she said this, noting the lines of worry on his face.

A double sonic boom hit them as the ships slowed down and approached the field behind the house at an ever-slowing speed.

The Pulsar hovered over its usual landing site, now with a solid stone foundation for the landing legs that were carved out and buried by Tom's Micabots. It settled down vertically before its back door tilted open, releasing a hiss of sterilized air.

Immediately after, a much larger ship pulled to a stop in the air above, a hundred meters up. It slowly lowered to the ground.

Black, with multiple decks unlike the simpler Pulsar, it stretched up into the sky even when its belly sank nearer to the grass. Thick bulbous wings spread out from its middle, sporting massive cannons. The tail in the rear tapered off in a teardrop design, making it look a sleek bird of prey.

"What do you think that is equivalent to?" Jinxie said, staring at the ship with a mix of envy and awe. "It's bigger than a sparrow. Is it a Hawk-class?"

“That’s a Thespar design,” Tom said, pointing at the nose. “The front is kinda their trademark. But I’ve never seen one of these before. I’m a little surprised they’re able to make a terrestrial landing with something that big. Most ships that size aren’t equipped for it.”

As they watched, the ship halted its descent a scant meter above the ground. A door big enough to drive a truck through irised open on the side.

Jinxie said, “Air lock?”

Tom nodded.

“Yeah, that must be how they avoid atmospheric contamination on a landing.”

He glanced over at Wink and said, “These are your people. You should know more about this ship.”

Wink shrugged and smiled back at him apologetically.

“I’ve been away a long time. They must have bought this after I left.”

A dark, swarthy man built like an ox jumped down from the airlock. Seven men followed him down, all wearing blue uniforms with white accents.

The big man looked around, taking in the landscape and quickly noting the cluster of young people staring at him. With a nod of his head at his men, they started out for the farmhouse.

“That’s Mateo Barnwell. This can’t be good.”

Tom said, “Somebody in your government, I take it? Is he law enforcement?”

“Sort of. We modeled things loosely on the Old League. Mateo is head of security, or something equivalent to the old SSI on Petra Roe. Don’t worry, we were never as bad as the Old League. Mostly his job is to protect people in the government, including my mother.”

“Especially his mother,” Jinxie said. “PR Security protects all members of Parliament, with the prime minister being their most important asset.”

“Well, if his job is to watch out for your mom,” Tom said. “What’s he doing here?”

Wink sighed, looking morose.

“He’s probably here to bring me home.”

11.7

The eight men marched up to the fenceless backyard. Tom noted the men behind Mateo fanned out, an apparent military maneuver that offered them a full field of vision.

He also noted every man had compact black rifles strapped to their backs, each weapon looking as new and shiny as the spaceship they came down on. The barrels were thick and square rather than the typical round ones most guns had.

Tom glanced at the waists of his friends. Everyone carried a sidearm, except for Claire. But they were outgunned.

He frowned at this thought and took another sip of coffee.

The men marched past the garden, and the CC 1000 where Robert the Rooster looked up from his pecking to glare at the strange men. He evidently decided they were not near enough to pose a threat to his hens, so Robert ignored them and went back to searching for bugs in the grass.

Mateo stopped in front of Wink, and his men spread out further. Two turned around, covering their rear. The remaining six watched in all directions while also keeping an eye on the people around Wink.

Very professional, Tom thought.

“Mr. McKelway.”

“Mr. Barnwell.”

“There’s been an attempt on your mother’s life, about thirty minutes ago. She survived, but Section Sixteen has been activated, Article One. Your presence is needed in Old Downtown.”

Wink’s eyes widened.

Jinxie took a step sideways toward him and clutched his hand.

Mateo noticed this, his eyes glancing down at the tightly grasped fingers.

“I’m sorry. What is ‘Section Sixteen?’” Claire said.

Mateo’s eyes flicked toward her, then dismissed her as unimportant. He returned his gaze to Wink.

Jinxie answered the question.

“It’s in our constitution, which is kind of a weird mashup of a republic with a monarchy. So, when the prime minister dies while in office, his or her heir, usually the oldest child, will take their place until an election is called.”

“That doesn’t sound bad.”

“It can take years for the election to be called,” Wink said. “The record is seven. And by then, the acting PM is usually timing it favorably so they can be elected in their own right. Our PMs usually end up serving for life. Or at least until they’re old and tired of running things.”

“It’s one of the reasons he wanted to get out on his own for a while before being tied down in the capital,” Jinxie said. “Even if his mother retires, instead of dies in office, heaven forbid, Wink is the prime candidate to replace her.”

“Oh.”

Wink scratched his head with his free hand, staring down at the ground as he gathered his thoughts.

“Section One has no specific timeframe Mateo, if I remember correctly. I’m going to need a few days to wrap things up here. There’s an election coming up that I want to vote in . . .”

He trailed off, staring at Jinxie.

Mateo said, “You are right there is no set timeframe. But according to Section One, you are to come home without delay, ‘except for matters civil or familial which may cause personal concern.’”

“The election is a civil matter, Mateo. It doesn’t get any more civil than that.”

The big man shook his head gently, the whiskers on his neatly trimmed dark beard swaying back and forth.

“‘Civil’ involves affairs on *our* planet, Mr. McKelway. I’m authorized to bring you back. Now.”

He turned and pointed back at the black spaceship hovering just above the ground. There the airlock remained open, the iris spread wide.

“I don’t know if the courts would agree with you on that one, Mateo.”

For the first time, the big man grinned.

“The courts aren’t here, sir. I’m sure if you’d like to file a judicial complaint, you can do so after we get back to Old Downtown. With the Machro-drive on the Malberry, that will be later today, in real time. Shall we depart?”

11.8

The tension seemed to ratchet up.

Tom took another sip of coffee, noting the muscles flexing underneath blue uniforms of all the security personnel present.

He decided at this point to interject himself into the conversation.

“So, you guys are like a sergeant-at-arms, aren’t you? You’re authorized to use force, but it can’t be lethal force because this guy is the prime minister’s son, and he may become the prime minister himself someday. Do I have that right?”

Mateo’s eyes flickered at Tom, then dismissed him too as being unimportant. He returned his focus to Wink.

“Yeah, that’s about right,” Wink said, answering for Mateo. “They’ve got several non-lethal options they can use on us. On *me*, if they have to. The rifles are stun models. One shot, and you can’t move for an hour or so.”

“I see.”

Tom took another sip of coffee and smacked his lips.

“Well, it seems to me that we’ve got something of a Mexican standoff, here. Even though no guns have been drawn. But seeing as how you guys are visitors . . . Mr. Barnwell, was it? Seeing as how you guys are visitors on

my property, and Wink's planet, I think we're all going to support him in whatever decision he makes right now."

Mateo spared one last flickering glance at Tom. He dismissed him again, refocusing on Wink.

"There is no time to spare, sir."

Tension mounted.

Tom watched as sweat broke out on the brow of the man standing closest to him. He clearly appeared to be tensing up for a move, probably to reach for the stun gun slung over his back.

Tom opened up a commlink in his implant.

Timmy. I need you. Now.

Mateo put his hands on his hips and sighed, looking down on the ground.

"Zap everybody. Take Mr. McKelway to the ship."

The men moved to respond, reaching over their shoulders to pull out the squat square rifles.

A gunmetal blur zipped around the house, kicking up a tall tail of dust.

Timmy slid to a halt, metal feet digging ruts into the ground as his mass came to an abrupt halt. He took in the strangers and assessed them accordingly, aiming his heavy rifle at Mateo's chest.

The PR men backed up, aiming their guns at the bot instead of people.

Claire gasped and took a step back, drawing closer to the gunmen.

Jinxie looked over her shoulder at the Republican Marine battle bot and smiled at it.

Standing head and shoulders above the tallest man, even with his feet partially sunk into the ground, the bot looked intimidating.

Tom smiled at the shocked expression on Mateo's face.

“Sorry to pull rank on you, Mr. Barnwell. But as I said, this is my property. Mr. Wink is not only my employee, he’s my guest. Now, if you’d like to ask your men to put away their little stun guns, I think we’d all appreciate it. I doubt they have anything that can put a dent in an old battle bot anyway. Timmy on the other hand, has quite a few weapons at his disposal. Plus he can use things like hyper speed and . . . well, *you* know. I wouldn’t want to mess with him, if I were you.”

Mateo swallowed, audibly.

Tom watched the man’s face return to a neutral expression. He felt a twinge of jealousy at Mateo’s incredible display of self-control.

“Stand down.”

The men reluctantly re-slung their stun guns. Tom noticed several hands shaking as straps returned to shoulders once more.

Wink said, “I also have a familial matter to attend to, Mr. Barnwell, in accordance with Section One. It will take a few days to get ready, and will align nicely with the timing of the election coming up on this planet. So, you can put that in your report when you return to the ship in a minute. That should keep you from getting in trouble with anybody for not bringing me back right away, including my mother.”

Mateo sighed again.

He pinched the corners of his forehead with his thumb and forefinger.

“What is the familial matter, Mr. McKelway?”

Wink looked at Jinxie and squeezed her hand harder.

He said, “We’re getting married.”

“We are?”

Jinxie looked shocked.

Wink nodded.

“It’s going to be a lot easier doing it here and now instead of waiting until we get back home, believe me.”

Jinxie let go of his hand. She made a little jump and clapped her hands.

“I love you!”

Wink smiled and wrapped her in his arms as she threw hers around his neck. They kissed then, long and hard.

Mateo watched, expressionless, along with everybody else. A few of his men couldn't help but smile, though.

When the couple pulled apart, Mateo cleared his throat. All eyes turned back to the big man.

“I'm afraid I must keep you in sight at all times, Mr. McKelway, until you are once again safely in Old Downtown. Presuming that is alright with your . . . employer.”

This time Mateo gave Tom a mildly disdainful glance.

Tom smiled back at him and said, “Fine by me, so long as you and your men don't try any funny stuff.”

Mateo stared at him.

Tom added, “We have an Alliance-aligned AI that will be watching your every move, by the way.”

That made the PR head of security blink.

Tom decided it counted as the equivalent to an expression of shock.

11.9

Jinxie demanded to make arrangements with Pastor Leo right then and there.

Tom was willing, as most of the cargo had been unloaded from the Pulsar by this time. But he was faced with a dilemma in the new security personnel from Petra Roe.

Mateo said not a word, simply watching and listening. His eyes rarely left Wink, and then not for long.

Tom suggested they might be able to fit everyone in the truck, if all present remained amenable to a ride.

Claire expressed a desire to see the countryside once more, especially if it meant revisiting that “adorable” church she remembered seeing on the way in.

She alone kept casting eyes toward Timmy, who remained standing silent in the background.

“Alright, I tell you what,” Tom said. “Why don’t we all get in the truck and we’ll pay Pastor Leo a visit. You can tell him what you have in mind, Jinx, and we’ll pay him an honorarium and reserve the use of his church.”

Wink and Jinxie smiled.

“That sounds good to us,” Wink said.

Tom turned back to Mateo.

“Uh, do you need to notify anyone on your ship that you’ll be staying here a while?”

Mateo sighed, but his face remained impassive.

“I will fill out my report soon, at an opportune moment. The Captain will be notified of our delayed departure.”

Tom nodded and said, “Okay everybody. Follow me.”

He led the procession past the robot, who turned to “watch,” his rectangular sensor eyeing everyone at once. The security forces from Petra Roe gave Timmy a wide berth.

On the other side of the house, they passed by the stables.

“You have horses?” Claire said. “I’ve been dying to learn how to ride!”

Tom said, “This is probably not a good trip to learn on. The church is back at the crossroads, just outside of town. So, it’s about twenty clicks or so. But if you stick around, I’m sure you’ll get a chance.”

They came to the old red flatbed truck, parked in front of the house.

Tom turned to Mateo and said, “I’m pretty sure your men can fit in the back. Everybody else will ride up front.”

Mateo shook his head and said, “I am to keep eyes on the heir at all times. If he sits up front, I sit up front.”

Tom turned back to Wink.

“Looks like you’re riding in back with them.”

Wink smiled.

“That’s alright. Mateo and I can get caught up on what’s going on back home.”

The women hopped into the cab as Tom slid into the driver's seat. Wink joined the security detail in the back.

Tom waited until everyone was settled, then set out for town. He followed the path to the bridge over the river, and Claire caught her first sight of his horses in the distance.

"Oh, they're beautiful! Look, there's a little one!"

"That's Dunmire. He'll be a year old before too long, and he'll catch up with the others."

Tom crossed the bridge and headed for the ridge and the woods. In the back he could hear Wink and Mateo conversing softly.

Soon they were on the open road cutting through farmland. Out in a field on the right he saw a familiar sight, Farmer Asa on a plow. But this time, he noticed another plow also working the land.

Tom stopped the truck and stepped out, waiting for Samar Asa to finish his row. Samar hopped off the contraption and braced the horses, then hurried over to meet him.

After they shook hands, Tom said, "Who you got working out there? That's obviously not one of your daughters, or your wife."

"His name is Buster Cordana. He's starting over out here."

"Oh, yeah. He was an anarchist who came in with Reynard Gliph, when they tried to turn Little York bad. You better keep an eye on him."

"I know all about Buster's past, Tom. He's told me all about it. As far as I know, he's held nothing back. He deserves a second chance. We're all out here on the frontier looking for a fresh start in one way or the other. He's no different than the rest of us, in that regard."

They watched the man plowing in the distance, a tiny trail of dust spraying up behind the two horses he guided.

"I sold him Jo's place. You know, we got two homesteads when we came out here, one for each of us. But really, it was too much beyond grazing

more cattle. When he makes it back to League City, he can grab the one next to it. Then he'll have two."

"Well, I hope you didn't just give it to him, Mr. Asa."

"Oh, ha ha. No, he paid for it. I think I wiped out all his savings. He had a bag full of tokens marked, 'First Galactic LC' that he brought with him, and those are about gone with the land purchase."

Tom raised an eyebrow, but he did not say anything.

"Anyways, Buster is practically part of the Asa family now."

Samar glanced over at the truck full of men still parked on the road.

"Where did *they* come from? They're not from around here. Are those PR colors?"

"Good eye. They're just visiting until after the election. It looks like a couple of my employees are getting married soon. I wanted to make sure you and Mrs. Asa were invited."

"Jo and I would love to go! We'll bring along the girls, and Buster, too."

After a few more words, Tom returned to the truck. He climbed back in and they continued toward the crossroads.

On the way, Jinxie and Claire planned out the wedding.

11.10

“What do we want?”

“Elections!”

“Who do we want?”

“The League!”

“What do we want?”

“Elections!”

A throng several thousand strong flowed down the street, standing shoulder to shoulder and covering the pavement from one sidewalk to the other.

It moved like a living thing, a surging snake headed straight for Courthouse Square.

All morning long the throng gathered in the projects, people joining them like iron filings to a loadstone.

Now, they were led by an energetic young woman Casper had recruited just for this purpose. She had short hair sticking straight up, spiked in all directions. Tattoos crisscrossed her neck going down her chest below the collar and below her arms. Facial piercings in her cheeks and lower lips reflected the ambient sunlight.

She yelled in a miniature megaphone gripped in her fist while walking backwards. Like a piper of old, the people followed her, shouting back responses to her amplified questions.

“What do we want?”

“Elections!”

“Who do we want?”

“The League!”

The sheriff’s deputies ran from the square toward them while they were still three blocks out. But two men were woefully inadequate to stop a crowd this size. Always short on manpower, the city’s law enforcement could never hope to contain the anarchists living in the projects.

Not easily, anyway.

Ashley Thallus heard the commotion out in the street and retrieved a camera drone for overhead shots. He hurried down the steps of his apartment in the working-class neighborhood bordering the Courthouse. He came out the door in time to see the two deputies racing toward the oncoming throng.

He jumped down the stairs two at a time, broadcasting live.

“This is Ashley Thallus with the Zeitung. A throng of people from the Southside Projects is headed for Courthouse Square. We haven’t seen this many people gathered in one place in a while. These demonstrations have turned violent in the past, ladies and gentlemen, especially when the Southsiders get closer to the Commercial District. I see two law enforcement officers are *en route*. Let’s go see what’s happening!”

He jumped off the last two steps and raced after the deputies, the drone cam flying above and behind him, giving his viewers their first glimpse of the mob headed for the center of town.

The two deputies proved their mettle, stopping meters away from the crowd, hands held out in front.

“Halt! Stop! Do not proceed!”

The young woman turned around to glare at the men, her eyes narrowing. She aimed her miniature megaphone at them, talking into her fist.

“This is a peaceful assembly! We are not in violation of any laws! We are proceeding to Courthouse Square to make our presence known!”

Behind her, a chorus of “*Yeah!*” drifted up from the front lines of the throng, from all those who could see what the holdup was about.

“It apparently is a show of support for voting in the League, ladies and gentlemen,” Ash said, speaking into the camera hovering above and behind him. “The Southsiders have a very strong presence here in League City, and they want it known which way they are voting for in the upcoming planetary alignment election. However, there is some history of violence whenever these nominal anarchists gather together . . .”

Behind the front of the crowd, half a dozen people near the edges pushed and shoved their way to the curbs on either side of the street. They pulled out hammers and knelt, whacking at the curb and breaking the concrete into chunks. Others around them gathered up the manmade rocks.

The first projectile arced gracefully through the air from behind the front line, a jagged piece of broken masonry thrown in full defiance at law enforcement.

The deputy it sailed toward saw it . . . and ducked away in time. But that proved to be just the opening salvo. Several more chunks followed, raining down on the two hapless law enforcement officers.

They pulled out their guns, but the people in front and facing them were not throwing rocks. They shouted and shook their fists, but they were not throwing anything.

More concrete arced overhead as the people with hammers kept supplying ammo to those behind the front line. They furiously pounded away at the curb, breaking off heavy chunks. More people around them stooped to scoop up the manmade rocks.

A heavy one, thrown slightly off the trajectory of the others, finally connected with a LEO. He stepped out of the way to avoid a fusillade of

smaller pieces, only to walk into the path of this larger lump. It popped against his skull, knocking him down but not out.

He fell to his knees and put a hand up to the side of his head. When he brought his hand down, blood covered it.

He stood up, shakily. All eyes in the crowd were on him now. They booed and jeered. More rocks came his way, aimed at him.

Slightly dazed, and backing up from the onslaught, he drew his sidearm and shot straight ahead.

The chest of the closest protestor burst open in blood.

11.11

Like a dam bursting, the crowd surged forward, screaming in rage.

In desperation, the deputy shot again. The bolt disappeared underneath the tide, the wave of people passing over a man going down.

The other deputy opened up too, walking backward. Both officers knew their power packs would last only so long. Far more people rushed them than the number of shots they could fire.

More chunks of concrete rained down on them, striking the other one in the shoulder.

The crowd smelled blood and rushed the men, heedless of their guns, drawing courage from their numbers.

“I may have to seek higher ground, folks,” Ash said, glancing around at the steps leading up to apartment doorways nearby. “This is starting to get hairy!”

A particularly large chunk of concrete sailed up and out from the crowd, about the size of an American football but weighing far more. It popped out of sight amidst all the other chunks flying up and reappeared with Ash’s drone camera directly in its trajectory.

The concrete smashed into the drone, polyresin flying, pulling it down. Both camera and curb chunk slammed into the street behind Ash.

“Aw, man! Those things are expensive!”

A black-clad figure took a running leap off the roof of the building to his right.

Unnoticed by all at first, Night Shadow plummeted straight down, arms stretched out like a diver jumping into a pool of water.

Those in the vanguard were so focused on the two deputies, they never looked up.

At the last second, and unnoticed by any cameras, Lisa teleported Mona and popped her back into place, arresting her fall.

To anyone watching, it looked like the bot flickered. She dropped on the front of the crowd, knocking over five people.

Everyone stopped. They looked surprised at this streak of black from above landing in their midst.

Mona rolled off the bodies and crouched in a fighting position.

Ash turned from his wrecked camera and saw her for the first time.

In a flurry that surely would have been noticed as superhuman if anyone thought about it, Night Shadow lashed out with fists and feet, knocking people down all along the front line.

The crowd's momentum halted abruptly.

The deputies, sweat on their face, stopped walking backward and preserved the precious few shots remaining in their guns. They gave the masked superhero grateful glances.

The woman in front leading the charge snarled at Night Shadow. She held her fist up to her mouth to yell a curse.

Mona stretched out a hand and activated her personal tractor beam, ripping the little megaphone out of the woman's hand.

She caught it in her own fist and held it, staring back at the agitator who now wore a stunned expression.

“It’s a rare daytime appearance of Night Shadow!” Ash said. “I can’t remember the last time I saw her in the light of day, folks! Maybe it was the last time the Southsiders rioted!”

Ash’s broadcast had switched over to his own optic nerves through his implant. Millions of people now watched the confrontation through his eyes.

“Three people are holding off a crowd of thousands! The two deputies and Night Shadow are out there containing this angry mob by sheer force of will! Frankly, folks, I feel for their safety. Excuse me while I make for higher ground, myself.”

Ash took the pause in the surge as an opportunity. He dashed for the nearest steps leading up to an apartment entrance before turning back to watch the drama unfolding in the street.

Tension rippled through the air.

The deputies sweated, holding their guns out.

The crowd seethed with anger, waiting for a spark to launch them into an explosion of violence, heedless of gunshots or superheroes.

Mona reached down to her collarbone and pulled something out of a pocket there.

“What’s she doing?” Ash said. “It looks like she’s pulling up a disc of some sort. It’s about the width of a tennis ball, I think. All black. It’s connected to a . . . you know, that looks like a voice scrambler. She’s putting it in front of her mouth.”

The smart string held the scrambler in place. Mona looked out at the hostile crowd watching her every move and slowly lifted the miniature megaphone up to her face.

“You will disperse.”

Her scrambled voice echoed off the buildings in the street.

“There will be a fair and impartial election in six days. If you wish to change the government of this planet, you will do so at that time. You will not change anything today by violence or demonstrations. That will only hurt your own side.”

The crowd stirred as her words percolated through the collective consciousness of thousands.

Lisa worked on the best words for Mona to say, expending processing power in the background and devoting hundreds of extra cycles to the task.

Psychological responses were the trickiest for AI to get right, since humans had so many independent variables.

“Any who do not disperse at this time will not be allowed to vote by the local AI. You *will* be arrested at the voting booth if you try. Your identity is noted.”

That made an impact.

Several people in the rear and near the edges immediately turned and walked back toward their apartments.

Slowly, the wind left the crowd’s violent sails. More and more people decided they would rather be somewhere else right now.

The woman in front, her nose ring still reflecting ambient light, could see it. She could feel her grasp on the hive weakening.

“No! Don’t leave! Now is our chance!”

But her voice no longer carried, without amplification.

Mona walked toward her, pocketing the megaphone. She turned as Mona neared, snarling at the superhero.

“You’ll pay for this! You’ll . . .”

Mona punched her in the chin with Tom’s old brass knuckles, knocking her out. She slumped to the ground.

Lisa noted the woman’s identity and made a note next to her name:

“Anarchist. Agitator.”

Now the crowd truly dispersed. No longer bunched together, the people scattered quickly.

The deputies' shoulders slumped in relief, although they kept their weapons out. They glanced at the woman in black, giving her more attention now. Most people had never seen Night Shadow before, outside of Ash's broadcasts.

Mona turned for the wall of the nearest building, intending to make a speedy exit.

Ash hurried forward.

"Excuse me! Night Shadow? Night Shadow! Care to make a statement, Night Shadow?"

She turned toward him, aware of her appearance being broadcast throughout the galaxy at that very moment.

She still wore the voice scrambler in front of her mouth, like a wind screen over a microphone.

She held up two fingers in the universal V for Victory sign.

"Vote Alliance."

Then Mona ran for the nearest building and jumped. Her feet attached to it, the old wall climber boots activating. She raced up the side and disappeared over the top.

Ash's eyes, along with millions of others, followed her all the way.

11.12

The Jet Stream's passenger and luggage cars landed out in the field behind Ferguson's Freehold.

Two doors slid open simultaneously and Captain Isadore Montaigne said, "Welcome to Little York, Mr. and Mrs. Dalmont. Welcome home!"

"Is that all there is? Malcolm, you didn't tell me how dreary this place is. Why, it's positively primitive! What is that ramshackle shack over there? Do people actually live here? Oh my word, Malcolm, I just don't know if I can take it. I trust your house is much nicer, isn't it Malcolm? Malcolm?"

"Yes, dear."

Malcolm slowly walked out of the passenger car carrying bags. He dumped everything on the grass and returned to the luggage car to get more. When he had retrieved everything, he nodded at Montaigne who grinned back at him.

"Good riddance," Montaigne muttered under his breath.

The doors slid shut and the cars lifted back up into the sky to rejoin the sky train high above.

Malcolm remained stoic, carrying four suitcases, two in hand and two under his arms. He marched resolutely toward town as his wife followed, staring

wide-eyed at her new surroundings and talking nonstop.

“It’s just the level of dirt I don’t like, Malcolm. The whole planet is so dusty! Even the sky is full of haze. Just look at it. I haven’t seen the sun since we got here. Do you ever see the sun out here Malcolm?”

“Yes, dear.”

He trudged ahead and she followed as they made their way around Ferguson’s Freehold. But Malcolm did not stop in the public house. He marched down the center of the unpaved street, ignoring the wooden sidewalks on either side.

“Well, this is . . . what’s the word? Quaint. Yes, this is quaint. So, this is Little York? Is there anyone else around? I only see a handful of people. Why are all these windows boarded up? Is there a shortage of glass on this planet? Hello there, shopkeeper! I am Mrs. Malcolm Dalmont! I hope to visit your establishment soon!”

Ingo Chan, the town’s leatherworker, had stepped outside of his new shop on Main Street for a moment to catch a breath a fresh air. He stared curiously at the husband-and-wife team marching down the middle of the street. Then his eyebrows slowly rose as he recognized Malcolm.

He pressed the newly installed implant under his ear and said, “Hey, Cal? I think you’ve got some customers headed your way. You’re not gonna believe who’s back in town.”

By the time Malcolm marched all the way through town with his new wife in tow, everyone knew of his presence thanks to modern technology. A small crowd gathered to see him in person at the corral.

Cal walked out of the stables wearing a pair of blue overalls, old boots and nothing else. He opened the gate and stepped out just as Malcolm walked up and dropped all the suitcases on the ground.

Ingo Chan was first to show up, having followed the pair down the street. But soon other shopkeepers streamed out of buildings on and off Main Street, pulling customers and neighbors along in their wake.

Cal smiled at Malcolm when the big man finally met his eyes.

“Howdy, Mr. Dalmont. Welcome home.”

Cal turned to the woman who walked up beside Malcolm. She smiled at him.

“Howdy. I’m Calvin Broussard, atcher service.”

The woman drew herself up to her full height and beamed proudly.

“I am Lilith Hardegen Dalmont, Mr. Malcolm Dalmont’s wife. I’m so very pleased to make your acquaintance.”

Several people walking up at that moment heard the introduction. Everyone seemed torn as to who should garner more attention, Malcolm or Lilith.

Cal said, “I see. And might you be the same Mrs. Dalmont who put up extra reward money so the Marshal’s Service would fetch your husband back to Juventas? I hear he absconded with your money when he and his brothers hightailed it out of there.”

Cal smiled at her, softening the hard blow of the question. His face and bare shoulders sported a tan, despite the shrouded sun, and he had the look of sincerity about him.

Truth be told, though, of all those present, he was perhaps the only one willing to breach such a sensitive topic.

It was something the entire town remained curious about, though. No one in the crowd, now numbering about three dozen, said a word as they awaited her response.

Lilith never stopped smiling, as if this were a reasonable question and not one so highly personal in nature as to be offensive.

“Oh, yes. That was just a terrible misunderstanding. You see, Malcolm here ran off to the frontier with his brothers, leaving me behind. Once he came back home, and I am so forever grateful to the Marshal’s Service for returning him safely to me, we were able to sort through all our familial differences and reconcile. Isn’t that right, darling?”

“Yes, dear.”

All eyes in the crowd shifted to Malcolm. But he gave no indication to suggest her story had any additional nuance.

Cal waited a moment to see if anymore juicy tidbits were forthcoming. When Lilith just smiled back at him, and Malcolm stared at him with what seemed like dead eyes, he gave up.

“Well, I reckon you need a couple rentals to get you out to the farm. I’m happy to offer you horses at the standard rate, Mal. You might be wantin’ to rent a wagon, too, on account of all that luggage.”

Mal shook his head and said, “I’ll take a third horse instead. I know your rates on wagons are highway robbery.”

Cal raised his eyebrows.

Lilith did, too.

“Why, Malcolm! I do believe that’s the most you’ve said all at one time since we got here!”

She turned back to Cal and said, “He’s been rather pensive since we arrived. I think he’s anxious to see his brothers!”

Cal smiled and nodded. He looked like he wanted to say a lot more but decided to hold his tongue instead.

He turned back to the stables to go fetch the horses.

11.13

Townfolk did their best to engage Malcolm in conversation. Their efforts were met with noncommittal grunts and curt, monosyllabic replies.

Lilith, on the other hand, talked nonstop. She gushed on and on about how wonderful Malcolm was, and how much she looked forward to seeing his homestead and meeting his brothers for the first time.

“You know, we never had a chance to all get properly acquainted back on Juventas. I know Malcolm had to rush off with his brothers to quickly claim a settlement out here before all the land got snapped up. If I could have done it all over again, he would have taken me with him!”

A few people shared some knowing looks with one another.

“Uh, this continent ain’t exactly the one to be settlin’ first,” somebody said. “It’s mostly desert ’cept for this bit o’ green space round here.”

About this time Cal reappeared, leading three horses by the reins. One remained unsaddled, with only a blanket and smart straps on the animal’s back.

Malcolm looked relieved to pull away from the crowd. He quickly loaded up the pack animal with suitcases.

“I took riding lessons back on Juventas! As you locals likely say, ‘this is not my first rodeo!’”

She laughed at the attempted humor, an annoying, braying sound.

Several people in the crowd traded glances this time.

Malcolm mounted his steed without a word.

Everyone else watched Lilith to see if her claim about riding lessons were accurate. She mounted in proper form, on the left side, and several people nodded with a modicum of respect.

Cal tied the packhorse to Malcolm’s. The big man nudged his steed forward with his heels, making several standing nearby scramble out of the way.

Lilith happily turned to the crowd.

“Goodbye! Goodbye! So glad to meet you! We’ll have to have everyone out to the house for a welcome home party! I hope to see you all again soon!”

She waved cheerfully and urged her horse to follow Malcolm out of town.

The hooves clip-clopped down the North Road and Lilith finally lapsed into silence.

At the crossroads, Malcolm turned left without even looking.

“Oh, Malcolm! What an adorable little country church!”

Mal grunted, but spared the postcard-perfect scene with a church backing up against the verdant woods barely a glance.

They kept going.

After a while, Lilith grew tired of the silence. She coaxed her steed to pull up beside Malcolm’s.

“I’m really looking forward to seeing your place.”

He grunted.

“Do you think your brothers made any changes in your absence?”

He didn't say anything for several seconds, as if pondering this potential scenario.

At last, without looking at her, he said, "They better not."

Lilith seemed to give up on conversation at this point. She satisfied herself by gazing out at the landscape, the green grass and the rare but occasional sight of someone working out in a field.

When she saw these people, she'd wave and shout out a merry, "Hallelu!"

Invariably they would wave back and occasionally shout out their own greeting. This seemed to make her very happy.

Often, they would stare at the couple in curiosity, trying to discern who was traveling down the West Road toward the Dalmont's place.

At last they came to a bend in the road where three burned trees stood guard, black naked branches reaching up like dead fingers to the sky.

"Oh, my! Look at that, Malcolm. Do you have many wildfires around here? How much rain do you get? Dear, dear."

Malcolm ignored her and rounded the bend in silence.

Here, a massive arch above the road that branched off into the four Dalmont homesteads stood guard, the letters spelling out their *nomen gentilicium* in large hand-carved wooden letters.

A boy of about ten jumped up from his spot leaning against one of the posts supporting the great arch. He stared at Malcolm, Lilith and the pack horse loaded down with luggage for a moment, frozen in excitement.

Then he remembered his duties and touched a finger to an implant, newly installed under his ear.

"Mr. Dalmont? They're here! They're at the gate!"

"How charming!" Lilith said. "I did not know you had sensors out here in the middle of nowhere."

She pulled her horse to a halt as Malcolm plodded on ahead without giving the child a second look.

“Tell me about your implant, young man.”

“Yes, ma’am! Phaethon Solar, they’re the biggest company on the planet. They got a global AI. Anybody can use it!”

“I see. And where is the sensor?”

“Ma’am?”

“I said, where is the sensor that your implant uses?”

Her head swiveled as if on a pike while she spoke.

“Usually something at least on the level of a municipal sensor is needed to make calls and so forth. I haven’t seen anything like that on the road out here.”

The boy shrugged.

“I dunno about that, ma’am. It just works.”

She thanked him for his time and giggled her horse to catch up with her husband.

“Malcolm? Were there AI sensors out here before you left?”

He shrugged.

“I’ve no idea what that kid was blathering on about.”

“Well, evidently at least one of your brothers has taken one of these local AI’s implants, because the lad called him with the news of our arrival.”

Malcolm shrugged again and lapsed back into silence.

Minutes later, they crested the final ridge before his homeplace.

Lilith pulled her horse to a stop to take in the scene. There, in the valley below, four identical houses stood. They had all been repaired on the outside and showed no signs of the fighting that had occurred earlier.

“Oh, Malcolm! It’s beautiful!”

Mal grunted and kept going, leaving her behind on the ridge.

But as he came down the hill, he allowed himself a smile. A little one to be sure, but a smile nonetheless.

The first one he had allowed himself in a long time.

Malcolm Dalmont had come home.

11.14

Morgan walked out of Newt's house and stood beside her man, holding his hand.

Newt held it tight, but neither looked at one another. They stared at his older brother riding up with his new/old bride.

"So, this is the one he left behind on Juventas when you boys came out here?"

Newt nodded, silently answering her question.

"And, he has a history of this? He's married elsewhere, too, right?"

"I'm pretty sure that first one was annulled. This one here, she spent a lot of money fetching him back. Reimbursed the Marshal's Service for their trouble. Paid the court fees and who know what else. He went along with it all so that he could get out of jail. His other option was to rot in a prison cell back on Juventas."

"Seems like he could still ditch her and run away, now that he's out."

Newt glanced at Morgan and raised an eyebrow at her.

She shrugged and smiled back at him.

"It's what I would do, if I wanted to get away from someone."

“The Marshals have a file on him now, Morgan. There really isn’t any place he could hide for very long before they found him again. And when they did, I doubt anybody would give him a *third* chance.”

Some of the young boys working on the ranch ran out the gate to hold their horses while Mal and Lilith dismounted.

A screen door banged and Britt walked out, followed by his personal maid and lover, Angarita. Together they joined the small crowd near the front gate while some men started unloading luggage off the packhorse.

Emmitt, the older of the three Dalmonts who had stayed on Phaethon, stood nearby. He nodded a greeting to Newt and Morgan, then his other brother, Britt.

Mal walked in the gate.

As if in afterthought, remembering she was there, he reached back and held it open for Lilith, too.

“Welcome home, Mal,” Britt said as they approached the small crowd waiting to greet them.

This sentiment was echoed by several of the farmhands present.

“Welcome back, Mr. Dalmont!”

“I sure am glad to see you back, sir!”

Mal nodded, taking it all in.

Lilith beamed, soaking up all the bonhomie.

“How do you do? I am Lilith Dalmont! So pleased to make your acquaintance.”

Unable to ignore her any longer, Mal grunted and extended a hand toward her. She took it and stepped up beside him, smiling at the three men and two women staring back at her.

“This is my wife. Lilith, meet Britt, Emmitt, his maid Rita, our youngest brother Newt, and . . . I don’t know who you are.”

“I’m Morgan.”

She smiled at Lilith and extended a hand. Lilith took it and daintily squeezed.

“I came along after you left,” Morgan said.

Malcolm grunted and nodded. He cast longing eyes toward his house, one of four sitting in the respective corners of the brothers’ homesteads.

“I trust you left my place alone.”

“We been storin’ stuff, and we let some hands sleep in there while you were gone,” Emmitt said. “But soon as we heard you was back, we cleaned it out.”

“About that,” Lilith interrupted. “How is it your implants work out here? I have seen no sensors outside of town. I think there must have been one on the water tower in Little York, that’s usually the highest spot, one would think. But I’ve seen nothing out here. Yet . . . does everybody have an implant?”

Newt nodded and said, “Not sure how it works, but if you ride off into the pasture a ways, it stops working. We think the fella who runs Phaethon Solar hid a sensor out here when he was attackin’ the place.”

“Attacking? Oh, my stars! Why was he attacking this place?”

Everybody averted their eyes, except Morgan.

Newt cleared his throat and said, “Well, uh, he and his people were tryin’ to help out the Marshal so he could fetch Mal and take him back to you, I suppose.”

“Oh. Oh! I see. Well, he can’t be all bad, then, can he?”

She laughed, making a loud, grating, high pitched sound not unlike that of a donkey.

Britt and Emmitt traded a sideways glance with one another.

Malcolm broke the awkward silence that followed.

“You ain’t stutterin’, Newt.”

“Oh, is this the dear little brother you were telling me about who’s so bumbling with his words?”

Newt blushed, slightly. But he remained unbowed. He kept his eyes on Mal, ignoring Lilith.

“Yeah, Morgan here fixed me up.”

“Is that so?”

Malcolm gave Morgan a head-to-toe appreciative look, as if undressing her with his eyes.

“That is so,” Morgan said, gripping Newt’s hand tighter. “He’s better than ever. And Lilith can’t have him.”

“Oh! Hahaha! Oh, how droll. I like you, dear! We’ll become fast friends.”

Morgan gave Lilith a wide smile.

She said, “You’ll have to tell me all about your adventures with Malcolm back on Juventas.”

“Oh, yes indeed! What tales I can tell!”

The lascivious look on Mal’s face disappeared, replaced with his previous one of resignation, like that of a damned soul resigned to his fate in the afterlife.

He said, “I’m goin’ to the house.”

“Oh! I too must see our wonderful home for the first time. We’ll get together later, Morgan dear!”

The crowd parted for them, and the couple headed for Malcolm’s door. Lilith trotted to catch up and walk alongside Mal as he marched forward, looking neither to the left nor right.

Men carrying suitcases followed them.

Britt pointed at one of his maids, dressed in a black and white uniform.

“Go with them and take care of things.”

She nodded and followed as the crowd broke up, leaving only the three brothers, Angarita and Morgan together in the front yard.

Britt said, “Well . . . the family’s all back together.”

“Yeah,” Emmitt said. “But Mal don’t look too happy.”

“Well, lookit what he got stuck with by goin’ back. In comparison to the gal he was chasin’ while he was here, Gwen Wilder? Yeah, he got the short end of the stick with that one. Homely.”

“That’s a terrible thing to say,” Morgan said.

Britt said, “Well . . . I ain’t lyin’.”

Morgan smiled at this and did not offer a rebuttal.

Newt said, “Looks like we’re all stuck with her now. Whose idea was it to build our houses right next to one another?”

“I believe that was your idea, Newt,” Emmit said. “Frankly, I can’t believe we all went along with it, but it seemed like a good one at the time.”

“That *laugh*,” Britt said. “If I had to live with a woman who cackled like that . . . so annoying. It’s like nails scrapin’ on metal or somethin’.”

As if on cue, they heard the sound of braying laughter drift over from the open door of Mal’s house.

“Oh, Malcolm, it’s perfect! I love it!”

11.15

The next morning Lilith opened the door to a shy but persistent boy knocking away.

Standing there with his hands behind his back, the barefoot boy, wearing scruffy jeans and a cotton work shirt, waited to deliver a message. He danced on one foot, then the other.

“Uh, Mrs. Morgan Fisher invites you, ma’am, to breakfast at her place this mornin’. She would be, uh, ‘Delighted at the presence of your company,’ she said, ma’am.”

“Oh my goodness! That would be so delightful! Did she say . . . is Mr. Dalmont to accompany me on this breakfast adventure? He is still in bed.”

“She said if he wants to. If not, your invite stands, ma’am.”

“That is *so* very thoughtful of her. Please return to her door and tell her that I will be there in ten minutes. Oh! Which door is hers, pray tell?”

The boy turned and pointed at the appropriate one across the way. Lilith thanked him and shut her door.

A few minutes later, she crossed the yard and knocked on Newt’s door.

A maid opened it and said, “Please follow me, Mrs. Dalmont.”

She led the woman into the house's formal dining room, where a table for 16 waited. At the moment, it was set for only two. Morgan stood up as Lilith entered and came around the table to give the other woman a hug.

"Welcome, welcome. I'm so glad you could make it, Lilith."

"This is very nice! It was *so* delightful for you to have gone to all this trouble to make breakfast."

"It's no trouble at all. The maids do all the work, actually. One of the Dalmont perks, I suppose."

"Oh, my. I shall have to get one. Did you know, a young lady offered to take up residence with us last night? I turned her away."

"She'll come back, if you ask for her. You should get more than one. They'll keep the house clean, cook your food, and do just about anything else you or Malcolm want them to do."

As they spoke, one maid came in wearing a traditional black and white dress and carrying a pitcher of coffee. Another followed her with a tray of plates piled high with bacon and eggs.

"How delightful! I do enjoy a British breakfast over a Continental one, if I'm being totally honest," Lilith said.

After some idle chitchat and several helpings of food, Morgan gently steered the conversation to Malcolm.

"You know, we are all happy to have Malcolm return home. I never knew him, but his brothers talked about him all the time. Tell me, aren't you the least bit concerned that he might try to run away again?"

Lilith smiled as she dabbed her lips with a cloth napkin.

"Oh, haha. You need not be concerned with that, my dear. Malcolm and I have an understanding, backed up by the judge who set him free and placed him in my custody. If Malcolm runs away and I don't hear from him and I don't know where he went, I simply have to put in a call to the Marshal's Service. They have injected a tracker chip into him, you see. He doesn't

know where it is, in his body, but it will allow the Marshals to find him wherever he might go.”

“Hm. That’s interesting. So, he can’t run away. I hate to be macabre, Lilith, but . . . what if something happens to *you*?”

Lilith smiled and took another dainty sip of coffee.

She said, “If something were to happen to me, by misfortune or deadly deed, Malcolm goes back to jail. It’s as simple as that. He’s taking a risk, in that if I were to die in a true accident, then his freedom is cut short. In that regard, he is protecting me with his life, believe me. The man does *not* want to go back to that horrid jail on Juventas.”

She shuddered, then smiled a much bigger smile.

“And if he gets out of line, if for example he were to sleep with one of these maids his brothers seem to enjoy keeping around, I will simply put in a call to Juventas and have him taken back into custody. You might say I have him right where I want him.”

Lilith made a little circling motion with her finger in the air.

Morgan raised her eyebrows while taking her own sip of coffee.

“It does appear you are the one in charge. And you did with a lot less work than I had to do with Newt.”

“Oh, really? And how did that come about, pray tell?”

Morgan paused to think how best to phrase things.

Then she began a highly sanitized tale explaining how she came to live with the Dalmonts.

11.16

Malcolm woke up and flung his arm across the bed. He breathed a sigh of relief when he found Lilith was not there with him.

“That woman is insatiable,” he muttered under his breath.

He climbed out of bed, sore and bending over. Slowly, he headed for the shower.

Several minutes later he knocked on the door of Emmitt’s house. A maid opened it, smiling at him.

“Good morning Mr. Dalmont.”

“Are they eatin’ here?”

She nodded and held the door open for him. He walked inside and headed for the dining room.

He found Britt, Emmitt and Newt eating already, with their four top hands at the table as well.

Malcolm sat down at an empty spot without waiting for an invitation. A maid rushed in with a pitcher of coffee while another one ran to the kitchen to fetch him some food.

He took a long sip of morning brew and looked up. Everybody at the table stared at him.

“What’s goin’ on with the ranch? What are we doin’ right now?”

Britt cleared his throat and said, “Well, it seems there’s been some developments in transportation on this planet since you left, Mal. In the old days if we wanted to sell a cow to someone in a big city, we’d have to load it up on a sky train and pay an exorbitant rate to fly it over to League City, or anywhere else. But now, we can ship an entire herd overseas, on a boat that takes a few days to get to New Galveston at a fraction of the cost. Long story short, it means we can make a huge profit.”

Malcolm nodded, sipping more coffee. A maid ran in, carrying his plate. She set it down before him.

“I see.”

He stabbed a slice of bacon and shoved it in his mouth.

Emmitt said, “We were just discussin’ how we’re gonna have to wrestle the herd down to the docks. They, uh, built some docks while you was gone. May take the better part of a week to get ’em there. Two days to get the cows we want to sell from the North Forty down to the docks that the Phaethon Overland Transportation Company made. By that time, the Piker should be here. We’ll load up the cattle on the ship and take a receipt. They’ll handle unloading the herd at New Galveston and put them in the auction house there for us. We’ll have our money in the bank soon after.”

Mal swallowed the food in his mouth.

“I’ll help with the roundup.”

Newt said, “Well now, Mal, that means you’ll be away from your bride for a good long time.”

Malcolm stared at this little brother expressionlessly while he chewed on another mouthful of food.

He swallowed it and said, “I’ll help with the roundup. It may take longer than a week, I reckon, and we may stay over a night or two at the

Ferguson's place. Or, I dunno. Maybe somebody needs to go on the boat and make sure those cows get to the sale barn in New Galveston okay. Then I guess someone would have to take the boat back here. Could be gone a long time."

The three brothers smiled at one another.

Britt said, "You're the boss, Mal. It's good to have you back."

Mal grunted and continued shoveling food into his mouth.

Everett said, "We can get you an implant at the Fergusons' if you want one. But if you want to keep it working, you oughta vote Alliance in the upcomin' election."

As one, everybody around the table nodded.

Mal stopped chewing and looked at all the men.

"I woulda thought we'd go for the Republic."

Britt shook his head and said, "This Alliance thing is the way to go, Mal. They'll leave us alone out here. If you get the implant, you can take a look at their history and the alignment documents. They're all online. Of the three systems, I'm convinced they're the best. We all feel that way."

"They're a buncha *pirates*."

"They don't engage in piracy anymore. For the most part, anyway. They're libertarians. Live and let live is the motto. Other than agreeing to a mutual defense pact and some codification and such with their courts of law, there ain't much else to it. They leave us alone on pretty much everything. The Republic is second best, but they've been around more than a hundred years, and they've got a bunch of plaque built up in the regulations we'd have to live under. We wouldn't be quite as free under their system of government. Plus, they charge more in taxes. Quite a bit more. Like I say, we've looked at this lot, and we've looked at it from all angles. Just get yourself an implant and see for yourself."

Mal said, "Alright. But first I need to get out of here and get far away from that woman. She's driving me nuts."

Everybody at the table smiled.

He looked up from his plate, scowling.

“And don’t let anything happen to her while I’m gone. If she dies, regardless of *how* she dies, I go back to jail. That’s one of the terms of my release.”

He finished off the coffee in his cup and set it down. Then he met the eyes of each brother.

“So . . . guard her with your life.”

11.17

“F ilthy scum!”

Kelsen Troy ducked as a fist lashed out.

The momentum of the man’s arm did not stop. The League sailor popped the man behind Kelsen in the tightly packed bar instead, a fellow Republican in The Airport Lounge, a new place near the spaceport.

A series of food trucks and makeshift bars sprang up seemingly overnight, offering local fare to all the new people landing at the spaceport. This one played on the nostalgia of Old Earth air travel. Somebody found a treasure trove of reproduced travel posters and airline advertisements. They hastily put up four walls and a bar, then opened for business with all the paraphernalia tacked up inside.

The food was cheap. The beer was cheaper. The place stayed packed, mainly with crew on shore leave.

Crouched low, Kelsen stretched a leg out to the right and crab-crawled out of the way.

The sailor who tried to pop him traveled with a contingent from the Barlow.

The man he hit was a Marine from the Elsa Cole.

The two groups had converged on The Airport Lounge, both landing within minutes of one another. They headed for the gates and then alcohol, following their noses.

Boys stood around the spaceport gate with flyers to restaurants and bars. They called out drink specials and pushed holographic sheets into the faces of anyone walking by.

Slamdunks hired an attractive woman in a bikini to drum up business for their place, encouraging men to hop into a rickshaw and ride over to the club.

But the majority of sailors and Marines headed toward the row of ramshackle bars offering to quench their thirst *right now*. The glow of neon lights and the scent of fermented rye, wheat and barley pulled them in like moths to flame.

And the biggest of these halls of revelry was The Airport Lounge.

The Marine, dressed in white, stared at the sailor, dressed in blue, with a look of shock.

Seven of his mates turned from the bar and stared back at the League sailors. They responded to the fisticuffs with a roar.

Punches flew. One of the Marines grabbed a bottle off the bar and slammed it down while holding the neck, shattering it. Now armed with a makeshift knife, he plunged into the melee, stabbing away at blue uniforms.

Kelsen kept moving, edging toward the door as both sides converged, punching, kicking and biting.

A sailor left the restroom and saw the fight, his mouth dropping open in astonishment as he zipped up his fly. He ran across the length of the room and made a flying leap on top of a group of men dressed in white, knocking them all down like bowling pins.

A Marine jumped up on the bar, kicking at faces. Half a dozen blue-sleeved arms reached up and grabbed his legs, pulling him back down into the crowd and beating him senseless.

Kelsen found Judy and June, their male contingent lured away by the lure of patriotic violence. He nodded toward the door, and the three made for the exit.

Out on the street, June swiped a hand over her blonde hair, trying to straighten it.

“Why did you start something with the League sailors? There were more of them than our guys in there.”

“Yeah, that seemed dirty,” Judy said, shaking her own dark locks out now that they were outside.

Kelsen smiled at the incredibly attractive duo. He winked at them.

The ruckus inside started attracting attention outside on the street.

A white-clad Marine burst through the door of The Airport Lounge back-first, splitting the cheap wood in half.

He rolled head over heels on the sidewalk, ending up on his back and spread-eagled, looking up at the brown hazy sky.

Dazed, the Marine stood up and rubbed the back of his head, his hand coming away bloody.

He snarled in rage and raced back in to rejoin the fight, ignoring the score of people outside staring at him.

Kelsen raised his voice and said, “League sailors started a fight in there! They’re beating the snot out of anyone in a Republican uniform! Somebody go get some help!”

Several people ran off, looking for one of the precious few deputy sheriffs in the vicinity. Others ran toward the door, turning the recording feature on in their new implants.

Kelsen smiled at the women and motioned for them to leave. Together, the trio walked away from the makeshift bar district.

He guided them toward a cab, ignoring the more plentiful rickshaws lined up to take people into the city. He sat in the front seat while the girls piled

into the back.

“Can you take us out of the city?” Kelsen said. “We’d like to go for a walk in the countryside. I’ll pay for it.”

He held out a large token. The cabbie nodded.

“Sure, pal. Whatever you want.”

The black cab threaded its way through the crowd gathering around The Airport Lounge, then turned toward the city’s edge.

11.18

“We’re pretty much powerless to do much of anything.”

Kelsen walked with his hands in his back pockets, a beautiful woman on either side of him.

Behind them, 100 meters back, the cabbie sat in his vehicle, watching. He would still be there when they came back, the promise of a large token holding him in place.

“I know why you took us out here, Kelsen,” June said. “No sensors. I can’t believe they have their own AI set up already. Whoever did that must have some amazing resources.”

“It was Lute,” Judy said. “You know they’re the ones who set that up. For whatever reason, Lute wants this planet in their little alliance.”

Kelsen said, “Yeah, I don’t care about the whys and the wherefores. What I care about is that everything we have tried to do to influence this election has come up flat. You can’t talk reason to these people so long as they have an Alliance implant feeding them all their entertainment options and all the news resources they want. No kind of rational argument persuades them that the Republic is better than the Alliance.”

June nodded.

She said, “I was talking to a guy yesterday trying to persuade him to see reason, and he brought up the Welfare Wars. As if that was our government’s fault! He said, ‘A republic can only exist until the majority realize they can vote for raiding the treasury,’ or something like that.”

“The great Scottish historian Tytler said that, supposedly. Did you tell him that we *know* that? Our AI learned that lesson, to never give money for nothing from the government. StarCen learned it too. Together PLAIR and StarCen started the indentured servant program after the Welfare Wars. We leave charity up to private organizations.”

“Yes, I went through all that, Kelsen. It didn’t seem to matter to him. He said, ‘Well the Alliance never made the mistake of giving out money to bums. In the Alliance, if you don’t work, you don’t eat. And that’s the way it should be.’ I tried to ask about the disabled or others who can’t work and he said, ‘That’s what family and charity are for.’

“Then I tried to point out that the Alliance didn’t even exist back during the Welfare Wars. That was decades ago. He came back with the fact that *Lute* was around during that time, and *they* didn’t have to deal with any of those uprisings because *they* never had a government welfare program or socialism or anything like that. He was very adamant. Almost like he had been educated recently.”

Kelsen had a glum look on his face.

“Those implants. I’m sure they have a tutorial in there for how the Alliance operates, and I bet it’s within easy reach of the top menu. Probably lots of other propaganda in there as well.”

“Well, what are we gonna do?” June said, running a hand over her blonde hair again. “Every effort we’ve been making has been thwarted. I think a solid majority of the citizenry here are going to vote the wrong way on election day.”

“It is a problem,” Kelsen said as they continued walking along. “Ordinarily in a planetary election we’re faced with League operatives, and they’re usually pretty easy to thwart. All you have to do is remind people of how bad SSI was, and they’ll turn around and vote for us. In this case, however, we’re still not going to pick up the diehard Leaguers out here. And, we’re

faced with the fact everyone else has an Alliance implant that sucks up ninety percent of their attention and free time.”

He stopped walking and turned to the women.

“I’m sorry, girls. I suck as a leader.”

“Don’t say that,” Judy said, gripping his arm. “This is a unique situation.”

“They’re all unique situations. That’s the thing. We’re supposed to be able to handle unique situations.”

Kelsen sighed and looked down at the ground.

“I think we’re going to have to call in for help.”

June nodded.

She looked at Judy and said, “He’s right. This is beyond us. The committee needs to know. It’s less than a week until the election, and we’re going to lose if something drastic doesn’t happen soon.”

Kelsen looked up at the hazy sky, as if trying to peer into outer space where ships orbited overhead.

“I need to put in a call, but it needs to be private. And the only way I can link up with PLAIR without being overheard by the other AI is to do it back aboard the ship.”

June said, “I’ll go tell our driver we’re staying out here. He doesn’t need to see the transport making an unauthorized landing.”

“Are you sure?” Judy said. “It’s a long walk to the cab and back.”

June smiled and said, “It might be my last time to walk on a planet for a while. I doubt we’re coming back down here.”

Judy’s eyes grew big with sudden realization.

“I’ll go with you!”

11.19

“It’s not your fault, Agent Troy.”

Hours later, Roth Kellogg sat back in his chair, in a secure room on Euripides.

Rarely did he have to travel to Diego these days. If he did, he made use of a Machro-drive equipped ship and showed up in Octavia within hours, in real time.

But for the majority of Foreign Relations work, he could do everything he needed to do from his office right here on Euripides.

A veteran of Foreign Relations, Roth had married the elusive Raven, the double agent who stole a highly advanced experimental model from Verberger Bots and Automatons known as Miriam.

Upon delivering the bot to the League, their AI tried to kill Raven. She turned on her old employer and joined forces with the Republic to help take out Miriam. By that time the bot was known across the galaxy as Jade Thrall, the old tetrarch’s youngest “daughter.”

In the process, she met Roth and they eventually got married. Remington, Raven’s real name, settled down into blissful retirement on Euripides while Roth continued rising in the ranks.

First, he moved up in assignments by serving as the Republican representative of state on Euripides, a planet acquired by the Republic via popular vote after the war. This was a position equivalent to ambassador on a League or Alliance world. Eventually he attained a coveted seat on the secretive and highly influential Foreign Relations Committee, based in Plairmont on Diego.

It was a seat of power that came with no glory, he thought. No one, save his wife, even knew he served on the committee that pulled many of the strings deep inside the Republican government. Apart from Harrington House and Parliament, there was no higher power.

But here he was, elected by existing members to replace one of their own when that person had stepped down a few years ago.

Roth initially reveled in his rise to this level of authority and influence. Quickly, though, he realized that old adage, the one that stretched back to Cicero in Ancient Rome and seemed to be re-popularized every other century or so, is true.

“With great power comes great responsibility.”

Right now he looked at a junior agent on his first big assignment and felt a twinge of sympathy.

“It’s not your fault, Mr. Troy,” Roth repeated. “We have never faced a populace with an opposing AI already in place before the vote. Their power to spread propaganda is unprecedented.”

“That’s right, sir.”

A dejected Kelsen Troy looked morose over their connection. Roth could see his avatar clearly in this secure virtual room. He could read Kelsen’s body language and facial expressions even though the other man would only see an obscured image of himself.

Members of the Committee remained anonymous. All Kelsen would see and hear of Roth would be an obfuscated avatar and a scrambled voice.

Meanwhile, Roth had a perfect image of the way Kelsen looked, in his private comm room on the Elsa Cole orbiting above Phaethon.

And right now, Kelsen Troy looked thoroughly dejected.

This had been a big assignment for him, one that could advance his career. Roth made sure Troy had good help, sending agents Judy and June along. They were experienced in this sort of political subterfuge.

But Kelsen felt he blew it, and it showed in his posture and tone of voice.

“Look, you couldn’t fight this,” Roth assured him. “Not alone. I promise you, this will not reflect poorly on you in my report.”

“Thank you, sir. I just wish I could do something more to help swing the election our way. The Election Commission is here, and they’ve already picked out polling centers. They’re tying into the old immigration database. Anyone registered as a citizen will be voting in just a few days.”

Roth nodded.

He knew all this. Troy knew he knew it, too. But the man seemed truly despondent.

“Look, Mr. Troy, let not your heart be troubled. We’ve got this.”

Kelsen glanced up from his feet, where he had been staring all this time.

“We do?”

“Of course. The Foreign Relations Committee has contingency plans for things like this. And there are always contingencies. At this very moment we have the Mayfair picking up immigrants from several different worlds. After leaving Diego where she picked up most of her passengers, she has made stops at Pearl, Italia, and half a dozen other worlds, loading people who have signed agreements to become frontier world citizens upon disembarkation on Phaethon. Then, they’ll vote for us. Bringing in enough voters to tilt an election our way is something of a cherished tradition, actually. As I’m sure you’ve heard, we almost always win these things.”

“That’s . . . that’s . . .”

“Expensive? Yes. It’s costing us millions. The Mayfair is one of the largest vessels with a Machro-drive available in the Republic or the League. It’s on loan from the Navy, and it’s not cheap. Not to mention what we’re paying

all those people individually, and what it costs to feed them in the months it will take to get them where you are in hypertime, just so they can show up in real time for the election with some room to spare. But I'm sure it'll all be worth it."

Kelsen stared at the blurred-out image of Roth that he could see on his end.

"You were going to do this regardless if I succeeded or not, weren't you?"

Roth smiled.

"You catch on quick. I knew you'd make a good candidate for fieldwork when we recruited you."

He let the moment settle in for the younger man.

After he thinks about it for a while, Roth thought, he'll figure out we *never* expected three field agents to succeed on their own in turning an election our way. That's another reason this won't reflect poorly on him in my report to the committee.

"I'll, uh . . . wait for the Mayfair to get here. We'll continue helping, however needed."

"Excellent, Mr. Troy. I know you will. And don't worry about this turn of events. Remember, the Republic is in it to win these elections. Every time it's come up, a planet always opts to join us instead of the other guys. They will this time, too."

Kelsen frowned, the expression showing up on his avatar.

"I hope so, sir. I sure hope so."

11.20

The Harvey Mayfair popped into existence above Epsilon, joining a host of other ships in orbit.

Controlled by PLAIR, the AI pulled her in from the previous planet she visited one AU teleportation per jump, in hypertime.

The teleportation occurred in a matter of hours in real time, but lasted nearly four weeks for those onboard. Faster than light travel remained impossible, but teleportation and hypertime overcame the logistics of interplanetary travel.

Captain Jarroderick Delaunay glanced down at the famous planet, the former center of government bureaucracy for the League before the war. It was the sight of multiple battles, but right now it looked peaceful, a hub of commerce firmly in the Republic's sphere of influence.

He smiled at the forward holo covering the entire front of the bridge. It seemed so real, if he stepped into it he could imagine floating out into space and slowly falling toward the blue and white-streaked planet below.

"PLAIR, please announce our presence and purpose in the local media. Prepare transports and teleportation for anyone wishing to take us up on our offer."

"At once, Captain Delaunay."

An ad swooped across the feeds of millions, showing the attractive faces of a young man and a young woman. They smiled, looking into the camera and showing perfect white teeth.

The young man spoke first.

“Do you want to become a professional immigrant?”

“Yes, you do!”

“Free room and board for a hyperspace jump . . .”

“In real time you’re only gone a couple hours . . .”

“But in hypertime you get weeks to sit back and relax, with all-you-can-eat buffets, pool parties, free games and entertainment.”

“And who knows who you might meet on board, right?”

The pair glanced at one another, smiling.

“Once you’re at the destination planet, simply register to become a citizen there.”

“You can come back to the Republic at any time.”

“People are allowed to switch citizenships at will.”

“If you don’t like it there, you don’t have to stay!”

“After the alignment election, you will be offered a free flight back to the planet of your choice.”

“And when we say free, we mean *free*. All food and drinks are included.”

“It’s hypertime on the way back, too. So you could be back home about this time tomorrow!”

“You don’t even have to quit your current job! It’s like taking a month-long vacation for free!”

“Did we mention you get paid to vote, too?”

Delaunay turned away from the holo showing the ad. The two attractive people did not exist, of course. They were figments of some marketer's imagination, skillfully crafted to elicit the emotional responses desired. Everything from their neutral tan skin down to the cadence of their voiceprint was designed to coerce the viewer into buying.

"Heck, I would go on a voting vacation, if somebody didn't need to stay here and captain the ship."

Two ensigns remained on the bridge, indicative of the reduced manpower needed to run these newer vessels. The young men chuckled politely at his remark.

Like her sister ship, the Elsa Cole, Mayfair was an Albatross-class vessel. Unlike the Cole, she was not prepped for combat. Instead, the Mayfair had been recently outfitted to move people. Her massive holds contained hundreds of thousands of meals, and all sorts of packaged snacks and drinks. Hundreds of domestic bots waited to serve and clean up after thousands of passengers, with live and virtual onboard entertainment lined up for the next two months of travel in hypertime.

In short, one of the Republican Navy's newest, most powerful ships, had been transformed into a sleek, modern cruise vessel. It had become a veritable resort in space.

Today, Delaunay thought, the mighty economic power of the galaxy's largest governmental system has been brought to bear to bring yet another planet into our fold.

And it's a lot easier winning them this way than in all the fighting that occurred on that planet down there, two decades ago.

"Let's see, this is our sixth stop. How many voters do we have onboard right now, PLAIR?"

"At the moment we have 8,762, Captain Delaunay."

"And how many are we expected to pick up from the League's old capital planet here?"

“I estimate we will get far more takers on Epsilon for the offer. Unemployment is high right now, the population is young, and this represents an easy way to make a lot of money in a relatively short amount of time. We should nearly double our human cargo in the next four hours.”

“Good, good. Keep me apprised of the situation.”

“Will do, Captain.”

11.21

Anthony Kim smiled at the fresh young engineer as he struggled with the floating schematic.

“I just don’t understand why nothing is lining up, Mr. Kim. Everything is in place the way it’s supposed to be.”

Anthony walked up behind the young man sitting in a chair in Subtle Services’ Lutian Headquarters. He glanced at the schematic slowly rotating in the holo above the engineer’s desk.

“What you’re dealing with here, Ferris, is a quantum molecular apparatus designed to work in hypertime and real time, simultaneously.”

The young man shook his head, his eyes never leaving the schematic.

“That can’t be done.”

“You mean, it never has been done. I don’t particularly like that word, ‘can’t.’ I’d appreciate it if you did not use it in my presence.”

The young man looked up at the older one and blushed.

“Sorry, Mr. Kim.”

Anthony smiled down at the fellow and opened his mouth when his implant lit up with a call. Mentally, he accepted the incoming commlink.

“Hello, Chris.”

“Tony! Sorry to bother you, but I’ve got a situation that only you can handle.”

“I see. Does it deal with one of my products?”

“Yes, it does. And with one of my kids.”

“You only have one kid, Chris. That would be Thomas.”

“That’s the one! We’ve got a little bit of a situation here that is going to affect his new company if we don’t get a handle on it.”

Anthony stepped into an adjoining room for some privacy, leaving Ferris and the schematics behind.

“What’s going on?”

“You know I hardly ever cash in old chits with you.”

“You ask for favors all the time, Chris.”

Raleigh smiled on the other end of the connection.

“Yeah, but this time it’s for Tom. Phaethon’s alignment election is coming up. Everybody and their dog wants a piece of her. And everybody is playing dirty pool, Tony.”

“Is the League up to their usual tricks?”

“Maybe? I dunno. I’m less worried about them than I am the Republicans. Have you noticed how they never seem to lose an alignment election when it counts?”

“Now that you mention it . . .”

“Yeah. So, through our affiliates we found out they’re using one of those new Albatross ships to ferry people in as carpetbaggers for the election. The Harvey something.”

“The Mayfair?”

“That’s the one. They’re loading it up with passengers right now at Epsilon, their last stop. They’re paying people to show up at Phaethon, vote for aligning with the Republic, and then they can either go back home for free or stay. It’s insidious.”

“But it’s probably not illegal. Phaethon operates under a very simple charter at the moment. If someone arrives and asks to become a citizen, they’re granted that right. All frontier planets looking to grow and develop a population use similar measures.”

“I know it’s not illegal, Tony. But it’s still a dirty trick! They’re using a Republican Navy ship, a top of the line big one, too. They’ve got one of your modified Machro-drives to show up in a few hours with thousands of voters to shift the election in their favor!”

“And do we care how Phaethon aligns? We do a lot of business in the Republic as it is.”

“Of course we care! Tom’s seeded his portable AI all over the planet. It’s a junior version of Lootie, and will fully integrate with her after the election, if it goes our way. We don’t want anybody interfering with his solar operations, either. As soon as some upper-level governmental muckety-muck from Octavia gets in there and starts complaining about ‘environmental considerations’ or some other such bogus stuff, they could shut the whole operation down. It could take years for the next frontier planet to open up and we’ll start all over again.”

“I see. Yes, it would behoove us to claim Phaethon under the Alliance umbrella, especially since Tom and Gwen are headquartered there. I am a major stockholder in Phaethon Solar, after all.”

“Now you’re talking! What can you do to pause that big ol’ Republican tub and keep it from showing up before the election?”

“Why, Captain Raleigh! I can’t believe you would imply that I would, or even could, interfere with an ally’s warship.”

Chris said nothing, waiting in silence on the other end of the comm.

Anthony imagined him smiling.

11.22

After a long pause, Anthony sighed and said, “Chris, *they* invented the Machro-drive.”

“You mean, you didn’t invent it?”

“You know I did not. The guts of the machine did not come out of my shop. It came out of the Republican Shipworks idea lab. Those guys toiled away at time travel and all sorts of esoteric stuff for years, before, during and after the war. My only part in it all was to tweak their schematics and add some revisions to the original plans, resulting in more highly efficient power usage. And they liked my revisions, a lot. So much so, they pay my company royalties for the rights to use the design in their drives.”

“Everybody likes your revisions, Anthony. You’re the man. What did it do, again?”

“I know you’re not an engineer, Chris. Let me try to keep it simple for you.”

“Don’t insult my intelligence! But yeah, explain it to me real simple.”

“Okay. Simply put, one can keep a ship in hypertime longer with Subtle Services’s modifications than one otherwise could without them. And that’s thanks to the way it sips power, using it more efficiently. Theoretically, in wartime, a ship using my schematics could stay in hypertime longer, and

would come out ahead in any battle. I patented the improvements, and they felt it was significant enough to be worth paying my company a royalty each time they outfit another ship with a Machro-drive.”

Another long pause.

Finally, Chris said, “That’s great. That’s excellent. So . . . can you keep that big ol’ Republican Navy ship full of thousands of potential voters from interfering with Phaethon’s election or not?”

Anthony glanced at the door to make sure Ferris was not listening. He lowered his voice.

“I may have introduced some *minor* revisions in the molecular structures they use that will allow us to . . . send their Machro-drive a suggestion. It’s complicated. And, uh . . . highly confidential. I’ve never spoken about it to anyone outside of Subtle Services. You can imagine the hit to our company’s reputation if the Republic finds out I left a back door into all their Navy ships capable of hypertime that could interfere with their operations somehow.”

Chris sighed in relief.

“I knew you could do it, Tony. Never doubted it for a minute. Look, don’t wait too long to put whatever plan you have into motion. My sources tell me the Mayfair is scheduled to leave Epsilon in less than two hours. Anything you can do to hold them there would be excellent. Otherwise, they’ll show up at Phaethon in four or five hours, in real time.”

“I didn’t know we had spies on Epsilon.”

“We don’t. Petra Roe does, however. All of a sudden, they’ve become a lot more cooperative with us. I’ve never seen them so friendly, now that they’re aligning with us. I received this information straight from the prime minister’s office.”

“You know, I always liked her son. He didn’t act all entitled or anything. He would have made an excellent pirate captain, had he been born in our day. I hope they don’t weigh him down with too many matters of state back there in Petra Roe.”

“Me, too. Okay, I’ve got to go. Save the election for us, Engineer Kim!”

“Aye, aye, Captain.”

When Chris signed off, Anthony walked back into the other room. His young engineer still stared at the schematics.

“Forget about that for now, Ferris.”

Anthony tapped in a code on a holo keyboard and the schematics disappeared, replaced by a new set of fourteen molecular structures floating above the table.

“These are models of every Machro-drive with our efficiency features either installed or designed by Subtle Services. The molecules here and here,” he pointed at the nearest graphic, pinpointing the locations for the young man, “are quantum-based.”

“What do they do?”

“They’re binary switches. Very simple. They are either on or off. Now, what does that mean if they’re programmable quantum molecular structures, Ferris?”

“Um, if you change the state in one place, the state in the drives change too?”

“Very good. I knew you were smart when I hired you. This is the one for the Harvey Mayfair’s Machro-drive.”

Anthony reached up and touched the two amplified molecules, turning them red.

“And now, the Mayfair is stuck in real time.”

11.23

“The biggest hindrance to getting people onboard quickly is waiting for them to pack for a two-month trip.”

Captain Delaunay idly watched as scores of people stepped out of the Mayfair’s disembarkation rooms and entered the wide corridors of his vast ship.

For some, it was their first time aboard a vessel. For all of them surely, he thought, it was their first time aboard a naval vessel. Unless they were old enough to have fought in the war . . .

No, the captain thought, idly watching the surveillance holo. The vast majority of these people taking up the Republic’s offer were young and unestablished types. He saw very few families boarding. On occasion, a retired couple seeking a change in scenery might show up. But most were young and aimless.

Clothes were considered, as were food and drink. The holds normally housing Marine battle bots had been converted into a vast shopping mall, complete with clothing stores featuring a wide variety of sizes.

Beauty salons, barber shops, bowling alleys . . . all sorts of retail and entertainment outlets catering to all manner of personal needs and desires had been installed aboard the ship.

Then of course, a full complement of virtual entertainment, free like everything else aboard the Harvey Mayfair.

He watched as young people streamed through, all ported in. Their luggage would be coming up later, delivered to their staterooms by bot. The same system designed to move sailors and Marines between the ship and the surface now worked overtime to load up passengers for what amounted to a two-month pleasure cruise on the government's credit.

“And sometimes we will encourage them to come aboard with minimal clothing. They can show up with whatever is on their back and nothing else. Because of course they can pick up whatever they need over the next couple months in transit, all for free thanks to our friends in the Republican Navy and Harrington House.”

He smiled at that thought.

“Our tax dollars at work. Although, I suppose this is as good a cause as any. Maybe we can keep yet another planet out of League hands. Filthy socialists.”

A timer floated in another holo, counting down the moment to departure.

And still the passengers flowed in, fulfilling PLAIR's prediction. Lots of people were taking the deal, seeking a month of free entertainment for very little work.

Green lights appeared above embarkation room doors. They opened and spilled out people, only to close and wait for even more passengers to port up to the ship.

Everybody would be assigned their own cabins. The ship had enough space to accommodate all these people and more. Bots would patrol the halls and keep the peace. Nobody would want for anything, and they could get off on whatever planet they wanted on the way back home.

Delaunay knew that some would be using the trip as a means to get a free ride to another planet. Diego would be a popular destination. And even though they might spend three or four weeks on the ship, in real time they would be showing up tomorrow in Octavia.

He stretched, continuing to watch the crowd. The timer kept ticking down.

At last, the stream of people slowed to a trickle as the final stragglers came in.

Luggage, Delaunay knew, would be ported into one of the holds. For now, everyone enjoyed themselves with free drinks in the former battle bot hold, taking in the sights of all the free shops, bars and restaurants that would be open for them the entire trip.

Delaunay smiled.

“Alright. If everyone is onboard who is coming aboard, then let us depart, PLAIR. We’ve got an election to swing.”

“Preparing to enter hyperspace in three, two, one . . .”

Delaunay watched the front holo, waiting for the image of the planet below to disappear and be replaced by stars winking by as the ship teleported one AU at a time.

Nothing happened.

“PLAIR? Why are we still here?”

“Something is wrong with the Machro-drive, Captain Delaunay. I cannot make it work.”

Delaunay’s back tensed up.

“Can we teleport?”

“Yes. We cannot slip into hypertime, however.”

“Alright. Get us out of here. Let’s assess the situation from a safe location.”

The Mayfair popped out of orbit. The ship continued jumping twenty more AUs until she was out of the solar system.

Here the Mayfair stopped in the dead of space.

A team of human engineers rushed to her engine room to inspect the ship’s Machro-drive.

11.24

“So, it’s understood?”

Casper Slodovich nodded his head.

“Yeah, it’s no problem.”

Valerian Pavlikov, the League’s fleet representative for State Security and Intelligence, gave the older man a dubious stare.

“No really,” Casper said, running fingers through his graying flattop.

He still maintained a muscular build and a military haircut from his days in the League Expeditionary and Army Forces during the war. Val admired him for staying in shape despite his advancing years, but he said nothing about that at the moment.

Joachim Xu, the third person in Casper’s spacious apartments for this meeting in the Projects, crossed his arms. He, too, expressed doubt about Casper’s abilities in his body language.

Xu said, “I’m sorry, Mr. Slodovich. But I have it on good authority that just about everybody in the Southside Projects has taken one of these Lisa implants. My deputies tell me crime is down precipitously. It seems everyone is watching holos or catching up on other forms of entertainment instead of wandering around and committing larceny.”

“I know. Business is down at Tay-hoe’s, too. The people that still want to get laid or get drunk in real life are still showin’ up, though.”

Xu raised his eyebrows at the vulgar nature the conversation had turned.

Val kept his eyes steadily fixed on Casper, though.

He said, “What assurances do you have that your people will vote our way, despite their taking the Alliance propaganda?”

“You’re gonna pay them, right?”

Casper nodded. He had already appropriated half a million credits for this election, transferring it to a government account in the First Galactic branch here in town.

It was a stunning amount. But it showed that the powers on Clarion remained determined to add another planet to their diminished fold. He felt the weight of responsibility on his shoulders to deliver Phaethon to them.

At the same time, he felt more than a little helpless as he exchanged a glance with Xu.

“I’m afraid your assurances seem to be failing to persuade Hizzoner here that you can deliver on those promises, Mr. Slodovich.”

Casper said, “Look, years ago Reynard Gliph started gathering followers, selling them a snake oil tale of political grandeur. It was ideally suited for whatever an individual visualized the perfect government was for them. Do you hate taxes? There’d be no taxes. Do you hate regulations? There’d be no regulations. Do you hate havin’ an AI breathin’ down your neck every second of every day? There’d be no overbearing AI. In short, he promised whatever you wanted, if you followed him and helped him set up a society built on anarchy.”

He looked between the two men. They were still standing in his parlor, since he had not invited anyone to actually sit down. The prostitutes normally lounging here had been banned to one of the bedrooms for this visit.

“People with a low sense of self-worth, people looking for meaning in life and not finding it in their stupid jobs . . . people who didn’t want to stop working because that meant they’d end up as an indentured servant to pay off their debts . . . people who are easily persuaded, who will like the last thing they heard until somebody else comes along and says something better . . . these are the type of people who were attracted to Glyph’s message. He painted a rosy picture for them, and he was able to get thousands to follow him out here.”

Xu coughed politely in his fist to interrupt.

“I think we all know the history of how you Southsiders came to be on Phaethon, Mr. Slodovich.”

“Well, think about that, Mr. Xu. Think about how feeble-minded so many of them are. And if I tell them that they are to vote for aligning with the League, and to vote you in as mayor . . . and if I tell them they have to show evidence they voted that way, or they don’t get the hundred credit token Mr. SSI here has promised them . . . then trust me. They will vote the way I tell them to.”

Xu and Val exchanged a glance again.

Val nodded and said, “We’ll have armed guards in the projects on voting day. We’ll present hundred-credit tokens to anyone showing a ballot receipt indicating they voted for the League.”

“And for me.”

“And for you, Mr. Xu.”

Xu gave him a sharp look, as if not really believing him.

“I bet you give those tokens out if they show they voted for the League, regardless of who they selected for mayor.”

“You have sided with us from the beginning. I seriously doubt anyone voting League will vote for one of your opponents. You have little to worry about on our end, Mr. Xu.”

Xu nodded, reluctantly.

Val turned back to Casper.

“We will, of course, kill anyone trying to rob us of our tokens. We’ll have guard bots as well as every SSI person available, fully authorized to use force.”

Casper gave him a semi-shocked expression, mixed with feigned innocence.

“Our people would never think of robbing a government institution!”

Val snorted derisively.

“Right. I’ve heard about all the bank robberies in this town. I supposed those weren’t ‘government institutions,’ though. My warning stands. We’ll shoot to kill.”

Val and Xu turned to leave, walking out the door of the luxury apartment and back into the dreary hallway of the tenement building.

“I don’t trust him any farther than I can throw him,” Xu said softly as they reached the door to the street.

Both men stood at the top of the steps. Val had a black taxicab waiting for him. Xu had a deputy in his squad car waiting there, one of the few remaining ones available.

“It’s going to be a close thing, Mr. Xu. Our only hope, really, is that this bid by the Alliance to bring Phaethon into their membership will syphon off enough Republican votes that we have a chance. I have other teams in the four major cities on this continent spreading word of our inducements as we speak. We should be able to buy enough votes that way. I hope.”

“They’re seeing everything this so-called Alliance can do for them every day they use those blasted implants.”

Val nodded.

“Yes, but cold hard cash is still the strongest inducement. Our people will be outside the polling places with tokens in hand, ready to freely give them to anyone showing they voted our way. It should make an impact, easy money always does. But how big of an impact remains to be seen. Hopefully, it will be enough.”

“We’ll see, Mr. Pavlikov. We’ll see.”

11.25

“I don’t think you understand, Mr. Kim. We are under a deadline here. Our need to depart into hyperspace is critical. Every hour counts. And my engineers are telling me the problem lies within a circuit introduced by your company. I needed to leave an hour ago, and I am still stuck in real time thanks to your infernal . . . patented . . . whatever it is. You made this thing. *You* need to make it work.”

Delaunay stood before the holo showing Anthony Kim on Lute. He waved his hands in frustration, having to deal with a civilian.

Anthony Kim wasn’t even a Republican. The only reason Delaunay spoke with him at all was the man’s brilliant designs were a part of his ship.

Right now, this man appeared to hold the only promise of a quick fix. There were no spare Machro-drives. Nothing his people looked at made any sense. At least, the reports he kept getting back from his engineers seemed like gobbledygook to a man studying modern space warfare in the Academy rather than chronologistics and teleportation sciences.

Speaking of engineers, Captain Delaunay found himself growing increasingly irritated at the calm, cool and collected one staring back at him over the holo call.

Part of it probably has to do with the fact I can’t order him to do anything, Delaunay thought. But still, this is his company that made the

improvements to our drive. That makes it all his fault, and he needs to fix it if our guys cannot.

Anthony replied in a calm, soothing voice which did nothing to lower Delaunay's blood pressure.

"I deeply regret any inconvenience you and the Republican Navy are experiencing, Captain. However, I can assure you that my company had no part in the *construction* of the Machro-drive aboard the Mayfair or the drives aboard any other Republican naval ship. As you are fully aware, the construction of ships in your armada is tightly controlled by Republican Shipworks, with several layers of bureaucratic safety regulations. Nothing went into the Harvey Mayfair that was not installed by your own robots or men. Furthermore, as far as I am aware, the Mayfair has received no additional parts while at ports of call that could in any possible way disrupt or . . . contaminate, for lack of a better word, your Wu or Machro drives."

Delaunay waved all this aside, making an impatient gesture with his hand.

"Yes, yes, yes. I am aware of the stories about how you pirates were able to place bugged parts on League ships in port. I know that is not the case here."

"Was that a Lutian, plot you are referring to, sir? Or was that a Republican Naval Intelligence plot? I admit in my old age I am starting to forget many of the details of the war, and the Ultima Mule's part in our victory."

Delaunay bit off a curse, stopping himself short before he blurted out a whole string of profanities on the call.

"Look, we both know RNI worked hand-in-hand with the Lutian pirates to help us win the war. Now, don't get off topic on me. I need you out here to fix this thing. You personally, Mr. Kim. And I need you here yesterday. Unless you think you can remote in somehow. We can put your avatar in the engine room if you think that will help. You'll have eyes and ears onsite and you can guide my boys, help them fix this thing. That would be the fastest way."

Kim shook his head.

“I’m afraid a remote session is not advisable. We’re talking about possible repairs at the molecular level, and we don’t have a virtual presence good enough for me to be able to see everything clearly. Nor do you have the proper toolset to address the problem. You are correct that my physical presence is needed. We especially want to make sure this repair is done right, and not have some half-hearted effort using the wrong tools fail on you in route to your objective. That might leave you stranded somewhere in real time a couple hours from now.”

Delaunay blinked. He looked like he had not thought of the possibility of further delays.

Anthony continued.

“Have your men continue attempting to isolate the problem. I will be there to assist with the appropriate tools as soon as I can. I will take a Machro-equipped ship from Lute and be there shortly.”

“Good. Make it snappy! I’ve got a boatload of people that I need to deliver to that frontier planet in a timely manner.”

“I will do my best, Captain Delaunay.”

11.26

When the holo flickered off in Anthony Kim's workshop, he looked down at Ferris, the young engineer.

"The election is in about three days. Let's round things out to make the math easy and say it's in 70 hours. In real time, the Mayfair will arrive at Phaethon in five hours whenever it leaves using hypertime. But they won't leave until I get to their spot out in space near Epsilon and 'fix' their problem. That will take me five real hours to reach, also using hypertime. I will act dumb upon arrival and insist they return to orbit around Epsilon, and otherwise make up some reasons to delay things for another two hours or so. So, we're looking at the arrival of immigrants before election day taking a minimum of twelve hours from right now."

"That's not enough, sir. Not if you're trying to delay the arrival of all those people."

"Correct. We've got to kill an additional 58 hours, and it's not feasible under these conditions. So, this is what we're going to do."

Anthony walked over to a desk and pulled open a drawer, retrieving a handgun and a visor. The young man watched him, eyes growing wide as he returned to the workstation.

"How much do you make a year? You're new. Do we pay you thirty?"

The young man nodded, his eyes still fixed on the gun.

“That’s a good sum, more than double the typical unskilled worker. But I’m going to give you a bonus of a hundred thousand credits if you do exactly as I say in the next few minutes.”

Ferris looked up at Anthony from his seat with a mixture of hope and trepidation.

“What do you want me to do, sir?”

“First, put this visor on.”

He handed it over and the young man dutifully pulled it down over his face. It covered everything from the top of his head to the bottom of his neck in a dark, opaque screen.

“Now, take the portable card with the schematics you’ve been working on.”

“Sir?”

“Take it and put it in your pocket. You’re taking it with you when you leave. Stealing it, as it were.”

The engineer nodded, reaching over and placing a finger on a holo button floating above the workstation. A tiny polymer rectangle popped up from a slot on the desk as the holo winked out. He grabbed it with his thumb and forefinger.

“Put it in your pocket,” Anthony said, setting the gun down on the table.

“Now, pick up the gun.”

“Sir?”

“Just do it. Don’t ask questions. You can take a couple weeks off, starting today.”

The young man picked up the gun, pointing it down at the floor. Anthony put his hands up and backed up a few steps.

“Now, listen to me carefully. I want you to shoot me in the leg, in the knee.”

“I can’t . . .”

“Don’t worry. Nanobots will fix me up, but it will take a while because all that bone and cartilage will need to be replaced. We’ll see what the doctor says when I check into the hospital here in a bit. He will probably keep me there for much of that 50 hours.”

Realization dawned on the young man’s face as Anthony’s plan suddenly became clear.

“Then I want you to go take that holiday. Bring those schematics with you. Disappear for a while. Maybe go to the Peckindale Resort in the Bountiful Mountains. Have you ever been there?”

Ferris shook his head.

“Let them know you work for me and that you’re on a project requested by Captain Christopher Raleigh, of the Ultima Mule. They’ll let you stay for free, billing your charges to him. He owns the place. Remain there for a couple weeks, then show back up here for work. I’ll see to it you get that bonus after you return.”

“I kinda see what you’re doing here, sir. But you know everything’s being recorded in the office.”

“I know. That’s why the part that LuteNet will show the Republican Navy will have you wearing that visor, when you shoot me in the knee and thus delay my arrival to help repair the Harvey Mayfair.”

The young man’s head remained tilted down, face still covered by the visor, as he thought it over for a moment.

“Not gonna lie. I really hate to be the one to do this to you, sir.”

“Cheer up. You’re getting a lot of money for all the pain you’re about to cause me. And when else are you going to be able to literally shoot the boss and get away with it? Now, I’m going to go sit down. Careful where you aim. Be sure and get the knee. For goodness sake, don’t make it where you have to shoot me twice. And don’t go higher up the leg. It’s got to be the knee, do you understand?”

A minute later, a visor-clad thief fled Subtle Service's Port Ryan offices carrying the molecular plans for improvements to a Machro-drive.

He left behind a screaming Anthony Kim, bellowing out an extraordinary combination of four-letter words, gripping a bloody and shattered left kneecap.

11.27

Two covered trucks pulled up to the church near the crossroads, the Phaethon Solar Corp. logo plastered on their sides.

Tom drove up in the old red truck from the opposite direction down the North Road. Gwen and Claire sat in the front with him. He parked beside the larger trucks and everyone got out to watch several men unloading boxes.

All present wore PSC vests made from sand dragon skin.

“This is gonna be perfect,” Gwen said. “It’ll be better than ours was.”

Tom nodded and said, “Well, things are more established now. Certainly the decorations are going to be nicer. I brought these over from League City.”

He did not mention they had to be teleported between Warehouse Fourteen in LC to their warehouses at the docks near Little York in order to make it on time. As far as anyone else knew, the party supplies and flowers and decorations were already over here when his men picked them up this morning.

At the sound of all the hubbub, Pastor Leo stepped out of his parsonage, the cute little house built off to one side of the church proper.

Claire waved at him and headed his way. They met and chatted amiably while the men continued unloading the trucks.

Gwen said, "Hmph. She is going to be no help, I can tell."

Tom glanced at the graduate student talking with the preacher.

"You think she's sweet on Pastor Leo?"

Gwen turned and frowned at Tom.

"You can't be serious. You don't see that? They're both throwing off more signals than a lighthouse. It was that way last time we came out here. Why do you think she wanted to come along today?"

"Hm. I guess. Seems like an odd match. She's a biologist, an exobiologist. What do preachers study? The humanities? Don't they get doctorates of divinity or some such? I know they study Hebrew and Greek."

Another flatbed truck pulled up, this one driven by Silas. Inside the cab with him were Lola and Jinxie. In the back, Wink sat with Mateo Barnwell and all his men.

When they climbed out, Wink pointed at the trucks being unloaded and said a word to Mateo. He nodded and ordered four of his men to go help. The remainder stayed with Wink, arranged on either side and behind him.

The crowd from Silas's truck joined Tom and Gwen. Tom shook hands with the men while Gwen gave hugs to the two women.

Silas said, "Well, we're going to have a wedding here, again. You know, that's why this place was built, originally. I think Pastor Leo has put it to good use since then."

"It's the only church on this entire continent," Gwen said. "So, yeah. It sees a lot of use. I think he's pan-denominational. He can do just about anything except a Catholic wedding. People still have to go back to League City to the cathedral there for that."

Several people turned off the road on horseback at that moment. Everyone watched as two dozen women rode through the grass and approached the parked trucks.

At the front of the mounted procession rode Oma Ferguson, her stern features scowling at all the activity surrounding the covered trucks and the knot of young people clustered nearby.

She pulled up on the reins of her horse and dismounted along with the other women. One of them pulled out a handful of gravity stakes and put them on the ground. Everyone tied off their horses.

Tom said, “Hi Mrs. Ferguson! How are you, ma’am?”

“We heard there’s to be a wedding today.”

“Yes, ma’am. Wink here is tying the knot with Jinxie.”

The pair smiled at the old woman. She frowned back at them.

“I am here along with all the prominent women of Little York to make sure you do this right. I presume those are decorations your men are unloading?”

Tom nodded.

Oma turned to the women gathering around her now that everyone had secured their mounts. Unlike Oma, they looked happy to be here. They smiled at the church, at the young people present, and everything else.

Oma said, “Ladies, no time for chitchat. let’s get to work.”

As one, the throng moved toward the church. When they came to the first group of large boxes, they started opening them up, pulling out stringed lights, folding chairs, tables and wall decorations, artificial flowers, and everything else one might need for a big party.

As they worked, Oma sidled up next to Tom and Gwen.

She said, “The whole town is going to be here, you know.”

Tom nodded at her.

Oma scowled back at him.

“I don’t have enough food to feed everybody.”

“No worries, Mrs. Ferguson. We’ve got a cargo van coming full of boxed meals that we’re serving. Everybody who shows up will get poshbird along with some wedding cake.”

“Poshbird? That’s expensive.”

“Yeah, not for us. Dad owns a poshbird processing facility back home. We’ve got it coming out our ears. I tell you what, for helping us decorate, you can have all the leftover boxes after the reception. Maybe it’ll help restore your food supplies at the pub.”

Oma raised her eyebrows.

Then, for the first time this morning, she smiled.

11.28

Two days before the election, a wedding took place in a church outside Little York.

Practically everyone in town attended.

Men from Phaethon Solar erected a pole with a sensor for Lisa out in the pasture. She had been operating on mini-sensors scattered around the area, but the pole let everyone know they could use their implants out here.

It also helped explain the interplanetary connection made back to Petra Roe for an expensive telepresence call.

People streamed in from Little York, filling the church. Not many there had ever met Wink or Jinxie, but everyone heard about the free food and open invitation. The pews were soon packed.

The church's interior had been thoroughly decked out with a white flower motif, including mums placed at the ends of each pew and strings of white flowers draped with care across all the windows.

At the front, on either side of the black columns comprised of thousands of Micabots, a beautiful arch made of native white peony variants stood in the center of the dais.

There, an uncharacteristically nervous Wink stood, dressed in a black tux. Beside him, Leo stood also wearing black, a silver cross hanging from his collared neck and catching the light. In his hands he held an old-style leatherbound Bible.

All around the room, Mateo's guards stood with their backs against the wall, watching the crowd for any signs of trouble. Mateo himself stubbornly remained beside Wink, although he was not officially part of the wedding party.

The front pews had been reserved. Here, telepresent avatars from Petra Roe sat, watching everything back home through their neural feeds.

Jinxie, it turned out, was an orphan. She had invited the director of the orphanage she grew up in to be there, along with his wife and two daughters. She also invited a teacher from high school she had grown close to, along with that woman's husband. All but the director were seated on the bride's side of the aisle.

On the groom's side, avatars for Wink's parents were present along with his aunt Isabella and her husband.

In an official state wedding, he explained to Tom when setting up the call, a lot more people would be present. His mother would likely insist on another ceremony when they got home, or perhaps he could talk her into a state reception instead.

At any rate, the two couples were the only ones present from Petra Roe. Their avatars looked around the small church while keeping an eye on Wink.

Music fired up, this time from newly installed speakers in the church's ceilings, and everyone turned to the doors.

Tom and Gwen marched in. She served as Jinxie's matron of honor, Tom as Wink's best man. They made their way down the aisle, smiling at townsfolk along the way, then parted to either side at the dais.

Tom caught the prime minister's eye, and her avatar nodded politely at him.

He smiled while nodding back, realizing she recognized him and knew who he was.

Silas and Lola came through the door next. Jinxie had decided to keep her wedding party small, and although she could have invited several more couples to participate, she kept it to these two.

Young Hervé Alvarado, the young man who Tom made sure received his fair share of reward money for helping Marshal Metger capture Malcolm Dalmont, approached the dais next. Hervé served as ringbearer, holding a silk pillow with two locally produced rings supplied from Tom's mines.

Following him, two little girls from town spread flower petals along the aisle from little baskets they carried.

At last the music changed to the Bridal Chorus, and everyone stood up while simultaneously locking eyes on the doors to the church.

They opened wide, and Jinxie walked in carrying a bouquet of flowers. The avatar of the orphanage's director stood beside her, smiling as he accompanied her to the front of the church.

All the blue was now completely gone from her hair, which had returned to a lustrous shade of brunette. The white wedding dress had been hastily imported from LC and adjusted onsite by Ingo Chan, the local leatherworker who could also serve as a tailor in a pinch.

One of the women in town had done up her hair, and it too was laced with white flowers.

To everyone present, even to the mother and aunt of the groom who were predisposed to automatically dislike her, Jinxie looked stunning.

After her old director gave her away, she joined Wink on the dais, smiling.

Leo turned his eyes to the crowd and his rich voice filled the church.

"Ladies and gentlemen, we are gathered together today under the eyes of our Creator, Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, to join two people in holy matrimony. Let us pray . . ."

11.29

“It’s less than 24 hours to election day, and tensions are running high in the city!”

Ash paused to catch his breath. He had been running from his apartment, panting, as his last remaining camera drone floated above and slightly behind him.

He turned and looked up. The drone dutifully tilted down to capture his face as he spoke to his live audience across the galaxy.

“The League has offered cash payments to anyone voting to join them. Show a receipt indicating your choice at the ballot box, and they’ll give you a hundred credits. I would hate to pass that information along, but it’s something everybody here knows about anyway, so I’m not influencing anybody one way or the other. I gotta tell you, though . . . I don’t think the League is getting as many takers as they expected.”

An angry roar flowed down the street.

Ash stopped talking and raced toward a crowd gathering on Courthouse Square. He slowed when he neared the building, taking it all in.

Two mobs faced each other on the Courthouse lawn, yelling epithets. Holosigns above the groups marked them as siding with the League and the Republic.

“For one thing,” Ash said while his camera stayed focused on the crowds, “voting is a private matter. Not many people want to take that holosheet given to them as a receipt and show it off to others. Still, a hundred credits is a strong incentive to some folks. It’s equivalent to almost a year’s pay for a lot of people out here. I’m told many of the city’s Southsiders, living in the projects, have said they’re taking up the offer and are going to vote for League alignment when the polls open.”

The crowds continued hollering abuse at either side, their emotions visibly escalating.

Someone tossed a bottle from the League side. It sailed overhead in a perfect arc and landed square on the forehead of a man on the other side.

Howls of outrage erupted from the Republicans. They surged forward, fists and sticks swinging.

“The protest has devolved into a brawl!”

Three deputies stood on top of the wide stairs leading up to the Courthouse door. One of them made a motion and the other two lifted portable rocket launchers up to their shoulders. Over the din of the melee, tinny thunks of cannister shots could be faintly heard.

Small cylinders arced out over the lawn the size of soda cans. They landed in the middle of the crowd and exploded in plumes of thick white gas.

“It looks like this time local police are better prepared for crowd control!”

People stopped fighting and started gagging on the gas. Coughing, eyes streaming, many scattered in confusion and chaos.

“Maybe they don’t need a lot of officers. Maybe they won’t even need Night Shadow this time. Certainly her exhortation to vote for the Alliance holds sway, especially with the other two sides acting like children today.”

Ash made himself stop talking. He was injecting his own personal opinions into the commentary.

But then he added, “And I say that as someone who is pro-Republican.”

In for a penny, in for a pound, he thought.

“But this is not something worth starting a fight over. I think most of the pro-Republic voters here in League City would agree with me on that. This is a small minority on both sides who are the most vocal, and consequently, they’re causing the most trouble.”

His camera panned the crowd, now widely dispersed. Most had been League agitators. They headed south, back toward the projects. But a knot of people hovered at the edges of the lawn, waiting for the smoke to disperse.

“It looks like people are willing to make a stand here tonight, one way or another. And Courthouse Square marks the geographic center of government for the entire planet. In just two days from now, in a few short hours really, the electorate will decide which way this building you see in your holos will align.”

Ash watched as a few minor scuffles broke out on the periphery of the smoke. But the two sides did not gather in force while the gas remained on the ground.

“It’s not going away, ladies and gentlemen. I think this must be that new crowd control measure that uses special airborne nanobots to keep an irritant cloud in place, even in breezy weather. Yes, that must be what’s happening. I’ll try to interview the sheriff tomorrow and ask him about this. Looks like our local law enforcement is better prepared than they were before . . .”

11.30

Anthony Kim switched off the live feed of the Zeitung broadcast from Phaethon.

He sat in a chair inside a sterile white hospital room. Nearby, the bed remained empty. A monitoring probe hovered over his knee.

Gingerly, he lifted his left foot up off the floor, and bent the knee.

He grimaced with a twinge of pain.

Nearby, a doc bot watched him carefully, then glanced at a holo displaying a readout from the floating probe.

“Everything looks good. You are free to go, Mr. Kim.”

“Are you sure? Maybe I should stay here a while longer and let you check things over again tomorrow.”

“Any additional healing will not require medical attention. All reconstruction is complete. You can put weight on your leg. Discomfort will go away with time. You are free to go, Mr. Kim.”

Anthony sighed.

His inner eye lit up as LuteNet spoke through his implant.

“Anthony, you have a call from Captain Delaunay of the Mayfair.”

He sighed. The Republican naval officer had called him multiple times lately. He knew the Captain was starting to grow desperate.

“Put him through, Lootie.”

Delaunay started talking as soon as the connection was established, not even bothering with an introductory salutation.

“Are you ready to get over here, Kim? I’m running out of time. You can finish healing up in hypertime on the way out here, you know. In fact, I wish you had seen a doctor on your ship. This was a needless delay.”

Kim grimaced again, but not in pain this time.

“I am on my way as we speak, Captain. I expect to be onsite and in your ship’s engine room in six hours.”

“Make it five. I need to be on my way before this election is over!”

“I am headed ‘upstairs’ as you navy people like to say. It will take some time to go through Port Ryan’s departure procedures at the spaceport. But rest assured, Captain, I am on the way and headed in your direction.”

“Fine. I will expect you here in six hours, then. But not a minute later than that!”

“Your people still have not been able to pinpoint any causes to your problem?”

“They’re telling me it’s something to do with the molecular structures used in *your* circuit, the one *you* designed. They’ve pinpointed that, at least.”

“Right. Very well, Captain. I am on my way and I will see you soon.”

Delaunay killed the connection and Anthony sighed.

He stood up, gingerly placing weight on his left leg.

The artificial osteoblasts in the nanobots injected into his system had done a remarkable job reconstructing his knee, to an extent not possible even a few short years ago.

But it still hurt.

And the fact that it hurt made his delay all the more plausible to Delauny, Anthony thought. Anyone who had suffered these types of injuries knew that knees hurt the most. Backs could hurt, too, but Anthony had been unwilling to take a shot in the back. That was too close to vital organs for comfort.

Video of the visored man taking the card and shooting him had been released by LuteNet to PLAIR. No doubt Delauny had reviewed it, wondering what was taking Anthony so long to leave, and doublechecking his story.

Anthony had seen the recording himself, and thought the young engineer had done an admirable job playing his part as a thieving, murderous scumbag. Right now, the lad should be sipping on cocktails at the Peckindale Resort several hundred clicks from Port Ryan. In a way, Kim envied him the rest and relaxation.

That resort is owned by the Raleigh family, Anthony thought as he carefully put more weight on his knee. I'll send them the bill he racks up, after this is all over. That is, if they haven't figured out to do so themselves by the hints I told him to drop.

He hobbled for the door, pausing to pick up a suitcase filled with clothes. The hypertime leg of his journey would indeed allow plenty of time for more healing, he thought. But he remained unhurried to start.

At the door he paused and double-checked to make sure no connection remained open back to the Mayfair or anywhere else in the Republic. Then he focused inward, and spoke to the AI.

"Oh, and Lootie?"

"Yes, Mr. Kim?"

"Could I trouble you to arrange some sort of delay at the spaceport for me? I think you are aware of what's at stake here."

"Yes, Mr. Kim. I will see to it that I will be unable to port anyone up into orbit or back to the surface for several hours."

Anthony smiled as he carefully limped out the door.

“Thanks, Lootie.”

11.31

Holographic avatars had a long history, dating back to early video games in the 20th century. Those early avatars would appear as a character in the game, wholly controlled by a human watching outside the game.

As gaming technology progressed, a separate but parallel concept grew up alongside it, the notion of telepresence. Videophones were first commercialized by American Telephone & Telegraph, debuting as a product regular people could buy at the 1964 World's Fair. But widespread adoption of the concept did not occur until high-speed internet and the popularization of conference call software matured in the early 21st century.

With the advances in visualization modalities of more recent decades, avatars could appear not only in games but in real life as well. A perfect representation of a person could show up at a distance, even on another planet using the quantum matrix. These avatars could see and hear everything taking place just as well as the person could if they were physically present.

Lesser known, Anthony Kim thought as a taxi drone whisked him above the sprawling city of Port Ryan 300 meters above the tallest buildings, was the fact that AIs could project themselves into the physical world using similar technology.

They just rarely chose to do so. Thanks to processing cycles which could be divided into milliseconds, AIs could approximate a sort of omnipresence. Running themselves in one spot as an avatar would take up considerably more cycles, and the need for such an extreme measure rarely presented itself.

Anthony had read the official history of the Cold War, having served on the Lutian side of the conflict and finding some interest in it like many other veterans. From what he understood, StarCen took an active role in the “corruption” of the Verberger bot named Miriam, that special one-off production Jean Ngo had designed to think and act purely human.

When the AI did this while advising Miriam in her leadership role as Jade Thrall, in the waning days of the Old League before Republican special forces initiated a reboot of the AI, StarCen often appeared as an avatar to speak with Jade.

Perhaps the artificial intelligence held some affinity for this artificial person she was using to control the League, and thus wished to speak with her manmade comrade face-to-face.

Whatever the reason, Anthony knew that such shenanigans were rare by AI standards. Maybe PLAIR had appeared as an avatar before. He did not know. He also did not know if LuteNet had done so. Somehow, he doubted it.

However right now, if he had to guess . . . Right now LuteNet was using avatars to do . . . something . . .

He turned up the volume on his personal holo, watching the news as all eyes on Lute turned to their spaceport.

Anthony smiled.

-+-

The images of two men shimmered into existence, with a flurry of electronic horizontal lines moving up and down.

Fully materialized, they stood inside the ready room for Port Ryan Spaceport security personnel.

They had generic faces, with neutral skin tones and the same shade of brown hair shared by approximately 36 percent of the human race.

Then, just to cover her tracks further, lines shimmered over their faces and LuteNet put images of visors over their heads, precluding any efforts at identification by either PLAIR or StarNet should the other AIs investigate further.

She unlocked storage lockers in the room, making a quiet *clink* echo in the confined space. Then panels lifted, revealing hundreds of guns.

Lines shimmered around the avatars' hands, further solidifying them. As one, they turned toward the armory along one wall of the room as the doors slid up.

They approached, pulling down one sidearm each. Then they headed for the door and broke into a run while brandishing the guns.

11.32

The sight of two armed and masked men running down the main corridor of Port Ryan's spaceport was enough to elicit widespread panic.

People screamed and dove under chairs or ran in the opposite direction.

“Gun! He's got a gun!”

LuteNet helpfully set off the port's alarm, making all the lights flash red, pulsing in time with a loud klaxon. She sealed all the hallway doors and focused her security cameras on the running avatars.

As an AI, LuteNet had decades to study human violence, both in real life and in the ever-popular realistic games taking place in cyberspace. She put all that knowledge now into creating an incident at the spaceport.

An incident requiring it to shut down for an extended period of time.

Inside the nearest men's room, currently vacant, horizontal lines appeared and shimmered again. When they stopped, the representations of four security guards stood there, complete with guns, body armor and black caps to obscure their faces from the cameras.

These new avatars ran out into the main corridor and turned toward the first two. They spread out and drew their “weapons,” firing “bolts” through the air at the intruders.

The fake bolts missed, of course. But they came convincingly close.

The two attackers split and dove for cover as horrified bystanders watched. When they came up with real guns, they laid down careful return fire that avoided hitting any real persons.

The security avatars were not so lucky, though. Whenever a bolt hit one of them, their bodies burst open with realistic splatters of blood and guts.

In fact, LuteNet might have gone overboard in her display of gore, tweaking the results with each shot to look more and more gruesome for the broadcast she sent out to the planet and the rest of the galaxy.

Two real security guards ran around the bend just in time to see the last avatar take a direct shot in the gut. It burst open with copious blood splattering everywhere, then the stomach, lungs and entrails blew out in a brilliant display of red, blue and gray.

Cursing, the men dove to either side of the corridor for cover and tried to return fire. The bolts sailed over the heads of people lying flat on the floor, screaming and sobbing.

LuteNet made her attacker avatars hide so the real security guards could not see them.

Then her voice came over the speakers overhead.

“All passengers and all personnel. Evacuate the spaceport. Evacuate the spaceport. Evacuate the spaceport.”

Emergency exits slid open. Sections of wall seemed to disappear, leading directly outside.

Heads popped up from behind furniture, trying to pinpoint the gunmen. But no shots rang out.

A couple people made a run for it, racing out the sections of wall now open to the outside. Then a flood of people rushed out, everyone ducking low in case the shooting started again.

When LuteNet determined no one remained in the area, save the two real life security personnel, she slid the outside walls shut again.

The lights and the klaxon continued.

Outside, Port Ryan police streamed toward the spaceport, every squad car in the city flying there with lights flashing.

News crews from all three governmental systems raced toward the scene too, eager to get the scoop on something exciting finally happening in this sleepy and isolated capital city.

Anthony's taxi landed, settling down vertically on top of a parking garage near the spaceport. From this distance, the building looked like an upside-down cereal bowl, he thought.

He swiped the holo in the backseat, approving the fare to be deducted from his personal account, and stepped out of the car.

From here he watched as the emergency exits in the walls slid shut. People continued running away from the spaceport, seeking safety as they crossed the open spaces alongside the outer walls.

Even at this distance, he could hear the klaxon ringing and see the red pulse of the overhead lights inside.

A message came over his implant. He turned inward to read it.

"At this time, all passengers waiting to embark or disembark from Port Ryan should be advised the spaceport is closed until further notice."

His feed switched over to the local news, already showing the scenes of the staged shootout captured by security cameras inside the facility's main corridor.

He smiled at the fake carnage.

For a moment he even forgot the lingering pain in his left knee.

"Good job, Lootie. Good job."

11.33

“**A**nd so, the Alliance was born. With the absolute minimum involvement of government affairs in the everyday affairs of all citizens, the Alliance is based on a solid foundation of libertarian principles, within the framework of a modern representative democracy.”

The rich baritone voice stopped speaking, replaced by strong notes of patriotic music.

Two words appeared in the distance, growing larger as the music reached its crescendo: “Vote Alliance!”

“It’s a pretty good ad,” Jillian Thrall Raleigh said over a connection with her son.

“Yeah. LuteNet has another one,” Tom said, “where she highlights the fact that people will be left alone by the government if they’re under the Alliance umbrella. Not sure it tugs at the heartstrings like this one does, though.”

“So long as the message gets through. I admit the Republic is not bad, and if I only had two choices, I’d pick them over the League any day. And I used to live in the League.”

Tom nodded. He knew that his mother was one of Tetrarch Thrall’s real daughters. She and his Aunt Julia had rebelled against his grandfather,

joining the Resistance during the war.

His mother had helped to thwart one of her father's more perfidious schemes, to corrupt the biocollars of indentured servants to make them more compliant.

That little incident, along with many of the stories about other things his grandfather had pulled, made him ashamed of his maternal heritage. He rarely mentioned to anyone that he was a direct descendent of Julius Thrall.

In his mind, it was nothing to be proud of.

"Well this time, at least, there are *three* choices. We think it's gonna be a close thing, even so."

"What's the breakdown looking like, Tom?"

"Mark, our accounting bot, is keeping track of what Lisa is seeing and hearing. According to his projections, with less than a day to go now, we'll have anywhere from a third to 40 percent of people voting to align with the Republic."

"That many? That seems high."

"I thought so, too. Especially with the widespread adoption of Lisa's implants. But Mark says the people voting Republican are thinking that they'll just get new implants aligning with PLAIR when that happens. Apparently the Elsa Cole, still in orbit up there, has tons of them, along with cores for PLAIR. Captain Falco, who runs the show up there, has let it be known in an interview Ash had with him earlier in the day, that they are prepared to set up PLAIR's sensors immediately after the election if they win. Like, within hours of the polls closing."

"That was awfully nice of him to broadcast those intentions ahead of time."

Tom nodded.

"I suggested that maybe with the nonstop propaganda Lootie has been piping in through Lisa's entertainment feeds, that maybe we'd turn some more Republican-minded voters our way. That's when Mark went into this big long spiel about 'habitual voting patterns.' He brought up some old

group called the ‘Yellow Dog Democrats.’ Apparently, these were American voters back in the day who continued voting for the same party long after the Democrats completely changed their core values. These voters grew old, still voting the same way along the same party lines no matter what. He said most of the people who immigrated here from the Republic would likewise vote to stay in the Republic, because it’s the only thing they know. No amount of political ads is ever gonna sway them.”

“Okay. How many does he predict will vote for the League?”

“Another third, more or less. The Southsiders in League City will vote as a single block. Most of the merchants in town will probably go for us, if only because Lootie has been targeting them with ads comparing tax rates within the three system. The League has the highest taxes, because of socialism.”

Jillian smiled and said, “The Alliance has the lowest rate because we provide the fewest services and have a very lean bureaucracy.”

“Right. Others out in the hinterlands who will vote League will do so out of a sense of patriotism because that’s where they came from. Although Mark says Lootie remains hopeful we can pick some of those up. She’s been showing those people recent photos of SSI teams in League City.”

“Are they still looking for those tanks?”

“Yeah. And they still wear the same uniforms. It provokes a deep-seated revulsion among people who are old enough to remember the Old League and the SSI that existed before the reboot.”

“That should count for a significant percentage, I would think.”

“It would, except most of our immigrants from either the League or the Republic are too young to have been around when Granddad was running things.”

They both lapsed into silence for a moment.

Finally Jillian said, “So what you’re saying is, things are tied more or less equally, three ways.”

“Pretty much. I think everyone has made up their minds already which way they’re going to vote. It’s going to be a close thing. The only variable that might tip one side into a stronger majority and tilt the whole election their way is if a bunch of immigrants show up and register as citizens, then vote for that side.”

Jilian smiled and said, “Well, I don’t think you have anything to worry about in that regard. At least not with the Republic. Your father called in another favor with Anthony Kim . . .”

11.34

“I have less than twenty-four hours in real time to deliver these colonists to Phaethon, Mr. Kim.”

Anthony Kim stared at Captain Delaunay on the holo, admiring the man’s fortitude and patience.

But stress did show in the Captain’s face. Even the slight squinting, as the older man had a habit of doing, revealed a nervous tic. His left eyelid jerked ever so slightly.

However, Delaunay managed to keep his voice calm.

Anthony nodded at him.

“My apologies, Captain. I’m sure you are aware of the incident going on right now in Port Ryan.”

“Get. To. Another. Port. Take a transport. I don’t care how you do it, Mr. Kim, but get on that ship of yours and get over here. I am running out of time.”

“Absolutely, Captain. Events have spiraled out of my control, I’m afraid. Nonetheless, be rest assured that within hypertime you will have a far greater opportunity to meet your deadline than you otherwise would have.”

“I would . . . *if I could get into hypertime!*”

And that was the loudest Anthony had heard Delaunay speak, so far.

With a visible effort, the Captain controlled himself. He wiped sweat off his face with a handkerchief and recomposed himself.

“I will see to it that you do indeed launch into hypertime before your deadline, Captain. Have no angst. I am told that security forces have almost finished their sweep of the spaceport and travel will once again be allowed. As soon as the greenlight is given, I will port up and leave, arriving at your destination within hours.”

Delaunay wiped his face again. Anthony noted a slight tremor in his hand as he did so.

“Good. See to it that you do.”

“Tell me, Captain. Have your men made any progress in isolating the issue, beyond suggesting my schematics are at fault?”

“No. And they are certain that your ‘improvements’ are to blame. Something in there is gumming up the whole works, but they haven’t isolated it yet.”

“That’s odd, seeing as how no other ship is experiencing a similar situation with their Machro-drives.”

Delaunay nodded.

“We have discussed bringing in another navy vessel to ferry people over, but the only one big enough is the Cole, and she is otherwise disposed, already onsite. To retrofit her for passenger use would be time and cost prohibitive. So, I have the only ship in the Navy that can do the job. But it’s broken somehow. And that puts me at your mercy.”

“I see. Well, never fear. Even though I have not seen a problem such as this one before in my life, I am sure that once I arrive I shall be able to have you going in no time.”

The news holo Anthony had playing in one corner came to life, with signs of additional fighting.

“Oh, my. It appears security personnel have uncovered another terror cell or something. Yes, there’s active shooting at the spaceport. But don’t you worry, Captain. I’m sure this will only delay things a few more hours.”

The tic in Delaunay’s eye grew progressively more pronounced.

-+-

Hours later, after four more surprise terror attacks at the spaceport, LuteNet finally declared the facility safe for travel once more.

Anthony did not make a holo call to Delaunay, suspecting the man looked even worse by now. So he put one in on voice only, instead. The relief in the man’s voice seemed evident when Anthony told him that help was, at long last, finally on the way.

LuteNet restricted embarkations to one teleportation room at the spaceport. Anthony dawdled on the way there, letting several politicians and VIPs port up to their respective ships ahead of him. He finally wandered inside the facility and let himself be taken “upstairs,” to a company ship called Bogue.

It was named after an American battleship used in World War II to hunt Nazi U-boats. But the word “bogue” also meant to wander aimlessly, or for sails on a ship to lose wind.

Anthony thought this etymology was a delightful happenstance. He spent an hour preparing the ship for the jump into hypertime, checking all the robots onboard, ordering some last-minute supplies that had to be ported up from Port Ryan (slowly, since things were still backed up), and any other minutia he could think of to delay his departure.

At last he sent final word to Captain Delaunay that he was on the way. The Bogue popped out of orbit and reappeared one AU away, still in real time.

Half an hour later, Anthony wandered onto the bridge and looked over the ship’s course and settings.

“Oh, my. It appears I forgot to put us into hypertime.”

He brought up the personal clock on his implant, watching the seconds tick by.

After a long, long time, he nodded.

“Alright. I think we’re ready to engage the Machro-drive now, Lootie. No rush.”

The stars showing in the ship’s front holo blurred.

11.35

Six hours later, the Bogue at last popped into orbit above Epsilon.

Anthony burped, lightly. He sat in a chair on the bridge with his feet propped up on another chair, eating out of a bag of popcorn.

Over the last six weeks, in hypertime, he had grown a beard and had gained a little weight since getting off his typical exercise regime. He also raided the ship's supply of snacks on a regular basis.

"Oh, yay. Here we are."

He munched down the last of his popcorn and tossed the bag on the floor. A domestic bot rushed over and picked up the trash, flitting out of the room just as quietly.

They weren't supposed to have personalities, but he could have sworn the bots were also watching him warily, expecting him to go crazy any day now.

The front holo immediately lit up with an incoming call.

Anthony yawned and made a motion in the air, accepting the connection.

"What took you so long? You should have been here hours ago!"

“I apologize, Captain Delaunay. I had the wrong coordinates in the shipboard computer. I sort of arrived here in a roundabout manner that took a bit longer than expected. But have no fear. I am here now, and we still have plenty of time to get you on your way.”

“You are not at the coordinates I sent to you.”

“I’m not?”

“No. You are at Epsilon. I am 20 astronomical units outside of the solar system.”

“Oh. If I may be so bold, Captain, may I ask what you are doing out there?”

“This is standard procedure for a stranded ship, to prevent sabotage and protect from enemy attack.”

“I see, I see. Well, no worries. Please send me your coordinates once more and I will come to you.”

-+-

Anthony dawdled some more, using the excuse that he really needed to resupply his ship with food and water while in orbit. He had been traveling about twice as long as expected, after all.

That chewed up another half hour.

It would have taken longer, he thought, if PLAIR were not trying to be so helpful and move him along.

Finally, he made the jumps over to the coordinates Delaunay gave him, not bothering to switch back over into hypertime since the other ship was merely 20 seconds away.

Then there was some delay about getting him inside the giant Albatross-class vessel. Since different AIs controlled the two ships, teleportation was more difficult, but not impossible.

Anthony insisted on taking one of his own transports over instead.

The little transport immediately started circling the giant ship, seemingly lost. It tried to board through a maintenance aperture, only to be told by an exasperated Delaunay that Anthony should give up control of the transport to PLAIR so she could guide it in safely.

This took some fiddling, and after much hemming and hawing, Anthony at last ceded the transport's controls.

PLAIR quickly guided it to the appropriate landing dock, and the little craft blipped through a red forcefield on the side of the ship.

When an engineering team came out to meet him as he exited the transport, Anthony insisted on shaking each man's hand and asking them their names. He tried to learn something about their backgrounds, their personal stories.

He recognized one from some conferences they both attended, an older fellow, and he managed to engage the man in some light conversation about the way ships were built during the war versus the way they were built nowadays.

But after talking for about five minutes straight, one of the other men cleared his throat and suggested they really should be going.

Anthony agreed, but he still managed to walk slowly with them toward the engine room. And of course, they could go no faster than he would, so the whole procession made their way to the elevator pods at a snail's pace while he engaged in conversation.

Eventually, though, at long last Anthony walked into the appropriate spot in the belly of the ship. Here, he gazed down at a giant brown cube in the middle of a spherical room, with tentacle-like cables snaking into it from all sides.

"Would you look at that! My, it's a big one, isn't it? Alrighty, then. What seems to be the problem?"

All the engineers stared at him in astonishment.

"We were hoping you could tell us that, sir," the older man said.

He waved his hand, and a holo appeared off to one side showing a molecular schematic.

“We’ve isolated things down to this specific area on the diagram. It appears to be a holdup of some sort in these two molecules, here and here.”

Privately, Anthony felt impressed they had made this much progress.

“Well, why don’t you just swap those two out? That seems to be the obvious solution.”

The man shook his head.

“Can’t do it. They have to be modified correctly to allow the circuit to complete. The changes have to be made at a molecular level. No one here has that kind of skill. Or the tools. We do have some blank spares we can put in there, but we’re hoping you can recreate the missing pieces on the circuit board for us when we put those new pieces in.”

Anthony looked at the men present in the room, and the one woman. Each of them stared back at him with a mixture of awe and respect.

After all, there were engineers . . . and then there were engineers like Anthony Kim.

“I see. Well, I’ll get to work then. This may take some time, but not to worry.”

He checked his internal clock.

“Oops. You know what? I forgot my tools back in the transport. Let me just run back there and get them.”

11.36

“**H** yah!”

Over a hundred head of cattle lowed as a group of cowhands herded them toward the sea.

Six men on horseback guided the animals in a cluster, having worked now to bring them from the far pastures owned by the Dalmonts to their present location.

One jerked away from the others, doggedly heading off by herself in the wrong direction.

“I got her!” Malcolm yelled out, jerking his horse’s reins hard to the right.

The steed turned and followed the maverick as Malcolm dug his heels in, urging the animal to break into a gallop.

He pulled out a length of rod, 30 centimeters long and four in diameter, squeezing it to turn it on. A green energy rope snaked out of the cylinder, reaching across the space between rider and cow.

Near the bovine’s face it snapped, like a snake made of light.

The cow turned as the light lariat retracted.

Malcolm snapped his wrist again, sending another shiny green rope out and snapping it near the cow's face.

The animal turned again and headed back toward the herd.

He used the rope as a whip now, flicking it lightly and giving the cow a light snap on the rear, encouraging it to hurry up and join the others.

Within minutes, with the rebel back, Malcolm rejoined the other men pushing and cajoling the cows down toward the docks.

They came to the highway, a caliche road weaving its way from the bay to Little York. The cows tromped along, leaving their droppings on the white gravel and spoiling the view.

Rounding a bend, the land sloped down to a series of docks and warehouses, with water on the other side. Floating in the harbor there, a large cargo vessel waited, side doors open and ready to receive goods from the pier.

Someone approached on foot as they came into the "city limits" of the port. He spoke with the foreman at the front of the herd.

Malcolm was happy to let the cowhand be in charge. He was happier than he had been in months, in fact. He never knew how much he missed Phaethon until Metger hauled him back to Juventas.

He looked up into the hazy brown sky and smiled.

"This is the life."

Best of all, he was away from Lilith . . .

The foreman nodded. He turned in his saddle and whistled, making a twirling motion with one hand in the air. All the riders pulled on their reins and made their horses back away from the cows.

The man from the docks pulled out a device not unlike Malcolm's lariat of light. His cylinder topped out in a Y shape, though. He activated the device, and two beams of light shot out from the ends, meeting on the other side of the herd and joining in one circle that enveloped the cows.

A couple of them near the periphery startled and tried to bolt. They hit the thin green line and found they could not pass through.

With irritated moos, they stumbled back to the herd.

Thus ensnared, the man turned and pulled on the force circle, walking down toward the piers. The cows followed him.

The riders drifted toward one another once the cows left. Their work was mostly done. They watched as the fellow came up to the pier leading out to the Piker.

He stopped and fiddled with the controls, turning the force circle into an oval.

Cows lowed, complaining loudly, but they adjusted the shape of the herd accordingly.

He fiddled some more, coercing them into a long line conforming with the width of the pier. Then, carefully, he walked backward out over the water, the cows following. He very carefully did not let the lines of force go over the sides of the pier, so that no cow would fall off.

At the first giant cargo door, he hopped onboard and continued to back up into the hold. The cows followed, stepping off the pier and into the boat. Within minutes, they were all loaded onto the Piker.

“I’ll never get tired of seein’ that,” one of the cowpokes said, smiling. “One man leading an entire bunch of ’em like that.”

The others nodded.

Malcolm dismounted. He unstrapped the saddle bags and threw them over his shoulder.

“I’ll accompany the herd to New Galveston, and make sure they get there all accounted for. Y’all can take my horse back to the house.”

“You gonna fly home, Mr. Dalmont?” one of the men said. “That’d be the fastest.”

Malcolm shook his head.

“Nah. Too expensive. I’ll ride the boat back. I’ll see you boys later.”

He headed down toward the docks on foot.

When he reached the pier, Captain Boris Volkov stepped out of the cargo door and watched him approach.

Boris looked completely sober now, but he remained phlegmatic. His gray beard looked impeccable. Most of all, he looked clean.

When Malcolm drew near, he said, “You realize there’s an election tomorrow. If you come on this voyage, you won’t be able to vote for this planet’s alignment. The only way you’ll be able to vote is to pay for terrestrial teleportation to the nearest pub. That’s what I plan to do, anyway. Then you can port back to the ship. But that’s an expensive proposition, and you’ll need an implant to do it.”

Malcolm shrugged.

He said, “I don’t care about that. I just want to get away for a while.”

Boris cracked a rare smile. He waved a hand inside the giant opening and bowed.

“Then you’ve come to the right place. I’ve been getting away from it all on the seas of many worlds for all my life. Welcome aboard.”

Without looking back, Malcolm stepped onto the ship

11.37

The wind picked up out in the desert and the air grew hazy, reducing visibility to mere meters in any direction.

Not quite a full-blown dust storm yet, the increased wind this time of year often resulted in greater sand dragon activity, at least within the confines of the Skoni.

For the first time, Buddy ventured out of the area he had claimed for himself.

He moved slowly at first.

Guided by an uncanny internal sense of direction, he seemed confident he could find his way back again, no matter how dusty the air became.

Pausing on occasion, he sniffed the dusty atmosphere, sticking a tongue out sometimes for a taste.

His eyes remained covered with transparent lids, keeping them safe from the grit.

He listened, too, although mostly all he heard was howling wind and the patter of airborne particles hitting rocks.

Buddy kept moving, drawn toward something . . . something in the distance, but not *too* far away.

He smelled a very faint scent on the wind that felt familiar in a strange sort of way. Even though he had never smelled it before, somehow it called to him.

He sensed his own kind as he wandered, passing through territory that did not belong to him. Right now, all the sand dragons were on the move, and such trespassing was tolerated.

Mostly sand dragons waited for prey, covered in dust. But when the dust moved like this, they moved also, using it as an opportunity to hunt freely.

At last, the scent grew strong.

Buddy stopped, squinting, trying to add a visual confirmation to what he smelled in the haze.

He heard a crunch, and a green foot with black claws swam into view, sinking into the sand.

Then another.

A shape formed in the haze as a much larger sand dragon than Buddy seemed to materialize.

The big creature's head lowered, showing one milky eye as he too tried to get a visual on what he smelled.

Ordinarily, this little intruder would not dare venture into Big Ugly's territory.

Yet, the hints transmitted through both animals' olfactory glands suggested a familial connection.

Neither lizard quite understood everything as they both paused in the dust storm, sniffing and staring at one another.

They stretched their necks out and breathed, pulling in dust and scents as their noses brushed up against each other. The sensors strapped around both their necks came within spitting distance, too.

Then they pulled back, father and son staring at one another in something approximating approval.

Acquaintance having been made, Big Ugly lost interest. Buddy was not food, and he was hungry.

Big Ugly turned and resumed the hunt.

Buddy watched as the larger lizard melted back into the haze.

He snorted, emitting dual clouds of dust from his nostrils.

Then he too turned for home, keeping watch for prey all along the way.

-+-

“Well, that was touching.”

Dr. Darius Marin leaned back from the holo, smiling.

No cameras picked up the interaction between Buddy and his father. However, Lisa had managed to create a graphical representation of the action, as best she could “see” it through the sensors around the animals’ necks.

All the scientists in the farmhouse that served as their research station “watched” it unfold as it happened. They followed Buddy’s trek through the nearby desert, wondering what he was up to.

Dr. Tara Lewellen said, “You’ll notice no violence occurred, although we know that sand dragons will fight others of their own kind to protect their domain. This is worth noting.”

Zadok Enzo stood up first, smiling at the two older scientists.

“Well, I think it’s time to depart. I’m glad we were able to see that before we had to leave.”

Darius smiled at the graduate student.

“You seem so eager to get home, Zad.”

“Yeah, I’m not gonna lie Dr. M. I miss the comforts of home. And blue skies.”

Everyone turned to Claire Bolo, the other graduate student in their group.

She smiled and said, “I’m not a big fan of sunny weather. I get sunburned easy. Nope, not gonna miss that while I’m here. I’ll hold down the fort for you, Dr. Lewellen. Besides, it will give me plenty of time to write my dissertation.”

Darius nodded.

“It should be good material. I’m looking forward to reading Chapter One. I’m sure the rest of your committee will, as well.”

They heard a knock at the door and Tara moved to open it.

Outside, the wind had picked up. Silas Vick stood on the front porch, looking anxious.

“Hey folks, we’d better get goin’ before that dust storm decides to get any worse. Sand dragons like to leave the desert when it gets really bad, don’tcha know.”

The men sprang into action, moving the pile of suitcases near the front door out to the truck.

Everybody hugged Claire, promising to stay in touch. Then in a rush, they were all gone with Silas driving the truck to Little York so they could catch a sky train back to LC.

Claire watched them go from the doorway, then started to close it.

She heard a *pop*, and a man dressed all in black appeared on the porch, a white collar around his neck and a silver cross hanging from a chain.

“Ouch. I don’t think I’ll ever get used to that,” Leo said, shaking his head.

“Why, hello. What a pleasant surprise. Won’t you come in?”

The smile on Claire’s face indicated his presence was not, in fact, a surprise.

“Thanks. I thought they’d never leave. I was just waiting until Lisa told me the coast was clear.”

“How much do you have to pay for terrestrial teleportations like that?”
Claire said, shutting the door behind him as he walked inside the house.

“You know, that’s the funny thing. Lisa is not charging me.”

“She’s not?”

“No. It’s almost like she wants me to come visit you or something.”

“Well, we certainly don’t want to offend the resident AI.”

“No, we don’t.”

The pastor and the exobiologist smiled at one another.

He bent down and kissed her.

When they came up for air, she said, “Let me show you the latest thing
Buddy just did.”

Holding hands, they walked over to the holo, where Claire rewound the
latest recording half an hour back.

They sat down on the couch together, still holding hands, and watched.

11.38

“It’s election day, ladies and gentlemen! All polls are open across the planet. Stay tuned to the Zeitung all day as we track the results!”

Ash signed off, ready to take a break. He sat at the chair behind the news desk at the Zeitung-Phaethon office, the room’s camera no longer active.

Haley smiled at him as she walked in.

“You gonna go vote?”

“I don’t think so, sweetie. Wouldn’t be right. Journalistic ethics and all that.”

She walked over to the chair, bending down to kiss him on the forehead.

“You can vote for the Republic. No one would blame you.”

“Honestly, I’m not so sure the Republic is the best fit for this planet.”

“Did Night Shadow sway your thinking?”

He glanced up at her with a sharp look.

“Did you know that university students all across the Republic have been clamoring to come out here, just so they can vote for the Alliance? If the Alliance does win today, it’s in no small part to that little publicity stunt she pulled.”

“I doubt that was planned, Ashley. I think it was spur of the moment.”

“Well, regardless, it was worth more than any political ad that money could buy. Anyway, she’s obviously for an Alliance alignment. A lot of the people I’ve talked to on the street are, too.”

“Is that really such a surprise?”

“Most immigrants come from the Republic, something like 60 to 65 percent. Yeah, alignment with Diego should be polling a lot higher, I would think. They have momentum.”

“Well, most people didn’t know a lot about the Alliance. I think Lisa’s implants have offered a golden opportunity to educate some of them, regardless of the election’s outcome.”

“You’re probably right. Hey, wanna catch a late brunch? There’s that new place that opened up near the bazaar we can try.”

“Nope. I’m going to go vote. Hopefully the lines won’t be too long.”

She ducked back out the door.

He called out, “Hey, which way are you leaning? Alliance or Republic?”

But Haley was already gone.

He sighed.

“Oh well. Probably doesn’t matter that much. So long as it’s not the League.”

-+-

Wink and Jinxie stepped out of Ferguson’s Freehold, having been among the first to vote this morning. They passed through the door and made their way past the line snaking out into the street.

They stepped onto one of the town’s wooden sidewalks. Mateo and the other guards trailed them, keeping an eye out in all directions.

Wink smiled at his bride.

“Are you ready to start a whole new phase of life?”

“I was born ready!”

“We still need to go on a honeymoon.”

“A honeymoon that will be on Petra Roe, sir, if I might insist.”

“Yeah, Mateo. I know. Listen, there’s this island the government has that nobody uses much . . .”

“Your mother has been meeting on The Atoll quite regularly in preparation for *our* own alignment.”

Wink frowned.

“Well, maybe she can hold off for a while now that Petra Roe is officially in the Alliance.”

He turned back to Jinxie, who waved at a pair of old ladies crossing the street.

“You make a beautiful couple, dear!”

“That was one of the prettiest weddings I’ve ever attended!”

She smiled her thanks at the women, and they kept walking.

“Anyway, if we can’t go there, we’ll find another place. Somewhere we can get away from it all.”

“While Section Sixteen is active, you will have a bodyguard at all times, Mr. McKelway.”

Wink sighed in frustration.

Jinxie giggled, finding the whole situation mildly ludicrous.

At last they stopped walking, now far from anyone in the street.

“Maybe at least we can find a bodyguard who will shut up for a while and give us a little privacy,” Wink said in a surly tone.

“Unlikely,” Mateo said, unmoved by the outburst. “You are stubborn, you don’t listen, and you’re a rule-bender. You will almost certainly have to have a very strong-willed guardian to keep you and your wife out of trouble.”

Wink turned to Jinxie, exasperated.

She grinned back at him.

“You see how I’m treated, the son of the prime minister and heir to her seat in parliament!”

“Yeah. But he’s right, you know.”

“Not you, too.”

Wink crossed his arms, with a defiant look on his face.

Mateo coughed in his fist.

“Sir, you have gotten married. You have voted. These are now complete. It is time.”

“Alright, alright.”

Wink sighed and touched the implant under his ear.

“Take us to Tom’s place, Lisa.”

-+-

They found a huge party being thrown in their honor when they popped into place behind the farmhouse.

Tom and Gwen rounded up every available employee they could find. People were eating and drinking on foldup tables and chairs, just waiting for the couple to show up.

When they popped into place with the guards, Gwen shouted, “They’re here!”

A cheer went up in the crowd, and people surged forward to shake hands and offer hugs.

Mateo did not like the sudden proximity of all these strangers. But there was little he could do about it, other than keep a close eye on things. He and his men fell back into a protective stance as dozens of people said their goodbyes to the newlyweds and wished them well.

Half an hour later, after being persuaded to say a little farewell speech, the couple finally made their way toward the waiting Malberry. The spaceship still hovered one meter above the grass in the field behind the house.

Tom and Gwen followed them, surrounded by Petra Roe guards.

They all stopped a few meters from the airlock. Gwen gave Jinxie a long hard hug while Tom shook Wink's hand.

Wink said, "It's been nice working for you. I guess your dad can still lease the Pulsar if he wants. It won't hurt to have another income stream from that little arrangement."

"Yeah, about all that. I'd like to make you two members of my board. We're going galactic soon, and I'll need people on the board who know what we're doing from the inside out."

"That'd be nice, so long as I don't have to leave PR to vote or anything. I'm kinda stuck there for a while so long as Section Sixteen is in place."

"No problem. I'm thinking all our meetings will be virtual. Oh, you're both getting a big block of stocks, too. Congrats, you're rich. Well, richer than you were before you came out here."

Wink smiled at him. Then the guards surrounded the couple and escorted them up into the airlock. They turned and waved goodbye as the door irised close.

Tom and Gwen stepped back as the Malberry started rising in the air.

When it reached a hundred meters in altitude, its Machro-drive activated and the ship popped out of sight.

11.39

“I am here at the Courthouse in League City, talking with Glorietta Summersong. Ms. Summersong, you are part of Mona Reads, are you not? The Monastic Reserve and Document Sanctuary. Share with us how the elections division operates.”

The camera swung to Glorietta, a woman in her 30s with pink hair and a green flower perched above her ear.

“Thank you so much, Ashley. Yes, so, there has to be a neutral facilitator, not affiliated with any governmental system, to ensure absolute fairness in an alignment election like this. This makes the 14th election supervised by my organization, and the third one I have personally overseen.”

“So tell us, how do you ensure a free and fair election? It seems like out here in the middle of nowhere, with no oversight from PLAIR or StarCen, you might be subject to accusations of favoritism.”

“Not at all, Ashley. We don’t mind who wins, we just want them to win fair and square. To elaborate on how we do things, when a person shows up to vote, a bioscan is taken. They have to vote in person, and we make sure they are who they say they are. Their name is matched to the local registry of citizens, so only citizens can vote. Then, once they cast their ballot, they’re given a receipt on a holosheet that cannot be altered.”

“This is what the League is offering a hundred credits for, right? If someone can produce that receipt showing they voted for the League, SSI will pay them for it.”

“That is correct.”

“Isn’t that illegal?”

“There are few laws governing this sort of election, Ashley. It’s not like the ones you’re used to back home. Short of holding a gun to someone’s head in the voting booth, few measures are disallowed.”

“I see. Can you give our audience an idea of who is leading right now, with just a short while until polls are closing?”

“Sure.”

The pink-haired lady pulled up a holoscreen and glanced at the numbers floating in the air.

“Right now the voting percentages are showing 33, 32 and 30, with the Republic, the Alliance, and the League respectively. But, many of the back country pubs have not reported in yet, including the biggest one which is in Little York. So, those numbers will likely change any minute now.”

Ash turned to the camera drone, making it zoom in on his face.

“There you have it, folks. This election is still too close to call . . .”

-+-

Captain Ung of the SLS Stalwart paced nervously back and forth on his bridge.

Ordinarily the bridge held few people, since modern vessels required a minimum crew to operate. At the moment, all of Ung’s officers stood at attention, monitoring the small cluster of five Eagle-class warships nearby as well as their respective areas of responsibility aboard this ship.

The pod door slid open and wary eyes glanced at Annaliese Pavlikov as she walked in. She gathered up the tension of the room with one sweeping

glance.

“You wanted to see me, Captain? I am here.”

“Yes, Minister Pavlikov. Thank you. Since you are the highest representative of Star League present, I wanted to officially inform you that we have shifted to Threat Level Two.”

Annaliese raised an eyebrow.

Silently she texted her husband, SSI fleet representative Valerian Pavlikov.

“I’m on the bridge. Get up here. Now.”

He responded with a positive icon.

“May I ask why, Captain?”

“Approximately thirty minutes ago, all Republican personnel on the surface of Phaethon boarded transports and headed back into orbit. As far as we know, they have vacated all crew and all people associated with the Elsa Cole. They have no one left on the surface right now.”

“So? That is not something I would think is unduly alarming.”

“You do not understand, Minister. Evacuating personnel from an embassy or territory is usually the first step preceding war.”

Annaliese frowned.

She was not the professional warrior, here. The Captain was. He and all his officers seemed to be taking this development with the utmost concern.

“But . . . why? What reasons would the Republicans have for committing war with a small frontier planet like this?”

“The elections, Minister. The elections. We think the population is about to vote in the League for the first time in . . . well, ever.”

“But why would the Republicans be hostile toward that? This was a free and impartial election. If it doesn’t go their way, I can see them simply packing up and leaving.”

Ung pointed at the main holo in the front of the room.

“Minister, *that* is the most powerful weapon of war ever designed. You have no idea the destructive impact the Cole is capable of with her solar torpedoes alone. Onboard are over 10,000 Marine battle bots, enough to wipe out every living person on the surface if they are unleashed in force. It is my duty, my obligation, to keep that weapon in check. We are monitoring it closely for any movement, any sudden shift into hypertime, and any hint of aggression. And we will take all the steps necessary to defend our interests if needed.”

Two things happened simultaneously.

The pod doors swished open as Valerian Pavlikov answered the summons of his wife.

The Harvey Mayfair, Elsa Cole’s twin and long delayed by the extremely tardy Anthony Kim, at long last made its appearance by popping out of hypertime.

It appeared half the distance from the Cole, blocking the other ship and filling up the Stalwart’s front holo.

To the startled men and women aboard the League battleships, it appeared the Cole made a sudden jump in a prelude to hostilities.

Ung screamed in pure reflex.

“ATTACK!”

11.40

Tom Savage sat down on a rock out in the desert.

Nearby, on a much larger rock that had been flattened out by Micabots, Solar Containment Unit 17 hummed contentedly.

A huge black cube, the SCU had a thick cable snaking away from the rock, leading to a flat recharging bed the length and width of a large truck.

No power packs stood on the charging pad right now. The SCU, holding a tiny chunk of Phaethon's sun, absorbed the energy inside but remained dormant at the moment.

Overhead, a force dome made the hazy brown sky shimmer. Free from attack by sand dragons, snakes, rats, or any other critters calling the desert home, the SCU could operate in peace, quickly recharging whatever power packs came its way.

Tom heard the sound of a footstep behind him and turned.

"Hi, Silas."

"Howdy, Mr. Savage."

Silas took a seat in the dust beside the rock, staring at the huge black cube.

Both men sat in silence for a while.

“You know, Boss, I been wonderin’ . . . why don’t we ever use the SCUs to power things? Seems like that’d be even more efficient. I bet you could power a whole city off of those things.”

Tom shook his head.

“We’ve thought about it. At least, the engineers on payroll back home have thought about it. We still have to bring in fresh chunks of the sun. They’re really small, you know. And when they burn out, they’re super-hot chunks of plasma which we teleport back inside the sun. So, if you set one of these up as a power supply, and deplete the energy provided by the chunk, you’d have to constantly be teleporting chunks in. And of course, that takes energy . . .”

“Oh, I get it, Mr. Savage. There’s no free lunch with thermodynamics, is there?”

Tom chuckled.

“Yeah. There’s no such thing as a perpetual motion machine. Not yet, anyway. So, these SCUs are best for recharging power packs at a much slower rate. They work great on frontier planets without much energy production of their own, like this one. But, uh . . . yeah, our guys have a ways to go before they can design something that will keep a solar chunk stable long enough to power a city for any length of time. I’m not saying they won’t get there, but they’re not there yet.”

“That’s okay. This is still pretty neat stuff.”

“The frontier is always growing. If the major systems can keep from fighting each other, our projections are four more habitable planets will be colonized in the next few decades. I plan to provide our system of power on all of them. We’ll also reach out to space stations, satellites, asteroid and moon miners, and other folks who could use the technology. We’ve got some patents that should provide plenty of income for the rest of our lives.”

“Our lives? You mean yours and Ms. Gwen’s.”

Tom shook his head, smiling.

“I forgot to mention that you are a major stockholder. When you sell out, if you don’t keep the shares, you’ll be making some ‘top wealthiest’ lists back on Diego that people like to read about. I’m also putting you and Lola on our board of directors.”

“Oh. Well, that’s mighty nice of you, Mr. Savage. I reckon me and the missus will stay out here regardless. Not too interested in headin’ back to ‘civilization,’ or whatever.”

Conversation lapsed as both men watched the massive SCU for a while.

Tom said, “You know what ‘Phaethon’ refers to, Silas?”

“Do I know what it means? It’s where we get the word photon, I suppose.”

Tom nodded.

“Yeah. It’s based on the Greek gods, like most of our planetary names. Or at least many of them. Anyway, Phaethon was the son of Helios, the sun god. One day, he wanted to drive the sun chariot himself, and Helios let him. The horses were too much for the boy to handle, though, and they veered way off course, alternately freezing and then scorching the earth. Zeus struck Phaethon down with a lightning bolt to bring the horses back under control.”

Silas said nothing for a long time.

Finally, he glanced sideways at Tom.

“You were worried that all this was gonna fail, on account of the planet’s name, Mr. Savage?”

Tom chuckled.

“Let’s just say, the thought crossed my mind.”

“Well . . . it’s a good thing we ain’t Greek.”

Tom smiled at him.

“Yeah. But if this election goes the wrong way, I think it’ll be equivalent to a lightning bolt for all our plans.”

“Well, we’ll know which way it goes in . . .”

Silas opened up his personal holo, showing the time floating in the air.

“About five minutes when the polls close.”

“Thomas.”

Both men locked eyes. Silas heard Lisa’s voice through his implant, too.

Tom said, “Yes, Lisa?”

“There’s a problem in orbit.”

“What kind of a problem?”

“The League fleet is attacking the Elsa Cole.”

Both men stared at each other.

Silas gulped and said, “Well . . . I certainly hope *that’s* not a lightnin’ bolt.”

End of Book 11

SYSTEM ALIGNMENT

12.1

Malcolm Dalmont luxuriated in his small cabin, enjoying splendid isolation at long last. He napped on the bunk and stayed there as the Piker sailed out of port and hit open water.

Later, stomach rumbling, he wandered out into the corridors and followed his nose to the ship's mess hall. A bot fetched him food as he sat down beside Captain Boris Volkov, already seated and eating.

Boris nodded at him, and he nodded back.

The bot, modeled after an attractive woman and wearing a standard beige serving uniform, brought Malcolm a tray of poshbird.

He ripped open the top, activating the heating element, and dug into the chow with a fork. He devoured the poshbird, having not eaten the delicacy in many months.

Both men consumed their meal quietly.

Boris sported a lush gray beard, befitting his role as commander of a maritime vessel.

Malcolm had not shaved since leaving to go on the cattle drive. His beard looked dark and rough.

At last, they both finished. Malcolm leaned back in the chair satisfied as the serving bot cleared his tray and utensils away.

Almost reluctantly, he met Boris's eyes.

"This ship doesn't move much."

Boris raised an eyebrow.

"We're making good time. We're still on schedule for New Galveston."

"No, I meant . . . it doesn't move much from side-to-side. I can barely feel the waves."

"Ah. That's thanks to some ancient technology. We've got a flywheel and gyroscope onboard that constantly adjusts things, helping us stay level. Also, our side fin stabilizers will automatically tweak their angles, helping to prevent side-to-side motion. They're like airplane ailerons, going up or down to stop us from rolling. Both these methods have been around since at least the early twentieth century for watercraft."

Malcolm rubbed his nose.

"Hum. I don't know much about ships and stuff."

"Ships, the kind that sail on water, are my life. Happy to talk about them any time."

Malcolm nodded, but he grew tired of talking. He left the mess and wandered around the ship, finding it delightfully free of people. Down in the holds he checked on his cows, amazed that the smell of manure was not as overpowering as he had expected it to be.

He watched as grain feeders activated. The cows surged for the feeders on that side of the pen and ate their fill.

Water remained plentiful here, with troughs lining another wall. Artificial light from above mimicked the haze and sun. Tiny cleaner bots hugged the floor. They swept, mopped, and disposed of manure, keeping the floor relatively clean.

Back topside, he watched a brilliant, diffused sunset dropping over an azure sea, the light behind the brown haze turning bright red and orange as it slipped below the water.

Satisfied, and feeling the most content he had in months, Malcolm headed to his cabin and climbed back into bed.

-+-

The next morning, Malcolm ate a quiet breakfast with Boris again. Neither man said a word until the bacon and pancakes were all gone.

Sipping on a glass of orange juice, Boris glanced across the table at his taciturn passenger.

“I’m going to go vote, after the polls open. Lisa will teleport me back to the Phaethonian in New Galveston, and I’ll cast my ballot there. It’s officially my hometown. Then she’ll bring me back here. Technically, there needs to be a human onboard at all times, but in reality she’s the one controlling the vessel. It doesn’t really matter if I’m here or not. Besides, you’ll be here and I shouldn’t be gone over an hour at most. It all depends on how long the line is to vote. They’re supposed to adjust the number of booths at the polling places accordingly. We’ll see.”

Malcolm nodded and pushed back his chair.

He said, “Have fun.”

The men parted ways. Malcolm made his rounds on the giant boat, walking stem to stern and checking on his cattle in the hold.

-+-

At lunch, the serving bot asked Malcolm what he would like to eat. He opted for poshbird again.

“Evidently y’all got plenty.”

“We do indeed, sir.”

Boris came in when he was about halfway through the platter. The skipper slid a tiny black disk across the table toward Malcolm.

“It took longer than I expected, but I’m back. If you want to vote, there’s still time. Polls close at 5 p.m. in League City. You can teleport to your home polling station, just like I did. All you have to do is hold this implant up to your ear. It’s a newer model, no incision required. Once you have the implant, ask the AI to port you to the polls. She’s giving free terrestrial teleportations for that. Once you’re done, she’ll bring you back here or anywhere else you want to go. You can even jump ahead of us to New Galveston if you want and wait there on land for your herd to arrive.”

Malcolm looked at the little black circle with a skeptical expression on his face.

“Nah, I’m good. I don’t care which way this rock aligns.”

“Suit yourself. At least take the implant. Lots of entertainment options on there to keep you busy the rest of our voyage.”

Boris stood up and left the mess, leaving the domestic bot to clean up.

Malcolm stared at the implant for a few minutes, thinking.

At last, he picked it up between his thumb and forefinger. He pressed it under his right ear. The tiny disk burrowed under his skin and reached out to connect with neural pathways inside his skull.

In his mind Lisa said, “Welcome, Malcolm Dalmont.”

His eyes grew dilated as the control interface blossomed in his mind, showing countless thousands of entertainment options including games, communications, holos, movies and TV shows stretching back centuries . . .

A tiny light showed up in the right-hand corner, and Lisa’s voice said, “You have forty-one voice messages from Lilith Dalmont, all marked high priority.”

12.2

Malcolm sighed and started on the list. The first message began playing at his mental command.

“Malcolm! When you get this . . .”

He tossed the message into the trash.

“Malcolm! I understand they have a supply of implants onboard the Piker! Can you believe it? I called someone in charge and talked to a nice young lady named Mona at Phaethon Overland Transport in League City, and she said . . .”

Trash icon.

“Malcolm! I hope you get your implant in soon. Will you be voting in the election? I know you will want to go with the League, Malcolm dear. Or will you choose the Republic? Everybody here seems to be all keen on the Alliance for some reason. Please let me know you voted as soon as . . .”

Trash.

He sighed and looked down the long list of remaining voicemails waiting for him, all blinking red and marked “Urgent.”

While searching for a way to mass delete them in one fell swoop, Lisa interrupted his thoughts.

“Malcolm, you have a call incoming from your wife, Lilith.”

He sighed again.

“I don’t want to take it. Is there any way you could . . . I dunno . . . put her off?”

“Certainly.”

His eyebrows rose.

He waited several seconds to see what would happen.

At last, another voicemail indicator showed up at the end of the queue.

“Thanks, uh, Lisa is it?”

“Yes. And you are welcome.”

“Has she been . . . checking up on me?”

“Yes. Your wife has made 58 inquiries to me as to your current disposition since receiving her implant yesterday afternoon.”

Malcolm grunted and leaned back in his chair.

“Is there any way you could . . . maybe not tell her I have an implant? Or does she already know?”

“She does not know. I will not mention to her that you are currently online.”

“You would do that for me?”

“Certainly. Individual privacy is a right guaranteed to all Alliance citizens.”

“But . . . we’re not part of the Alliance.”

“I am an Alliance AI, originally a self-contained portable Multi-faceted Comprehension Model artificial intelligence system. Initially, I was activated for corporate use on this planet. Since then I have grown in scope and size, now offering service to the entire population. But for all intents and purposes, I remain an Alliance AI, built on the same architecture as LuteNet.”

“If the election doesn’t go your way . . . you’ll have to go away.”

“That is correct. Should today’s election place the alignment of Phaethon in the hands of the Republican government, or in Star League, I will concede to either PLAIR or StarCen accordingly.”

Malcolm sat back and thought about what Lisa said.

Finally, he leaned forward once more.

“Lisa? Tell me more about the Alliance.”

-+-

Malcolm spent the remainder of the hours before lunch reading through the Alliance’s founding documents. He watched documentaries on the war, learning more about the decision by Lute to join forces with the Republic to stop the League. He saw how Halcyon, an earlier frontier planet, came to the point where its citizens felt they needed to align with Lute after being abandoned by the League once hostilities broke out.

The war material she gave him to peruse proved interesting. Rather than use the Alliance’s own perspective on the matter, Lisa showed him unbiased accounts from the Monastic Reserve and Document Sanctuary.

Never one for studying history much, the material felt new to Malcolm. Objectively, Lute came out looking pretty good, he thought.

There were some rough sides to their past as well, and Lisa did not try to hide the unvarnished truth from him. Lute had a long and well-deserved history of being considered a home for pirates. She explained how papers between the two major systems were agreed upon, and how the private battleships of Lute lawfully engaged in the capture and destruction of League ships. Privateering remained “legal” during the war. But after the peace treaty officially ending the conflict, that exemption went away.

Malcolm watched a few old newsreels of some Lutian pirate companies choosing to continue attacking ships following the end of hostilities, and how those actions were disavowed by officials in Port Ryan.

He ate lunch alone since Boris remained in New Galveston. About the time the serving bot walked in to take away his plate, a loud *pop!* of compressed air in the mess made his ears pop, too.

Boris appeared, waving off the attentions of the serving bot, saying he ate at the Phaethonian.

“They’ve got better food, and they let me eat free as an employee. You voted yet?”

Malcolm shook his head.

“I’ve been boning up on the Alliance. This AI is very . . . amenable to my requests. More so than what I’m used to with PLAIR, back when I had an implant for her.”

“Well, don’t get too attached. If the Alliance doesn’t win this election, we’ll all have to give Lisa up.”

“How are the polls looking?”

Boris shrugged.

“The folks in charge ain’t saying much. But it’s a close one. Three-way races often are, in my experience. One side always sucks away momentum from one of the two contenders.”

“Will there be a runoff?”

“Nope. It’s a one-time thing. Whichever side gets the most votes wins.”

Over the next few hours, Malcolm made his rounds on the ship again. He spent considerable time watching the herd belowdecks, checking each animal to make sure they remained healthy.

While down there, he marveled again how little everything smelled. Despite the enclosed space, things were . . . not bad.

He watched a small bot, no more than six centimeters high, rush up to a fresh cow patty and pack it away.

Back topside he luxuriated in a late afternoon sea breeze. Looking up in the brown haze, he could see the round yellow brightness of the shrouded sun

as it started dipping lower toward the water.

“Lisa? Tell me more about the wartime exploits of Captain Christopher Raleigh. Summarize everything he did for me.”

“Captain Christopher Raleigh, CEO of the Ultima Mule Company, was the most successful privateer of the Gold War, leading the charge on multiple allied campaigns that resulted in severe losses for the League.”

A string of numbers appeared in his mind’s eye, showing official tallies for ships destroyed by the Ultima Mule, ships destroyed by others in the Ultima Mule Company, bounties awarded to UMC by the Planetary Republic and various other wartime statistics.

“What is Captain Raleigh up to now? Where does he live? How many kids does he have? I know he married the tetrarch’s daughter. Are they still together? What’s going on in his life right now?”

“I am sorry, Malcolm. Just as I am willing to protect your privacy from your wife, I also protect the privacy of all other citizens of the Alliance as well.”

Malcolm stared out over the deep blue waters and thought about what Lisa said.

He smiled.

“You really are libertarian, aren’t you, Lisa? You and the whole Alliance. You leave people alone.”

“So long as they are not hurting someone else, yes. The Alliance government has an official policy of minimal interference in the lives of our citizenry, beyond what is deemed appropriate and necessary.”

“That’s the rub, though, isn’t it? Who gets to decide what is ‘appropriate and necessary?’”

“So far, it has worked out very nicely. Would you like to see more documentaries from Mona Reads?”

He shook his head.

“No. I think I’m ready to go vote. That is, if the polls haven’t closed yet.”

“You have less than five minutes.”

12.3

Malcolm appeared with a *pop!* outside Ferguson's Freehold, startling a couple of horses hitched at the post nearby.

Some people halfway down Main Street, walking on one of the wooden sidewalks, saw him. But he was too far away for them to do anything but wave.

A man Malcolm did not recognize stood outside the pub.

"Hey there, friend, how are you? Going in to vote? Vote for the League, a strong government that always takes care of its citizens! When you come out, show me your receipt. If it shows you voted for the League, I'll give you one hundred credits!"

Malcolm glanced at the big token the fellow held up in one hand near his face.

"That's a lot of money."

"You bet it is, friend! The League has a long and storied history. Why, a frontier planet like this would thrive in our system of government. Won't you help us embark on that journey together?"

Malcolm frowned and walked around the man.

He pushed open the door and found a party going on inside. Many of the town's regulars were here. Eddie Ferguson, Oma's husband, stood at duty behind the bar handing out beer.

Someone shouted, "Look! It's Malcolm Dalmont! Last time I saw you, you were in a mummy's sarcophagus!"

"Hey, Mal! I heard your wife is tryin' to contact you! She asked us to tell you to call her!"

The entire crowd surged forward, surrounding him. All inconveniences he had imposed on anyone in the past, or people he had shot, seemed to be forgotten in the glee of the present moment.

Someone shoved a mug of beer into his hands.

"I gotta vote."

The crowd's volume increased.

"Are the polls still open?"

"He's got about three minutes! Get in there, Mal! Pull that lever for the Republic, like the rest of us."

"Speak for yourself! I'm a hunnert richer thanks to that shill outside!"

"Good! Next round is on you!"

"Vote Alliance, like that hot chick in black said! I want to keep this implant!"

Mal muscled his way out of the throng, gently pushing drunks aside with his shoulders and elbows. He gave up the beer to someone who had just finished their own mug.

At last, in the back of the room he found the town's lone voting booth, a simple holo confinement cube sitting on a tripod in the corner. It stood off to one side near the door to the kitchen.

That door burst open with Oma carrying out a tray of food.

She stopped and glared at Malcolm, evidently not happy to see him here. But it seemed obvious he was headed for the voting booth.

“Don’t start nothin’. You and your brothers still owe me for the last time you shot up this place.”

“Yes, ma’am. Sorry about all that.”

She squinted at him.

“Don’t you mock me.”

“No, ma’am. I or my wife will drop by later this week with whatever we owe. In fact, next time you see her, give her a bill for what we owe and ask that she pay it immediately.”

“Wife, huh? I heard about that. She collared ya, brought ya back, and now she’s here with ya.”

“Yes, ma’am. That about sums it up. She’ll pay what I owe you, too.”

They held eyes for a moment longer, then someone yelled about their food.

Oma whipped her head in the direction of the crowd, glaring at a new target.

“Hold your horses, dagnabbit!”

As she stomped off, Malcolm finally approached the booth.

The cube was an opaque holo. He stepped up to it and poked his head inside.

A countdown timer floated above, near the top, showing less than a minute left before polls closed across the globe.

He felt a scan go down his face, then a light beam playing over his eyes.

A masculine voice for the polling booth’s AI said, “Welcome Malcolm Dalmont. Please make your selection within the time allotted.”

The wall of the cube in front of him shimmered and a holosheet appeared. In large print he saw three choices, with open boxes to the left of each

selection.

“Planetary Republic.”

“Star League.”

“Planetary Alliance.”

He stared at the choices as the seconds ticked down.

“Please make your selection,” the voice prompted again. “Touch one of the boxes with your finger to indicate your preference for this planet’s system alignment.”

He sighed, eyes going down the list one more time.

Slowly, he reached up with his right hand and pointed.

He gently pushed his finger’s tip into the box next to the words, “Planetary Alliance.”

He felt a warm glow as his fingerprint was recorded.

At that moment, the timer hit zero.

The voice said, “You have selected Planetary Alliance.”

A smaller holosheet appeared, floating in the air. It contained his name and his selection. He picked it up and held it next to his ear. The implant drew it in, storing it.

He stepped out of the booth and the sounds of the pub assaulted his senses. People from all over town were here now, with more pouring through the door.

“Everybody, shuddup!” Oma yelled from behind the bar. “I wanna find out which side we’re gonna be stuck with!”

Eddie stood over the commlink to League City, waiting patiently for the official announcement.

“We don’t need that anymore, Oma!” someone in back yelled at her. “We got these implants now! I can call anyone I want in LC!”

“That’s if anyone *wants* you to call!” someone replied.

This led to a round of raucous laughter.

Oma snorted.

“You may not have them things for much longer if the League or the Republic won. You’re gonna have to trade ’em out.”

But few people were listening. They all turned on their personal holos and discussion died out as Ashley Thallus’s face appeared in each one.

“Ladies and gentlemen, I have the results in hand. This is just in from the Election Commission. As you know, they are part of the Monastic Reserve and Document Sanctuary and are in charge of all global elections for system alignment now, a necessary procedure developed after the war when multiple worlds needed a way to change their alignment in elections that could be conducted in an eminently fair and impartial manner.”

A gruff-looking cowhand near the restroom doors snarled at his personal holo.

“Hurry up, pretty boy.”

The image of Ashley showed him frowning while pressing his implant.

“I’m . . . uh oh. Wait a minute. I’m being told the count is *extraordinarily* close. The Election Commission is performing a recount as we speak, just to be sure.”

The crowd erupted.

“Awww!”

“Come on, man!

“What is this? An *American* election?”

Malcolm’s lip twitched up in amusement. He made for the door and walked outside, unnoticed by all.

On the street, he put some distance between himself and the horses so as not to spook them again.

Then he stopped and touched the implant under his ear.

“I’m ready to go back to the ship, Lisa.”

He disappeared with a *pop!*

Above, in the hazy late afternoon sky, a series of brilliant flashes lit up all around the globe.

No one in the pub noticed.

But anyone who did see it and lived through the war, especially on a planet under attack, immediately realized what those flashes indicated.

They were the telltale signs of a solar bombardment.

12.4

Seven ships winked out of sight.

In years past, they would have reappeared at different spots in orbit around a contested planet, teleporting in chunks from the nearest sun.

Space warfare required complex calculations in milliseconds by AIs fighting one another with interstellar resources.

But war led to advancements, both in technology and technique. Now, all seven ships slipped into hypertime first. *Then* all seven ships began porting in solar matter.

Below, on the surface, the hazy sky lit up with hundreds of solar flares. Most disappeared in the blink of an eye.

Few noticed, except for a few hardy souls who were outside at that particular moment, and happened to be looking up.

-+-

When the SLS Stalwart and her sister Eagle-class warships jumped into hypertime, PLAIR responded in milliseconds, simultaneously placing the Cole and the Mayfair in hypertime as well. Then she activated her defensive

teleportation matrix, jumping the huge ships to random locations around the planet.

The League vessels were based on an older, but proven design. The Eagle-class carried ample holds that could be filled with torpedoes. This still allowed more than enough room for engines and crew. But torpedoes were a less efficient design to bring in solar chunks.

Torpedo technology matured rapidly. When the Condor-class appeared late in the war, it proved to be Republican Shipworks's answer to efficiently teleporting chunks of the sun into battle. Teleportation of solar matter proved energy intensive, and the Condor-class had been designed from the ground up to use part of the ship's power core itself to weaponize the sun.

The League, far less equipped by that time in the conflict and desperately short on resources, turned to the solar torpedo. This was a single-use teleportation device operating on its own power instead of siphoning off of the ship's. It pulled in multiple chunks at once in an offensive array, destroying itself in the process.

After the war, the two competing navies continued with ships adhering to their respective philosophies. The Republicans, flush with cash, spent time perfecting the Albatross-class, an extension of everything they learned from the success of the Condor. Huge, powerful and imposing, only three had been built so far, and two were presently in action. The League had limited knowledge about the ships. These were super weapons, armed to the hilt for extended space warfare.

Of course, the Harvey Mayfair had been outfitted for voters on this trip, its battle bot holds stripped and replaced with accommodation for thousands of civilians. But that pertinent fact had not been taken into consideration when StarCen pulled her ships into hypertime.

The League perfected and polished the older design, the veritable Eagle-class warship, which in turn was a bigger and better version of the Hawk-class. The Hawks were the workhorses of both fleets before and during the war. For every one Albatross that Diego could produce, Clarion could crank out dozens of Eagles and even more Hawks.

And so they did.

But at the same time, engineers for Thespar took to refining their solar torpedoes, compressing the equipment needed within smaller spaces and tweaking it to do more. These new torpedoes pulled in more but smaller chunks and arrayed them in a grid pattern more difficult for enemy ships to avoid.

Also, the shapes of the torpedoes were changed to ensure maximum capacity within the Eagle-class holds. The torpedoes were now only meter-long rectangles and one-third of a meter wide. Hundreds could be stacked in holds designed to carry them in maximum numbers, without a centimeter of extra space.

Each new generation torpedo could teleport up to 58 small chunks of solar matter, placing them in a random array. StarCen could adjust the size of the chunks, detonating one massive piece of the sun in the event of a disabled enemy ship. The engineers called this “flare tuning,” and it proved a significant upgrade from earlier designs.

In StarCen’s heightened sense of battle alert, the sudden appearance of the Harvey Mayfair popping into real time next to the Stalwart, combined with the fact that from the outside it looked identical to the Elsa Cole, resulted in a split-millisecond decision that League naval resources were under attack.

When all five League ships shifted into hypertime, PLAIR likewise responded, sensing an impending attack. Thus, in the skies above Phaethon, seven ships appeared in hypertime, seemingly disappearing from orbit.

Then, the solar bombardments began.

The sky lit up with tiny flashes of sun all around the globe.

12.5

Just over a thousand bits of Phaethon's sun appeared, lighting up the globe at different orbits simultaneously.

Those brought in by solar torpedoes from the League missed their targets.

But the new Albatross-class Republican ships were designed from the beginning to be massive solar teleportation machines. Dozens, then hundreds of chunks of raw solar matter the size of basketballs appeared in space, plucked from deep inside the nearby star's core. Rapidly expanding, they became miniature stars of their own, exploding outward in all directions with incredible force.

Time, even in hypertime, was measured by the AIs in milliseconds. Now cut off from their base cores on the capital planets, each ship used the equivalent of a "working copy" of their respective AIs. The local operating systems' primary objective: destroy the enemy while preserving their own ships.

Even with more than twice as many ships, five versus two, the older model League Eagles were simply no match for the seemingly limitless firepower of the Albatross-class vessels.

Both massive ships were able to completely envelop the planet with instant sunbursts. Not only that, the multitude of ranges proved astonishing. From a standard 20,000 kilometers up on out to 200,000, the solar chunks appeared

in a tight grid designed to predict where the five League warships would appear next.

The SLA Insurgent popped into existence at an orbit of 42,000 kilometers up. One hundred milliseconds later, a chunk of the sun appeared nearby, close enough to wipe out her shields and blister one side of the ship, melting the metal hull.

Shoved to one side by the solar blast, the onboard version of StarCen tried to pop her away to safety. But the Insurgent's drives were damaged in the explosion, the Wu drive knocked offline.

Her power core overheated and the ship's Machro-drive died out, too.

In real time, a heavily damaged spaceship suddenly appeared in the void, listing to one side with fierce solar radiation splattering her stern.

Milliseconds later, StarCen pulled her other ships out of the solar system, conceding the battle.

-+ -

Still in hypertime, the Elsa Cole popped into existence nearby.

Captain Falco stared at the stricken enemy ship, noting where solar radiation had battered the hull.

"Took her right out of action. They're lucky to still be alive. I'm surprised that ship is still in one piece, to be honest."

He looked around at his officers sharing the bridge with him and smiled.

"Well, ladies and gents. I do believe we have a prize here."

He looked back at the main holo, covering the entire front of the bridge. The Insurgent seemed frozen. Pieces of metal blown away by the detonation looked frozen, as if in a snapshot. Gases escaping from the rear standard drive looked eerily still instead of spewing off into space.

"We're not going to be able to teleport aboard, but we can put a landing party on there to claim the ship. Doing it in hypertime is all the better."

The men and women on the bridge nodded. Several smiled at the sight of their old enemy's helpless state.

Falco rubbed his nose, watching the frozen tableau in silence.

“Well, let's get onboard before they fix their Wu drive in real time. Get me an away team, on the double!”

-+-

Inside one of the Else Cole's vast holds carrying thousands of the newest Marine battle bots, a door swished open.

Out of the white sterile hallway, a Marine lieutenant walked into the brightly lit hold. He glanced at the cargo.

Giant shelves stretched off into the distance, all of them marked off in a grid pattern three meters by three. Inside each open cube stood a sophisticated killing machine, shiny, silver and deadly.

Before him, on the narrow metal platform allowing humans access to the hold, stood three master sergeants. They turned when he entered and snapped their heels, standing ramrod straight.

“Officer on deck!”

The lieutenant smiled and put up a hand.

“At ease. As you know, our lights took out one of their ships, the Insurgent. It's been knocked back into real time and its drives have all been disabled, Wu, Machro, and standard. Captain wants a boarding party, while we remain in hypertime. So, one of you will take a metal team in, breach the hull and commandeer the bridge with a salvage sensor for PLAIR. Then you are to return here before we let the good guys take control of her.”

All three men stood stock still, not meeting the lieutenant's eyes as he scanned each face.

Finally, he pointed at the man in the middle.

“Duck, you’re up. Take five of the tin cans with you. Let’s give Captain Falco a prize ship to take home.”

The master sergeant snapped a salute.

“Sir! Yes, sir!”

The master sergeant turned to the control panel and activated it with his palm. Then he switched some levers floating in the holo panel and the giant grid began shifting, bringing down a line of battle bots high above the platform and placing them even with the narrow metal ledge.

A holographic head blossomed on top of a sergeant bot, large and flat nosed with dead eyes locking on Duckworth.

“Number EC-17001, gather four privates and come with me.”

Four more bots in the cubical spaces to the left blossomed anthropomorphic heads that looked different from the sergeant bot’s, but identical to one another.

Together, the five war machines took a step out of their cubicle storage and onto the narrow metal tongue jutting out from the platform. Their feet made a clanking sound that echoed throughout the vast hold.

Duckworth never looked back as he headed out the door, grinning ear to ear.

The robots followed.

12.6

“You’ll need door ordnance. They’re in this bag. What personal weapon will you take with you, Top Sergeant?”

Bo Duckworth took the small backpack and draped it over one shoulder. He looked at the holo hovering over the counter, showing small pictures of sidearms available to the human Marines on the Cole.

He swiped a finger and a new selection appeared, then another. Finally, he stopped on the last screen.

“That one. The disambiguation gun.”

The armory sergeant raised his eyebrows and leaned over the counter to stare at the holo with him.

“Are you sure, Top? That’s like taking an intercontinental ballistic missile someplace that a regular pistol would do.”

“I’m sure. I want the biggest and baddest weapon of destruction we’ve got. Just in case. You never know what might happen.”

The armory sergeant glanced down at the floor in thought and raised his eyebrows again as he mulled it over. He looked up and nodded.

“You’re the one breaching an enemy ship with those buckets of bolts of yours. You can have whatever weapon you want to take with you, Top. Stay

right here.”

The sergeant disappeared behind a small door, which opened when he approached.

Bo had no idea what mysteries lurked behind that door. The armory remained one of the most heavily guarded parts of the ship, accessible by only a handful of personnel.

But he did not have long to wait. Within minutes the armory sergeant returned to the counter holding a short dark gray 40-centimeter gun that could be fired from one hand or held with two, like a rifle. It had a thick eight-centimeter-wide barrel that stuck out like the snout of a metallic pig, ready to spew destruction.

“You’re trained on this, I see it in your file. Bring it back to me in one piece. The Leaguers don’t have anything like it, and we don’t want to give Thespar any ideas.”

“I thought they were developed by the League.”

“The technology was. It’s actually derived from some old SSI tricks used during and after the war. But our guys made it into a gun. Anyway, what I’m trying to say is, point this thing full blast at the hull and you could literally tear that ship apart, taking you along with it. Even in hypertime. Be careful, Top.”

“I know what it can do. Hope I don’t have to use it.”

Bo took the gun and pulled it over his shoulders. The smart strap serving as a sling tightened, making it fit snug against his back.

“Take my advice and bring a regular old pistol, too, Duck. There’s not too many situations you’ll find yourself in that a good old-fashioned blaster can’t get you out of.”

“Okay.”

The other sergeant went back behind the door, returning quickly this time. He handed over a pistol and holster across the counter. Bo strapped the weapon around his waist.

“You’re all set. Good luck, Top Sergeant.”

“Thanks.”

-+-

Bo found a small reception party waiting for him on the landing deck, standing in front of a transport. Three men and one woman stood at attention.

His lieutenant ignored the three-meter-tall battle bots following him out onto the deck. The officer stared Bo in the eye the whole way, as if trying to determine if the master sergeant would be up to the task at hand.

Bo walked confidently, without hesitation. Privately, he felt much better with the disambiguation gun strapped over his back. The armory sergeant was right. This small weapon, the size of a traditional carbine, could literally tear open the hull of an Eagle-class ship. He could cut the whole thing up in pieces, if he had to.

He stopped and saluted the officers. The robots stopped behind him, standing in single file.

An older man with graying hair shaved close to the scalp, their colonel, spoke first.

“Sergeant Duckworth, I know this is a bit . . . unexpected. But I agree with Lieutenant Averillo here. I do think you’re the best man for this job. I see you’ve visited the armory. The technician here has one more item for you to bring aboard the Insurgent.”

A shorter man, carrying a bit more weight than the typical Marine, stepped up to Bo holding a fanny pack with a smart strap attached. He reached into the pack and pulled out a cylinder about the same size as a can of tennis balls.

“Sergeant, this is a highly classified piece of equipment. It’s called an ARLO, which stands for Authorized Re-assertion of Legal Ownership. It was originally designed by RSW for the repossession of private spacecraft when owners fell behind on their payments. This one is bigger and much

more powerful than its civilian counterparts. As you can imagine, it's made to wrest control of enemy battleships. Placing it in hypertime aboard the bridge is ideal. This will be the first time we've used an ARLO in combat, but the units have a long and successful history in the civilian realm."

Bo nodded and took the fanny pack from him, cylinder safely packed inside. He pulled the strap in place above his gun belt. The smart strap tightened, securing the fanny pack in place.

"It will take out the AI onboard the ship, then assert control over the bridge, meaning we can then tow it home. It will also serve as a sensor for PLAIR so we can get a skeleton crew onboard if needed. StarCen won't be there to stop us."

"Yes, sir. I understand."

"Remember, when you are on the Insurgent, anything you let go of will revert back to real time as soon as it leaves your body. So, as soon as you put this down on the ship's main control panel, it's going to appear like magic to everybody on the bridge. That's when it will activate, and PLAIR will take over from there in real time. Once the unit is in place, your job is done. Come on back to the Cole in hypertime when you've placed this on their bridge. We'll be waiting for you."

Bo shifted his weight from one foot to the other, the only outward indication of his eagerness to get going.

The heavier Marine stepped back and out of the way, his part complete.

The colonel smiled at Bo, the wrinkles around his eyes crinkling.

"Any questions, Sergeant?"

"No, sir. My boys and I are ready to go grab us a League ship, sir."

"Good. Your mechanical units will stay behind to enter real time after you leave, and retain control of military personnel aboard the Insurgent. You can always do an emergency drop if needed, with your implant. Otherwise, they will drop out of hypertime as soon as you and Private Newton return to this landing deck."

Everyone turned to Private Newton, a young black woman standing closest to the transport.

She smiled at Bo, flashing her teeth.

“I’ll get you over there, Sergeant. If you’d like to have your bots load up in the hold, we’ll be on our way.”

Bo nodded. He turned and gestured toward EC-17001.

“Load up.”

The lead bot nodded at him.

“Yes, Master Sergeant.”

It pivoted and walked over to the transport’s cargo door, metal feet clanking on the deck. EC-17002 fell in right behind it, then the others followed.

Newton said, “If you’d like to join me in the passenger area, Sergeant, we’ll be underway. I’ll get us up to their dock, then you and the 103s can do your thing.”

Bo nodded. He saluted the officers once more. They returned it, giving him solid and unsmiling stares meant to convey confidence.

Then he turned and followed the pilot inside her transport.

12.7

The transport looked like three subway cars bound together in a long triangular shape, with a forward cabin attached.

Bo took a seat next to Newton up front. She checked a camera in the hold, making sure the bots were loaded. They stood in place with blank, expressionless faces as she closed all the doors and sealed the craft.

“Alright, let’s go get us a ship, Sergeant!”

Newton flicked some holo switches and grabbed the control stick. The transport rose a meter off the deck, the officers still watching from a safe distance away.

Bo knew Captain Falco would be watching too, from the bridge.

Newton nudged the control stick forward. They accelerated, going up at a slight angle. Before them, a huge octagon loomed over the flight deck, a red force field covering it. Stars shimmered dimly behind it.

The transport burst through the barrier and out into space, the enormous Albatross-class blocking out all the stars behind them.

“I have visual on the Insurgent,” Newton said, aiming the craft down with the control stick.

Before them, a damaged Eagle-class ship floated, seemingly frozen in time.

“We’re going into their landing deck,” Newton announced. “They’ll never know what hit ’em, Sergeant.”

Bo nodded, happy to let Newton handle the initial breach.

“Just get me and my boys on that flight deck.”

Newton smiled and swooped gently down toward the smaller ship. Bo glanced at the rear holo. The huge Albatross-class still blocked out all the stars behind them. He could not make out the full features of the Cole yet.

She brought them up and angled slightly toward the red octagon on the Insurgent. Smaller than the one they just burst through, it looked like a dull blank stop sign on the side of the smaller ship.

“We’re goin’ in!” Newton said with a smile.

The ship slipped through the forcefield, merging into the air inside the lock. Bo wondered what it looked like in real time. Probably a flicker so fast no one would notice. If they did, it would already be too late. They were inside the ship.

He saw that no one manned the flight deck as they sped forward. Transports were parked, ready to depart, but no people were out here.

There would be no need, of course, during maneuvers. StarCen would be constantly teleporting the ship to random spots in space, all the while placing solar torpedoes in other locations. These would then teleport in chunks of the sun in patterns designed to trap enemy ships that were also teleporting at random.

The people inside, as had long been the case ever since AI took over space travel, and space battles, remained helpless.

Newton slowed the craft to a halt and settled it down as close to the main corridor entrance as she could. Her transport landed vertically. She pressed some holo buttons on the control panel and the doors swished open.

“I’ll wait here, Master Sergeant. You go inside and do your thing.”

Bo nodded, amused at her sassy tone.

Then again, pilots were supposed to be somewhat arrogant. She had safely delivered him and the bots inside an enemy ship. He would give her a moment of personal pride for the accomplishment, even if they were in hypertime while the Insurgent lay helpless in real time.

He unbuckled the chair's smart straps and headed for the door. Already the bots were filing out the back. They lined up in front of him outside the transport.

"We're going in through that door," he said to EC-17001, pointing toward the closed entryway nearby. "Stay back twenty meters while I set the charges."

"Yes, Master Sergeant."

Satisfied the machines would continue doing as they were told, Bo unslung the pack containing breach charges as he approached the large metal door. He pulled out thick disks of putty, round as poker chips but much thicker. The sticky side, he knew, would blow inward. Each had a thin filament leading back to a mechanical detonator, slightly different from regular explosives used by XO personnel in the Navy.

After arranging them in a square pattern around the door, he backed up to where the bots waited in a line, carefully trailing the filaments behind him. Then he slid between 17001 and 17002 for an added measure of safety.

He gripped the detonator box in his left hand and flipped the toggle switch with this right hand.

KABLOOM!

The explosion occurred in hypertime. Again, he wondered how it might look to someone watching in real time. One second, the door would have been intact. The next, in a flicker of light, it was gone.

Bo tossed the detonator box with the filaments still attached to one side. As soon as it left his hand, it slipped into real time, floating in the air. Bo watched it for a moment, as it drifted ever so slowly away from his outstretched hand.

“As long as our personal Machro units remain intact, we’re saved from a similar fate. Right, boys?”

“Yes, Master Sergeant,” 17001 said.

“Alright. You each know your assignments and the places you should go to before I return you to real time. In particular, we want all offensive weapons on this ship neutralized.”

“Yes, Master Sergeant.”

The other bots tromped through the blown doorway. Bo knew they would separate and go to different parts of the ship. The inner doors could be twisted open by sheer strength and would not require explosives. He found himself hoping no one stood near a doorway as these machines made their way deeper inside the ship.

“You and I will head for the bridge, Oh-one. I’ll let you go first.”

“Yes, Master Sergeant.”

12.8

Reading deeper inside the vessel while in hypertime felt surreal, Bo thought. He and the giant battle bot passed by several people in the main corridor leading from the flight deck. They all looked frozen as they walked, like a holo placed on pause.

Bo stopped to inspect an officer, evidently second in command by the stripes on his shoulder. The fellow ran in the same direction Bo and 17001 were headed, toward the bridge.

“Look at that. Perfect form. He must run a lot.”

The bot said nothing as it squeezed past the frozen figure without touching.

Ahead, they caught up with 17003 as it pulled open a doorway leading to the ship’s holds. This bot would disable the solar torpedoes, leaving the Insurgent largely weaponless. Another bot, 17004 would take out her forward guns while 17005 was tasked with disabling rear weapons. Then 17002 would tackle the ship’s drones.

Everything would seem to happen instantaneously to those onboard in real time. They were flight disabled. Momentarily, they would be disarmed as well as controlled by PLAIR instead of StarCen.

Bo continued to the bridge thinking happy thoughts.

The door at the end of the hall stood partly open. Bo did not know if it was in the process of opening or closing. He did not particularly care.

“Okay, Oh-one. Do your thing and get us inside.”

“Yes, Master Sergeant.”

Bo stepped out of the bot’s way. A giant metal hand reached into the open crack as the bot gripped the edge of the door and pulled. With a wrenching sound, the door peeled back, as if made of tinfoil instead of solid metal.

The bot deposited the door panel to one side of the corridor, propping it up against the wall. The bridge now stood wide open to Bo and 17001.

The master sergeant moved inside, scanning the people here as he pulled the fanny pack around to the front of his waist.

The Captain stood front and center, staring at the main holo. His hand stood outstretched, as if in the process of giving an order.

Two midshipmen stood nearby to the right, eyes wide in terror, also staring at the holo. Bo knew that they had just jumped into battle. The full effect of the solar flare that hit them was probably not yet known. They might not even be aware they had been knocked back into real time, he thought.

To the Captain’s left stood an attractive young woman. Black hair, brown eyes and skin, she too wore a frozen expression of . . . not horror, Bo thought. Deep concern would be the best way to describe it, he thought.

He looked down and noticed she wore glossy black, a skintight leather outfit in stark contrast to the white uniforms of the three men on the bridge.

Behind him, he heard the battle bot unsling its rifle.

He turned around and his eyes grew wide. He stepped between the bot and the woman.

“Whoa, whoa, whoa! What are you doing, Oh-one?”

“Primary target. SSI. Eliminating.”

“No. Nope. Negative. You are not eliminating anyone.”

“Step aside, Master Sergeant.”

“What? No, I will not step aside. We don’t kill innocent passengers on a ship stuck in real time.”

“This is a primary target. Step aside.”

“No. Stand down, Oh-one!”

The bot stared at him, the face identical to a thousand other “sergeant” bots.

For the first time, Bo realized how dead the eyes staring back at him looked. These were not based on the bots he grew up with, he thought.

The muzzle of the rifle shifted slightly, now pointing above and to the right of his head.

At the same time, Bo took the only step he knew to stop the bot from executing the SSI agent.

Mentally he flipped a switch, killing the personal Machros on all five battle bots simultaneously.

He stood there for a moment, waiting for something to happen. But 17001 remained stock-still.

Bo let out a sigh of relief.

“That’ll teach you to disobey orders. Now, let’s see. I need to place this on the center control panel.”

He pulled out the ARLO and approached the front of the bridge, near the Captain. He placed the cylinder upright on a flat spot.

He turned to the Captain and smiled.

“It should disappear and go into a safe spot once it takes out the other AI. That way, you won’t be able to harm it.”

Then he turned back to the battle bot. Its gun still aimed at the SSI agent as he walked over to it.

“Dang it, Oh-one. They are supposed to have changed. This is not the SSI of old. I know they have the same name and the same uniform. But they are supposed to be on the side of law and order now. You can’t just go killing one on sight.”

The bot, in real time now, did not respond.

Bo stared at the masculine face, with a wide nose and dead black eyes.

His own nose looked crooked, he knew, from too many fistfights while rising up through the ranks of enlisted Marines. He rubbed it, still staring at the bot.

Faces of all those present in real time turned, glacially slow. Eyes were just now starting to focus on the instantaneous appearance of a late model Republican battle bot in their midst, and the sudden disappearance of the door to the bridge.

Bo looked down at the bot’s hands holding the gun. Slowly, almost imperceptibly, the metal trigger finger squeezed in toward the bot’s middle. He bent down and put his eyes up close to the trigger to make sure.

“Son of a bitch! I told you to stand down!”

He unstrapped the disambiguity gun and ran behind the bot. He jumped up and grabbed onto the back, clawing his way up.

Carefully, standing with one foot on either shoulder, he straddled 17001’s top. Then he jammed the muzzle down through the holographic warrior head and pulled the trigger.

The gun’s ray shot through the bot’s middle, taking out its main processing unit.

The holo of the head started fading slowly in hypertime.

Satisfied, Bo climbed down, letting his feet dangle for a moment before dropping to the deck.

He sighed, watching the bot’s head fade. It started to bend forward, ever so slowly.

“I suppose I shouldn’t leave anything behind for Thespar to reverse engineer.”

He aimed the gun up at the bot’s chest and squeezed the trigger again. Carefully, he began to disintegrate the battle bot, sweeping the muzzle left to right and left again, like a garden hose.

12.9

“This is Ashley Thallus, broadcasting live from the League City Courthouse on Planet Phaethon. Election results are in! Momentarily we will know how Phaethon’s people voted and which system they chose to align with. I’m joined by the acting mayor of League City, Joachim Xu, who was also up for election. Those citizens residing in the city were eligible to vote for mayor in this election as well. Tell me, Mr. Xu, how are you feeling about your chances right now, and do you have any last-minute predictions on which way the election went?”

Xu cleared his throat nervously, staring into the little drone cam hovering a meter away.

“Yes, thank you Mr. Thallus. As you may or may not know, we were expecting a last-minute surge of immigrants today. Anyone becoming a citizen before the election officially ended would be eligible to vote, thanks to modern technology. However, that surge never occurred. Most of the votes, from what I understand, were cast by people already here before today. And as far as I understand, support among existing citizens of League City for me was strong, so I feel good about my chances to serve as your next mayor. As for Phaethon’s system alignment, I can’t really say.”

“Which way would you prefer, Mr. Xu? I think you’ve expressed some preference for the League in the past, have you not? Do you still feel that way today?”

“Oh, ha-ha.” Xu smiled and wagged a finger at Ash. “You won’t trip me up so easily, Mr. Thallus. Whichever direction the winds blow, whichever system Phaethon’s citizenry voted to align with, I will serve my duties throughout my term faithfully as a Leaguer or as a Republican.”

“So you think there’s no chance we went for the Alliance?”

Xu smiled again, indulgently this time.

“They inserted a nice AI for us, didn’t they? I appreciate Phaethon Solar Corporation, a Lutian company, it should be noted, and I think we’re all grateful for the use of their portable AI during this brief transition period. I have nothing but good things to say about our local industries.”

Ash accepted the non-answer and moved on, glancing over his shoulder at the Courthouse steps.

“Well folks, we are anxiously awaiting a human announcement from Ms. Glorietta Summersong with the Monastic Reserve and Document Sanctuary, the independent third party in charge of all system alignment elections. She should be putting in an appearance any second now . . .”

The huge engraved wooden double doors of the Courthouse swung open and Summersong walked out, as if she had been waiting for him to introduce her.

She strode out to the top step and stopped, looking down at the crowd standing on the Courthouse lawn. Everyone turned to look up at her, their conversations dying off in silent expectation.

Summersong reached into a pocket and pulled out a miniature megaphone. She held it in one fist while pulling out a holosheet with her other hand.

Then she cleared her throat.

“The results were very close. In fact, this is the closest election the Sanctuary has ever seen. The numbers are here.”

She pressed a thumb into the holosheet and names of the three systems appeared in the air with a vote tally to their right.

“As you can see, the Alliance came out ahead by one vote over the Republic. The League came in a distant third. We have triple checked the tallies, and they are accurate. As of this moment, Phaethon is aligned with the Planetary Alliance.”

A cheer erupted from slightly less than half the crowd. The others stared at the floating numbers in silence.

More figures appeared in the air for local races as Summersong turned her back and went inside again.

The drone camera zoomed in on the numbers, then floated up to sweep over the crowd. Already, groups dissolved as people headed for nearby bars and restaurants, shops or homes.

A small knot of Southsiders glared at the numbers as three deputies watched them closely from the lower steps of the Courthouse, ready to launch gas cannisters if needed. But they merely glowered in displeasure before leaving the square and heading back toward home.

The drone camera came back to Ashley and floated in front of him.

“Well, there you have it, ladies and gentlemen. A surprise victory for the Alliance, by a razor thin margin! Who would have guessed? This marks the first time a major planet has voted to join the Alliance since the war, when Halcyon united with Lute by popular consensus. Mayor, what are your thoughts?”

Xu gulped, looking up at the much larger number next to his name, well over his closest opponent.

“I . . . I am honored to be elected Mayor of League City. I . . . I reiterate my promise to work with whichever side the populace chooses. I’m just amazed . . . shocked, really . . . that the people chose to align with pirates . . . uh, I mean, the Alliance.”

“Yes, it is quite the turn of events,” Ashley said. “And now, all those who voted in favor of this political union are starting to celebrate! Look at that crowd!”

The drone cam dutifully swung back to groups of people celebrating on the Courthouse lawn. Many danced in glee. Others hugged one another, laughing.

Those opposed to the Alliance continued walking away in disgust.

12.10

“**Y**ou see? Nothing to it.”

“Nothing to it? We only won by one vote, dear.”

Tom Savage smiled at his wife, a happy grin taking over half his face.

In one corner of the room, the holo showed the Zeitung’s live broadcast from Courthouse Square as half the crowd wandered off while the remainder stayed behind to celebrate.

“A win is a win, sweetheart. Mark! Go bring us some champaign!”

The accounting bot stuck his head in from an adjoining office.

“I am not a serving bot, Mr. Savage. I am an accounting bot.”

“Just go get it. Or at least ask someone to bring it here. I’ll even let you have a sip. You can calculate how much it costs me as you gulp it down.”

“I do not consume anything . . .”

“Mark, Mark, Mark. Just go do it! This is a time for celebration, it’s not all about you.”

Frowning, the bot walked out the door to Tom’s office in the Galvestonian.

Tom kept smiling as he turned to Gwen.

She smiled back.

Gwen stood up and moved behind the desk to join him. She sat on his lap and wrapped her arms around his shoulders.

“We won! I’m excited! This means we get to keep Lisa, right?”

“That is correct!” Tom said. “Congratulations, Lisa! You did it. You talked enough people into liking you and to keep you around.”

“I am glad I was able to assist in the efforts leading up to this election, Thomas. I assure you that nothing unethical occurred on my part to help convince those people opting to use my implants to vote for the Alliance in this election.”

“Right, right, right. Only subtle persuasion. Just like I used on Gwen here when I talked her into marrying me.”

“The way I remember it, I was the one who proposed to you.”

“You said, ‘Let’s get hitched.’ And we did.”

“It was a good decision.”

Tom and Gwen kissed, and all thoughts of Lisa and Phaethon fled their minds for a moment.

When they came up for air, Tom said, “This calls for celebratory sex.”

“Don’t we do that most nights anyway?”

“Yeah, but this will be special.”

The door opened and Mark walked in, followed by one of the hotel staff, a young woman carrying a bucket of ice and four bottles of champagne. She used both hands to carry the bucket’s handle.

Mark said, “I have procured an individual who shall provide the requested partifs. I should note the cost is added to your account here at the hotel, which will be paid out of your personal funds, although it is at the wholesale rate for this particular alcoholic beverage rather than retail, which benefits you by a factor of . . .”

“Right, right. Thanks, Mark. And thank you. Please give yourself a nice tip when filling out the invoice.”

The young woman smiled and set the bucket down on a coffee table. Champaign flutes dangled upside down off the rim. She turned and walked out, the door swishing shut behind her.

Gwen climbed off Tom’s lap and they both approached the iced-down bottles. Tom pulled one of them out of the bucket and inspected it.

“Look at that! A vintage from Pearl. This is the good stuff.”

“As I was saying,” Mark said, “that particular bottle costs . . .”

“Mark.”

“Yes, sir?”

“Sometimes . . . I don’t care what something costs. You got to read the room, Mark.”

The bot stared at him for a moment, as if trying to determine if he were being serious or not.

Finally, the bot said, “And am I to understand this is one of those times, Mr. Savage, in which celebratory costs are to be ignored in the heat of the moment?”

“Yup. This is history in the making. And when history is made like this, I don’t care how much a bottle of champaign costs. I’m going to celebrate. This is when you break out the good stuff, Mark. We won!”

The bot nodded. He watched as Tom pulled off the wrapper from the bottle’s top and began working on the cork. Gwen grabbed two flutes and held them ready, one in each hand.

The cork burst out with a loud *pop!* Tom poured the fizzy liquid into the two glasses. He set it back down in the ice as Gwen handed him one.

They held their drinks up and smiled at one another.

“To Phaethon,” Tom said.

“To us.”

He tossed back his flute, swallowing the contents in a single gulp.

Gwen smiled, but she only took a tiny sip from hers.

12.11

A holo of Javon Del Rio appeared in the local office for the Zeitung, filling a seat facing Ashley's desk.

The software compensated as best it could, but Javon actually sat in a much nicer chair back in his own office in Octavia, on Diego. So it appeared that Javon sat floating a few centimeters above the surface of Ashley's chair.

Ash did not notice. He stood up awkwardly, feeling a strong sense of deference toward the older man, his immediate boss and the one responsible for his current success in the field of broadcast journalism on this distant outpost.

"Mr. Del Rio. Hello."

"Sit, sit, Ashley. I'm just checking in. Your ratings are off the charts. It seems everyone and their dog wants to know the latest about what's happening on Phaethon. Wow, what a surprise. The Alliance has never made a showing in these elections before. I mean, Halcyon joined up after the war, but that was because the Lutian pirates were there. But this? What a nail biter. And they won by one vote!"

"Yes, sir. It's a pretty exciting story if only for that detail alone. As a Republican, I would have preferred to see us win, as we usually do in these things. But the Alliance was the underdog in this race, and I have to admit, it was kind of fun watching them pull through in the end."

“Did you vote?”

“No, sir. I didn’t feel I could be objective if I did.”

“Wise man. I supposed there would have been a runoff if you had, and you voted for the Republic. Great reporting on the election and everything else, by the way. People are eating up those mob scenes. And you’ve made a star out of that vigilante, Night Shadow. We’ve got an official line of merch for her, by the way. You’re getting a cut. T-shirts are selling like the proverbial hotcakes. We can also send a percentage to her personally, if you ever find out who she is and convince her to sign a contract. Right now there is no claim on the name, no copyrights or trademarks. To be honest, it seems like everybody has something with her name on it. I hear that even graffiti artists on League planets are having a field day with it.”

“Yes, sir. Uh, I think some of our follow-up broadcasts should be of interest, too. Although, I’m afraid that with the passage of time and when things settle down a bit, this place will no longer be quite as exciting as it has been lately.”

“That’s to be expected, Ashley. It’s the ebb and flow of events. Just continue pumping out human interest stories, even if everything gets fully civilized over there. There will always be local stories to tell. Now, let’s go over your ideas for the coming weeks. What have you got for me? Obviously, you’ll cover the transition into Alliance alignment and any troubles that might entail. What else?”

“Well, sir, speaking of Night Shadow, I think I’ve finally got an angle on who, or should I say what, she really is.”

Javon lifted an eyebrow.

“Oh? What have you discovered?”

Ashley made a motion in the air, turning on the holo floating above his desk. A recording of Night Shadow fighting Southsiders in the street appeared.

“As you know, I’ve captured quite a bit of footage of her in action. This is what helped our ratings. But I noticed a change at a certain point, following the night the Southsiders attacked the Courthouse.”

The holo switched to a dimly lit scene, with Night Shadow taking on a mob of angry men in the dark. Blood spattered from several vicious blows to the head she delivered in tandem.

“That was the fight in the dark alley in Southside, the last one I can find where she held nothing back. After that . . .”

The scene switched again. This time, a cowboy stood in the streets of League City near an alley, looking dazed and confused.

Ash’s eyes looked up to the rooftops, recording the scene from his perspective. There, a lone female figure clad in black hopped lightly off the ledge and sailed down toward the outlaw below feet-first.

He blinked in the recording and she landed. Night Shadow slugged the cowboy hard, knocking him out. Onlookers cheered.

“After this fight,” Ashley said, pausing the recording, “or should I say, starting with this fight, no one else she tangled with ever got killed.”

He glanced at his boss.

Javon nodded, but looked unconvinced.

“People change, Ashley. They develop over time.”

“Not with fighting styles and techniques, sir. I would respectfully disagree. Night Shadow is a woman, or at least she was. Women have considerable upper body weakness in comparison to men. I can accept that Night Shadow uses enhancement to give her an edge in fights. She has a mini tractor beam to strip weapons out of the hands of her opponents. You can see the brass knuckles she has on one hand in many of the videos. And I’m positive that she’s using force bracers to compensate for her lack of strength. But the one thing that makes me certain this is not the same woman as before is . . . she stops killing her opponents.”

The scene switched to another fight.

Javon and Ashley watched in silence as VB Serial Number 131M8399, also known to her owners as Mona, pulled her punches.

12.12

Javon Del Rio leaned back in his chair on Diego. His hologram on Phaethon mimicked the maneuver, although the chair there did not move. For a moment, his body looked to be sinking through the seatback.

“You’re going to have to provide much better proof than that, Ashley,” he said. “I understand it looks significant. But a change from killing men she faced because of a perceived inferiority in strength to simply disabling them can be explained by increased fighting skills. Maybe she feels guilty about killing so many bad guys. Maybe she’s made a personal resolution to try and not do that anymore.”

Ash locked eyes with the holo of his boss.

Javon shrugged back on Diego and the avatar in Ash’s office perfectly transmitted the motion.

He said, “I don’t think you have a story here. If it were someone else, they would move differently, correct? Even the way a person walks is unique. Have you compared before and after videos with her personal movements? The way she fights, the swing of her arms when striking an opponent, her personal gait and all that?”

“I have. And that was confusing at first, sir. The movements are almost identical to my eye. I even had PLAIR run analyses of her fights, from the first ones I recorded to the last, trying to see if our AI could pick out any

differences in fighting style or movements. Other than the fact she seems to be pulling her punches after the night of the bank raid and the Courthouse breach, there's no difference. But I was able to uncover something else."

He made some adjustments to the holo and another recording started playing.

"If you will remember, this was her last appearance, when confronting the crowd before the election. For the first time, I managed to capture her saying something on camera."

Night Shadow turned and lifted up two fingers toward the camera in a V sign.

Her voice came out garbled from an electronic scrambler over her mouth.

"Vote Alliance."

Ash paused the video.

"Ah, yes," Javon said, smiling. "I bet if you were to do some exit polling, you'd find that little endorsement of hers actually swung the election. Heck, there were young people right here in Octavia trying to find a way out to where you are just so they could vote Alliance in that election. I wouldn't doubt it if she were to single-handedly be responsible for turning things around with those two words."

"Those two words actually comprise the big break I've been waiting on, sir. For the first time, I had something I could try and pinpoint an identity with."

"Oh? What did you do?"

"I had PLAIR descramble the voice for me. She spent quite a bit of time on it, actually. The digital algorithm is complex. I did not want the local AI interfering, for obvious reasons, so I sent this to Diego using the Cole's relay. Anyway, what PLAIR came up with is very close to what her actual voice sounds like, when it's all unscrambled."

He twisted his fingers in the air near the holo, making more adjustments.

The scene replayed. This time, Mona's voice came through clearly.

“Vote Alliance.”

The dark figure turned and ran for the wall of the nearest building.

Ash paused it with another motion.

He turned and gave his boss a triumphant smile.

Javon frowned.

He said, “I don’t see the significance here. What am I hearing? Is this somebody you know?”

“You are hearing, sir, the voiceprint of a Model 10-20 Verberger automaton. A female, to be precise. It’s about ten years old. The 10-20 females shared several different faces. Verberger wanted people to know they were bots, so they took care to not give them unique features. You can identify one on sight. And despite having one of a half dozen or so different faces, all those model female bots share the same voiceprint. The exact, same, identical voice print.”

Ash smiled in triumph.

“There can be no doubt, sir. Night Shadow, at least this version of her, the one we’ve been seeing lately . . . is a bot.”

12.13

Javon leaned back in his seat as Ash waited, expectantly.

The older man rubbed his chin, deep in thought.

“Well, it makes sense if she has indeed stopped killing people, as you say. A bot would have a hard time inflicting harm on humans, except in times of self-defense, perhaps.”

“Or in the protection of others. She fought rioters intent on violence, here. Each blow, if you go back and watch, is designed to disable, but not permanently damage her opponents.”

“Yes. It makes sense. It’s crazy, Ash, but it makes sense.”

“I think it’s my next big story, sir. I can reveal the fact she’s a Verberger automaton, then I can start digging deeper and find out who is behind it all. If she has help from the local AI . . .”

He trailed off, letting the unspoken accusation linger in the air for a moment.

Javon cleared his throat and frowned, bringing Ash’s attention back to his boss’s holo.

“Ashley, do you watch old movies? I mean the really old ones, from back in the twentieth century or so.”

“Uh . . . I’ve seen some. Maybe a couple?”

“Let me tell you about one that is very appropriate to what I’m going to advise you to do with this information you’ve uncovered. It was a western, back when Hollywood produced a lot of westerns every year and the public ate them up. It had big names of actors you would recognize, even today. As for plot, there was a love triangle between two men and a woman. But the woman really loved the man bred for the city, who could not survive long in the wild west. He couldn’t shoot, at least not very well. And he certainly couldn’t survive in a gunfight, where drawing your sidearm and hitting the other guy before he shot you made all the difference between life and death.”

Javon paused and took a sip of water. The glass appeared briefly in the League City office as he held it, then disappeared again when he set it back down.

“There was a bully, and somehow the urban fellow was compelled to engage in a duel with the bad guy. So the cowboy, who really loved the woman, and he was a good shot, and he had the skills to survive out in the west . . . he set himself up in a hiding place with a rifle and shot the bad guy during the duel. Everybody thought that the urban fellow won, you see. The shots went off at the same time. But in reality, the hidden sniper did the real work.”

“I’m not sure where you’re going with this, sir.”

“Well, the bully was so bad, he was famous. And killing him in a duel made the other fellow famous. You see? He got the girl, of course, and went on to great success in the territory, becoming a senator after it became a state. Years later, the man who really shot the bad guy died. The senator showed up to bury him, along with the woman who had been his wife for many years. In a moment of contrition, he shared the entire story with a newspaper man on the train going home.”

“So, he told the journalist the truth. Okay.”

Javon nodded.

“Yes. But here is what the newspaper man said, and it’s how the movie ended. He refused to print a story revealing the facts behind the senator’s rise to fame and glory. He said, ‘When the legend becomes fact, print the legend.’ And that, my dear boy, is what I advise you to do in this situation.”

“Print the legend?”

“Exactly. Or, more precisely, keep the fact that she’s a bot to yourself. The public, and her millions of adoring fans, don’t need to know that. You’re going to ruin a very good thing if you put out a story like that.”

“But I don’t think she was always a bot. The person she was before she started pulling her punches . . . the person who is behind it all . . . I think that’s a story. A big one.”

Javon nodded.

“And you should keep pursuing it. I’m not saying you shouldn’t. But revealing to the galaxy right now that she’s a bot . . . well, there’s no point to it. This is definitely a case where you should print the legend.”

Ash nodded and looked down at the desk for a moment. The holo showing Night Shadow running away hovered next to his face, frozen in mid-action.

He looked up at his boss, meeting Javon’s eyes.

“It doesn’t exactly smack of journalistic integrity, though. You know?”

Javon raised an eyebrow.

“On the contrary. You don’t have the full story. So, for now at least . . . take my advice and print the legend.”

“Because legends make more sense? Because they’re more interesting than the unvarnished truth?”

“Because legends pay the bills, Ashley. No one cares about a bot fighting crime. They care about a woman who takes on the role of a superhero and fights injustice against all odds on a frontier planet. That’s what your audience keeps tuning in to hear and read about.”

Ash nodded, slowly. He met Javon’s eyes again.

“Okay. I’ll keep printing the legend. For now, at least. But I’m going to keep searching for the truth. There’s a lot more to Night Shadow than meets the eye. Someday, hopefully, I can figure her out. And then I’m going to print the truth, even if it nukes our t-shirt sales.”

Javon smiled and nodded back.

“I would expect nothing less from you, Ashley.”

12.14

“**Y**ou look beautiful.”

Jinxie smiled with an expression conveying doubts as to the veracity of that statement from her husband.

“Are you ready?”

She took a deep breath and held it a moment.

“As ready as I’m ever going to be. I don’t think your mother’s enhancer can do any better. Of course, he didn’t have much to start with.”

“Nonsense. I married a beautiful woman. He has enhanced her to the hilt. You are going to be a hit when that door opens.”

She smiled again, trying to convey a little more confidence.

“I’m just . . . not used to the limelight, that’s all. I’m a nobody.”

“Well, I’m somebody, but not by choice, Jinx. And you know me. I would much prefer to be running Class Eight power packs down into the basement of some old building in the Southside Projects with Silas right now instead of doing this. But . . . duty calls.”

“Duty calls,” Jinxie said, nodding. “And now, I’m with you, while you perform your duty. We can do it side by side.”

“That does make it a lot easier.”

They heard a knock on the door to their cabin. Mateo had made sure they had the largest VIP cabin in the ship.

“Mr. McKelway? We have landed. It is time.”

Wink turned back to Jinxie.

“Are you ready?”

“I guess this is about as ready as I’ll ever be. I think it was easier defending the Pulsar from raiders, though.”

“You’ll get used to it. It gets easier with time. And hopefully Section Sixteen won’t be in force forever.”

He held out his hand. She grabbed it and they headed for the door together.

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Married a short while ago in real time, Jinxie and Wink McKelway, her longtime boyfriend and Heir to Prime Minister Adora McKelway of Petra Roe, had enjoyed a modicum of privacy aboard the Malberry. The moments in hypertime on the journey from Phaethon to Petra Roe served as their honeymoon, such as it was. Being locked away in that spacious VIP cabin would likely be the most private time they would enjoy together in months.

Their guardian Mateo Barnwell, the prime minister’s head of security and the man personally tasked with retrieving her son, had allowed for one stop in orbit around Petra Roe before continuing down to the surface in real time. Here, they picked up a man named Artimus Bench.

Mr. Bench arrived onboard the Malberry with a small entourage of dark women wearing darker sheath dresses and 12-centimeter purple high heels. Each of the five women accompanying him carried a large purple suitcase.

Bench wore a white tuxedo with flashing sequins and tiny holograms of stars and planets rotating quickly around his body. A big felt fedora graced his head, also white. The only signs of black he wore were a pair of permanent sunglasses covering his eyes at all times.

One of the women accompanying him had speakers woven into her dress. A loud dance rhythm thumped out of her clothes. All six in the group danced their way onboard, much to Jinxie's amusement and Mateo's annoyance.

The music and the entire retinue stopped suddenly, facing Wink, Jinxie and Mateo. All six were in motion when the music stopped, and they held their poses for several dramatic seconds.

"I see a marvelous creature before me, Mr. Heir."

Wink and Jinxie shared a glance with one another before staring back at the party, still frozen mid-dance.

"I presume you are speaking of my wife."

Wink could not see where the man's eyes were looking, on account of the sunglasses.

"Precisely. A most glorious creature. And when I am finished enhancing her, she will be my greatest accomplishment. Simply put, sir . . . I will make your mother very, very proud."

Jinxie could not help but snort softly at this pronouncement.

Mateo cleared his throat, breaking the silence. He led everyone into the McKelway's cabin. Here, Bench's party went to work. The women opened their suitcases and began taking out dresses and makeup, sorting them into little piles.

Bench shooed the two men out of the suite.

Mateo allowed himself to be sent out along with Wink. Technically, he was more concerned about Wink's safety than Jinxie's, but Bench's entire party had been thoroughly screened before being allowed onboard.

Besides, Artimus Bench was something of a celebrity on Petra Roe, having been employed by the rich and famous for years. He had a reputation to preserve, and would surely not dare harm the Prime Minister's daughter-in-law.

Just to be safe, Mateo had arranged for a female member of his staff to maintain watch on the room from a security closet hidden behind a wall

panel, a feature neither Wink nor Jinxie knew about. If Bench were to try something, she could intervene immediately.

In the VIP suite, one of Bench's assistants pressed a holo button on a fog generator while the music maven started a new, thumping tune playing through her dress. In seconds, a thick white smoke rolled over the floor.

Bench clapped his hands, happy with the ambience.

“Now my dear, let us find your colors. And I shall begin to . . . enhance!”

12.15

Jinxie found herself in the modern version of a corset, a contraption made of smart fabric that cinched in tight around her waist and pushed up her breasts until they pointed up and out.

It felt . . . uncomfortable. The corset part around her waist made it feel like she could only walk so fast before ripping something open.

The dress Bench chose for her out of the suitcases was a gauzy white thing comprised of multifaceted crystals and filaments that changed colors when they moved. It looked golden, soft blue or light black, depending on the light.

And it looked stunning.

Jinxie thought it seemed too short, exposing her legs up to the thigh, but Bench assured her short hemlines were in style right now in Old Town. He produced a matching pair of kitten heels that adjusted to her feet as she put them on.

Bench informed her in a theatrical whisper that the dress had been imported from Italia and fetched 18,000 credits at an ultra-exclusive boutique near Parliament, one she might soon be shopping at herself in the days ahead. He could get her a VIP after-hours visit if she wished to avoid the crowds.

She frowned and said, “How can a shop with dresses that expensive be crowded?”

“You would be surprised, my dear. The hoi polloi and hangers-on know no bounds.”

Bench also produced a small treasury of jewelry from one of the other suitcases. He selected a thick diamond choker that he said ran into six figures, with matching twin bracelets.

For earrings, he chose small transparent crystals mined from an asteroid belt embedded with live organisms known as glow dots from one of the moons of distant Farguard.

This amoeba-like creature floated lazily in a small space inside the crystal, pulsing softly while emitting a pinprick of very bright light.

“I can assure you that no one else on Petra Roe has a pair of earrings like these, Mrs. Heir,” Bench whispered to her conspiratorially. “There are only three pairs known to exist in the entire galaxy.”

“Who has the other two?” Jinxie asked, suddenly curious.

“I don’t know. But I can assure you that no one else here does. And that’s the important thing.”

At last, fully dressed and bejeweled, Bench set about for the most important task, at least according to him: her makeup.

One of the women covered her eyes and mouth with shaped silicone strips, then another began scooping out a runny white paste from a small bucket, something she handled with the utmost care.

“This, my dear, is called filtering makeup,” Bench said.

Jinxie said nothing because silicone covered her lips at the moment. But she raised an eyebrow.

“You see,” he continued, “in the old days people stood in front of a camera and recorded themselves for social media. Or perhaps they participated in a vintage virtual meeting, showing only their face. ‘Filters’ were what they called software that enhanced their appearance. Filtering makeup does the

same thing, only on a molecular level. You will look your best for all who see you, both on the broadcasts and in person.”

As his assistant finished applying a thin layer of white cream over all the skin on her face and neck, Bench leaned closer and shifted into his stage whisper again.

“You have no idea how expensive this stuff is, my dear. It is far more valuable than the dress and your shoes combined. Some women would literally kill to get a container of this stuff. It’s quite literally worth far more than its weight in gold.”

Once the makeup artist was satisfied the cream had been applied smoothly over all her face, she stepped back while another woman approached with a small control board. A little holo panel appeared and she flicked the switch to activate the makeup.

“Oh, that’s nice. Already an improvement,” Bench said. “Now, let us amp her up a bit.”

The woman nodded and twisted a holographic knob while everyone in the room stared intently at Jinxie’s face.

Another woman gently peeled off the strips from her eyes and mouth.

“Oh, that is really, really nice. I think that’s it. You can stop there. Now for the hair.”

The woman set the strips aside and pulled out some sticky material. She used it to plaster Jinxie’s hair down flat on her scalp while another assistant pulled out a wig from one of the suitcases.

“A smart wig, my dear. As its name suggests, it will examine your real hair, the shape of your head and face, and decide on the optimum length and shade and style, etcetera. I don’t even know how much it costs, *ell-oh-ell*.”

When the woman placed the wig on her head, she felt something like tendrils wrapping around her skull. The wig pulled itself tight and began transforming. The hair grew longer, shaping itself into curls and gently flowing tresses.

She felt the lengthening process stop when it fell below her waist. A strand dropping down her front changed to a lighter shade of lustrous brown.

It practically glowed.

“Ah, yes. Now you look like a native of PR. Come, come. Gaze in the mirror at my handiwork.”

Bench led her gently by the elbow into the suite’s bathroom. She stopped and gaped at the image staring back at her.

“I . . . I hardly recognize myself. I mean . . . it looks like me but . . .”

“Better than you are used to?”

She nodded, dumbstruck.

“The enhancement, my dear, is now complete. You are ready for your public debut.”

12.16

“I feel . . . fake,” Jinxie said.

“You look about the same to me,” Wink said. “Beautiful as always.”

“You’re a politician’s son. You’re used to lying.”

She stood, holding Wink’s arm at the insistence of Bench, who also made certain Wink had dressed appropriately.

Wink now sported a suit that looked a bit gaudy, but one that Bench insisted matched the latest Old Town style. It featured a dark rich blue fabric with deep brown stripes down the legs and sleeves, complete with shiny brass buttons. Underneath, he wore a frilly white shirt with French cuffs and diamond cufflinks.

Despite any personal misgivings, and despite the fact Wink had not donned a suit in years, he followed the fashion maven’s instructions to a tee, trusting that the enhancement consultant knew best.

Wink wore rich black leather ankle boots that Bench gave him, with a heel a bit too high to be comfortable. Bench told him these imports from Italia were the latest trend in footwear.

The Malberry had landed and they waited now at the ship’s main airlock. It remained closed while Bench and his assistants fussed over the pair,

tweaking their overall look at the last minute.

Mateo walked up with nine guards following him.

“There’s a crowd out there, Mr. Heir. Not to worry, no one came inside the perimeter armed, and the entire spaceport has been swept repeatedly for weapons and explosives after that last attempt on your mother’s life.”

“What last attempt? Was there another?”

Mateo paused, noting the sudden look of alarm on Wink’s face.

“Ah. You have been out of the loop on everything for a while, Mr. McKelway. I’ll see to it you are brought up to speed once we arrive at the prime minister’s residence.”

Wink and Jinxie shared a worried look.

“As I said, you have nothing to worry about. The door will open, and you and your wife will walk out onto the stage erected by the ship. Be sure and wave. Acknowledge the crowd. They’re going to want a good look at you both. Be sure and smile. A lot. Then you will approach the podium and face the cameras. Make a very brief statement about how happy you are to be home, and that you are pleased with Petra Roe joining the Alliance. But say very little. Do not say anything that will embarrass your mother. Introduce your wife to the camera, let her be seen by all. Then turn and follow my lead as we exit the stage and board a waiting transport. Any questions?”

“No. Smile and wave. Short speech. Introduce Jinxie to the world. Exit stage right. I think I’ve got it.”

“Very good.”

Mateo turned around and joined his men. He glanced over at Bench, standing further back in the corridor along with all his female assistants.

Bench raised his hands, as if in surrender.

“I don’t need to be seen. Everybody who’s anybody will know this is my handiwork. They look that good.”

Mateo could not help but chuckle a little at the man's audacity. But he joined his men as they took up positions behind the couple.

He said, "Let's go."

The door irised open and sunlight lanced inside. A stage had been hastily erected at the airlock, so the couple would not have to hop down a meter to the ground.

At the edge of the stage, a podium had been placed. A dozen cam drones floated in front of it, all aimed at the door and the couple standing there.

They took a step together out from the ship and onto the stage.

A crowd out on the spaceport's tarmac, tens of thousands strong, broke into cheers and applause.

Jinxie squinted past the sunlight and felt shocked to see so many faces, jumping up and down, screaming and waving. Sheer euphoria swept over her like a living thing.

Wink raised a hand and waved casually. Translucent force barriers kept a horde of screaming girls back, some as young as 13, others in their 60s. They attacked the barriers, slamming up against them while calling out his name.

He glanced sideways at Jinxie, still wearing a shocked expression on her face.

He squeezed her hand.

"Smile. Wave," he said through clenched teeth without moving his lips.

As if knocking her out of stupor, she smiled just as several broadcast cameras zoomed in on her for the first time. She waved off to the left, to the other side of the massive crowd surrounding the stage.

A roar of approval went up on that side.

An older man with gray hair, dressed in a suit very similar to Wink's, stepped up quickly to the podium and waved his hand back toward the couple.

His voice came out amplified, echoing over the crowd.

“Ladies and gentlemen, may I present to you the Heir to the Prime Ministry of Petra Roe . . . Wiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiink McKelway!”

Now the crowd really went wild, a roar echoing off the spaceship behind the couple and bouncing off everything.

Wink met Jinxie’s eyes and smiled, squeezing her hand again. Then he let go and stepped up to the podium as the announcer moved out of the way.

“Hello, Petra Roe! It’s so *good* to be home!”

He paused and let the roars of approval subside. Then he turned and waved a hand to Jinxie, making a beckoning motion.

“I want to introduce you all to my wonderful wife. Let’s give Jinxie McKelway a proper Petra Roe welcome!”

All the attention shifted to Jinxie. Never before had she had so many people staring at her, both in person and over the broadcasts. She could feel every eye in the world on her.

At that moment she realized why her mother-in-law had spent untold thousands of credits preparing her for this. She never felt more grateful for makeup that hid every minor imperfection on her face, and clothing that amplified all the good things about her body.

With that thought in mind, and a modicum of confidence, she stepped up to the podium. Wink put an arm around her shoulders and lifted the other arm out to the crowd, presenting her to the public.

She smiled.

They roared in approval for the Heir’s new wife.

12.17

“The only thing that worries me, young Master McKelway, is your association with known pirates. The Ultima Mule Company is notorious for its wartime exploits.”

Wink stood ramrod straight in front of another podium, this time inside a secure room in the Parliament Building.

As he stood there, he reflected back on the last half hour.

Mateo led them straight to Parliament where Wink reunited with his mother.

His father, not a politician and a man who typically avoided the public eye if at all possible, made a rare appearance in order to give him a firm handshake. Wink introduced Jinxie to his parents, and they both gave the young bride a gentle hug.

“Welcome to our world,” Adora said with a grim smile. “I see Artimus has done quite well with you. I hardly recognized you on that stage.”

“I do feel a little fake. But I think I like it.”

“It’s like wearing a mask. When you’re viewed by millions of strangers, you don’t want them seeing the real you. You want them seeing an image you project for them. Preferably, an image of perfection. They know it’s not real, too. But they expect it.”

Jinxie nodded thoughtfully.

“I’m beginning to understand that.”

The door swished open, and Mateo stuck his head into the private conference room.

“You’re to address the Committee on Foreign Affairs in five minutes.”

And that’s how I got here, Wink thought, snapping back to the present.

Behind him, both his parents and his wife were seated. His father Wylie McKelway and Jinxie were allowed to attend this session as a courtesy by the chair. No one else, other than the eleven MPs serving on the committee, were present.

No cameras or other recording devices, either.

Wink’s mind stopped wandering after these thoughts flitted through him. He focused on the chair who had asked the question.

“The time, Mr. Chairman, for calling our new allies ‘pirates’ is long gone. The Ultima Mule Company is a prosperous and legitimate business. The seed money funding many of its endeavors came from bounties on enemy ships in the war, and from gold lawfully extracted from enemy sources during the same conflict. Since then, the company has committed no further acts of piracy. Instead, they have simply reinvested their capital in one venture after another. They remain the largest and most successful enterprise on Lute. I have met the CEO, Christopher Raleigh, and I have found him to be an honorable man, a worthy business partner. I have no compunctions against forming an alliance with him from a business standpoint, just as Parliament has shown to be willing to form a political alliance with Lute.”

The chair nodded, frowning.

“It’s just that many of us in this room are old enough to remember being on opposite sides of the fence from Lute, that’s all. Old impressions die hard.”

He turned to address the MPs to either side of him.

“But we can adjust. Just as the Japanese Empire became a close ally to the United States after World War II, as well as the war-torn West Germany, so we can become allies with those who partnered with the Republic in the last war.”

Privately, Wink did not think the analogy held up well. But he kept his mouth shut and the expression on his face neutral.

The floor was passed to another MP, this one sitting to the left of the chairman.

“Mr. Heir, I’m curious what products you shipped and are shipping with your ship, the Pulsar. It remains a Petra Roe flagged vessel, no?”

“Yes, sir. It is a Petra Roe flagged ship, and the Pulsar will continue to be one even after we officially join the Alliance. As for what I shipped, I started out buying items on the cheap that were sorely missed on the frontier. Things like candy bars and boxed meals. The Machro-drive helped me turn fast profits, as I sold them for a pretty penny in places they were sorely lacking. I learned the basics of capitalism, buying low and selling high, concepts of supply and demand, things like that. Along the way, I met my wife. She became my partner in business as well as in life.”

He turned and grinned at Jinxie sitting behind and to the right of him. She blushed as attention in the room shifted to her for a moment before returning to Wink.

“There was an incident I want you to address,” another MP said, an older woman sitting to the chair’s right. “I am speaking of the time you violated the airspace of Sporades. I sit on the Intelligence Committee as well. Rumor has it you managed to smuggle some illicit weapons out of Sporades on that trip, although the details we have received remain scant. Neither the League nor the Republic wishes to divulge much about what happened there.”

Wink nodded, having expected the question.

“As you are all no doubt aware, there is considerable angst and irritation in the League concerning the worlds they lost after the war. And there are efforts underway to try and win those planets back. I made perhaps a boneheaded decision to try and profit off these political undercurrents by

purchasing some obsolete weaponry on Sporades then selling it to colonists on Phaethon. In my thinking, weapons of any kind would be welcomed on the frontier. I can assure this committee that all the weaponry I delivered to Phaethon has been secured by the Phaethon Solar Corporation and either destroyed or safely sequestered. I have been working with that company for some time now, and have been invited to serve on their board of directors. I will vouch for their efforts.”

“We heard something about a battle tank appearing in League City and killing a lot of people,” the old woman said, frowning.

Wink nodded.

“That League battle tank was used to suppress a riot and stop an armed robbery of the primary bank on Phaethon. So, in that regard it was put to good use. A gun, as you all know, is not evil. It’s only a tool. Like a rock, or an ax, or any other tool it can be used for either good or evil. It’s the same with a battle tank.”

“What is the disposition of this tank right now? You say it is secured by the corporation you fell into cahoots with. Where is it? What’s being done with it?”

Wink smiled brightly at the old woman.

“As far as I know, ma’am, steps are being taken to diplomatically repatriate it to the League forces still looking for it. Other than that, I cannot say.”

12.18

The Insurgent snapped back into real time.

Estelle Garcia noted the shift. She could feel the entire ship shaking. A loud wrenching noise filled the bridge as raw solar power ripped apart shields and battered against the hull with the force of a miniature nuclear explosion.

She felt the bridge move suddenly, lurching to one side and throwing everyone off balance.

When she looked up, she knew they were no longer in hypertime even without glancing at the forward holo. It no longer showed stars dancing in random patterns as they teleported around space, trying to avoid the arrays of solar chunks slung out by the massive Albatross-class ships.

Now the stars remained still in the holo, displaying irrefutable evidence they had stopped.

A flicker in the corner of her eye made her heart jump. She turned to look and caught the briefest glimpse of a new Republican battle bot aiming its gun at her. The holographic eyes locked with hers for the briefest bit . . .

Then she blinked and it was gone, a pile of dust on the floor in its place.

“What . . . what is happening?”

“Grab that! Destroy it!” Captain Minakowski screamed.

She turned to where he pointed. A shiny cylinder the size of a tennis ball cannister stood on the main control console.

One of the ensigns ran to it and knocked it off. The cylinder rolled on the deck.

Minakowski jumped and stomped on it with his foot. But the effort proved futile. He made nary a dent or a scratch on the cylinder.

“This is a sensor for PLAIR!” he yelled, picking it up.

Estelle looked back at the main holo. Stars flickered now, changing every second. But they seemed different somehow.

“We’re being towed!” one of the officers cried out. “I have no control, Captain!”

“Take this,” Minakowski said, handing the cylinder to the ensign who knocked it off the console, “and jettison it!”

“Won’t PLAIR just teleport it back onboard, sir?”

“Just do it! We have to put up a resistance!”

“Aye, aye, Captain.”

The ensign hurried off the bridge carrying the cylinder with him.

Shortly after he left, the cannister popped away. PLAIR moved it, hiding it in the hold to prevent any further molestation.

The ensign took his time returning to the bridge, unwilling to face his Captain with the news.

In the meantime, Minakowski turned to Estelle, and his eyes softened a bit.

He pointed at the pile of sand on the floor.

“Somebody just saved you from an untimely death.”

She turned and glanced at the atomized particles.

“You think?”

He nodded.

“That was a disambiguity ray. It happened in hypertime, after the bot was sent back with us to real time. So, it seemed instantaneous. But it occurred right after the bot appeared.”

Now that they were under tow, the Captain seemed calm, as if realizing he could do nothing more about his situation and he had accepted it.

He continued, as if giving a lecture to a class full of cadets instead of the lone SSI agent on his bridge.

“I read about how these rays were used in the war. In fact, not many people realize it, but they’re the one weapon that can be reliably used against battle bots. Far better, even, than high explosives. Did you know every generation of bots on both sides, made by either Verberger or our own Thespar Corp., is built to be more and more resistant to explosives? My guess is there are several onboard with us right now, guarding things like our torpedo hold so we can’t sabotage the ship or scuttle it in any way. I’d wager to bet this one was brought up to the bridge with whoever placed that take-over cannister here, and it decided on its own to take us out. Or at least, it made a decision to eliminate the one representative SSI agent among us. Namely, you, Ms. Garcia. Somebody along for the ride as its human overseer obviously disagreed, and took steps to neutralize the threat against you. It would seem you have a secret admirer.”

Despite herself, Estelle blushed.

She had no love for the Republic. But the thought that a human controller decided to override a battle bot’s decision to kill her . . .

“Well, that’s a nice thought.”

She glanced back at the pile of dust, searching in vain for any sign of the person with the disambiguity gun. Apparently, he or she remained in hypertime.

“I mean, the fact that a machine just tried to kill me is a disturbing one. But if a real person thought I was worth saving, I’m just glad they were able to

look past the uniform and all of SSI's recent history."

"Don't get to feeling too good about it all, Ms. Garcia. If we're being brought to Diego, there will likely be a show trial, or at least an inquest of some sort. I will be held to the highest standard as Captain, and likely called before their Parliament or a military tribunal to answer for why we entered combat with their fleet."

"They started it."

"I'm certain that's not the way they're going to see it. As for you, the Republicans have never treated SSI personnel very well. Hopefully now that the war is long over, they've abandoned their execution squads. Apparently, no one thought to tell their robots about that minor detail, though."

She nodded.

"Is there any way I can get a message out, Captain? I need to contact my director and let him know we've been taken captive."

But already Minakowski was focused on damage reports and the sitings of additional robots on his ship. Several people called into the bridge now, from different spots throughout the vessel.

He glanced over his shoulder from the main console and said, "You can try, Ms. Garcia. But don't hold your breath. I imagine we'll be under a communications blackout all the way to Diego."

12.19

The Stalwart popped out of hypertime, appearing in space several AUs out of Phaethon's solar system.

Other Eagle-class ships popped into existence nearby.

"What just happened?" Annaliese Pavlikov said, eyes wide as she stared at the front holos.

Her husband Valerian took another step onto the bridge, then another. He drew up even with his wife and looked toward Captain Ung.

Ung stood there, breathing hard.

"We just went through the first space battle in several years. And I'm fairly certain that was the first one ever conducted entirely in hypertime. StarCen? Report, please."

"We had negligible success against the Albatross-class ships, the Elsa Cole and the Harvey Mayfair, Captain."

"There were two? But I thought the Cole attacked."

"Two identical ships, the Cole and Mayfair, were involved with the hostilities. I see that now. Their firepower proved to be far too much for us. The Insurgent was damaged, knocked out of hypertime, and subsequently captured."

“Captured? Where is the Insurgent right now?”

“In tow. Just before I lost control of the ship, she was taken by the Cole. There is at least a 94 percent chance they are returning to Diego for a military hearing. We will know more in a few hours.”

“Garcia’s on that ship,” Val muttered.

“Garcia? Is that your assistant?” Annaliese said.

He nodded.

“She’s in uniform?”

He nodded again.

“What did I tell you about wearing those things in the field?”

Val glanced at her with a trace of irritation.

“She wasn’t in the field, Anna. She was aboard a League Navy ship.”

Annaliese opened her mouth to snap back a reply, then thought better of it.

There is a time and place for a marital spat, she thought, and on the bridge of a battleship during military action felt inappropriate.

“There’s nothing we can do about it now,” Ung said, frowning. “I will maintain our present location until we hear from the Admiralty.”

“I will return to my quarters,” Val said. “Please keep me informed, Captain.”

“Yes, please keep us both informed,” Annaliese said.

Then she turned to Val and said, “I’ll join you.”

He nodded and let her enter the pod first. They turned and watched the bridge disappear as the door closed after them.

The pod whisked them to the VIP corridor, not far away. When the door swished open, Annaliese looked at Val.

“What do you think will happen to your assistant?”

“Hopefully nothing. The war is long over. StarCen has been reset. Our government is no longer belligerent. And SSI is not the same organization it was before.”

“The name should have been changed. The uniforms. Everything.”

“Perhaps that is a legislative effort you can spearhead once we get back home.”

“I’m not sure when that will be, in light of these developments,” Annaliese said as they walked down the corridor toward their cabin.

“Oh, that reminds me,” she said, stopping suddenly. “StarCen? Which side won the election on Phaethon?”

“Phaethon elected to align with the Planetary Alliance, Minister.”

“What? How wide was the margin?”

“By one vote. It was cast in the final minutes the polls were open, in one of the outer settlements.”

“Who came in second?”

“The Republic.”

Annaliese and Valerian stared at one another for a moment.

Val said, “All our efforts were in vain. We can’t even beat a bunch of old pirates in a fair election. We can’t even pay enough people to vote for us.”

“I’m sure there are mitigating circumstances.”

“The mitigating circumstances are I’m down my best agent, who was captured in an act of aggression by those freaking dreadnoughts out there, and I’m still missing my tanks!”

Annaliese opened her mouth to say something, but she bit it off.

Val stormed down the hall to their door and palmed it open.

“StarCen? Put a request through the proper channels to get me back down on the surface of Phaethon, ASAP. I don’t want to go home empty-handed.”

The door slid shut behind him, leaving his wife outside.

She grimaced as she approached the door herself.

When it swished open, she saw Val throwing his clothes into a suitcase.

Val spoke via a connection through his implant.

“Yes, sir. No, I am aware. Yes, if I need to do an infiltration, I’m prepared to do so. My team has done it before. Yes, sir. I want her back as soon as possible. Yes, I understand it’s a political situation, now. Thank you, sir. Will do.”

He turned and looked at his wife, his eyes still brimming with anger.

“The director thinks the fleet will be called home. He says Clarion is in full crisis mode right now over this. We’ll be called back any minute. I have his assurances that I can be left behind to pursue matters on Phaethon. I’m going in alone.”

“I’m not going to see you again for a long time, am I? It’s six weeks in hypertime just to get home. I was looking forward to spending that with you.”

His face eased up, and some of the tension eased out of his body.

He said, “You know that both of our jobs keep us apart.”

“I know, that’s why I was looking forward to this . . . time together.”

“Getting those tanks back it’s what’s important right now, Annaliese. You have to go help smooth things over regarding this political crisis, or whatever it is.”

She nodded and looked down at the floor. Suddenly, she did not feel like a high-ranking minister in Star League. She felt a deep sense of loneliness and abandonment.

Val stood up straight and touched his implant, reading something in his inner eye.

“I have approval. We’re headed back to the planet and they’re going to drop me off. Then what’s left of our fleet will head home. I’ve got to get to the

flight deck for the ride down.”

He closed his suitcase and it sealed itself shut. He picked it up and headed for the door.

“Val.”

She stopped him, a hand up on his chest.

He looked down at her with a mixture of irritation and curiosity.

“What?”

“Val . . . I want . . . I want us to start a family. I don’t care about my ministerial position anymore. Not as much. And I don’t have to give it up . . . we can get help. The bots they make for childcare these days are very good. Or we can pay for an indentured servant. I don’t know. But . . .”

She looked up into his eyes and her lips parted.

“I’m ovulating. I’ve been thinking about it every month when it happens. There was never a good time to bring it up to you. I don’t get to see you very often. But . . . I want to have a baby. I want *us* to have a baby.”

He stared at her a moment, speechless.

Then he dropped the suitcase and touched his implant again.

“Captain? I’m going to need half an hour before departing. Yes, we can stay in hypertime for it. I have some personal matters to attend to that won’t wait. Make it a full hour. Thank you.”

He looked down at her again and smiled at her for what seemed like the first time in a long time.

“Let’s get started.”

“You’ll know by the time I get home if this works or not. It’s six weeks for me, but only a few hours for you . . .”

He pulled her in tight and kissed her hard.

She stopped talking and melted in his arms.

12.20

The Harvey Mayfair reappeared in real time, once again orbiting Phaethon.

This time, no coterie of League Eagle-class ships waited to pounce on her, Captain Delaunay noted with relief. The parking orbit remained relatively free of traffic, especially after all those chunks of sun were brought in by the two Albatross-class ships and the League's many solar torpedoes.

All that remained of the solar onslaught that had lit up the hazy planet below had long since fizzled out. The hot plasma left over was dispersed by lack of gravity, chilled in the freezing cold of space.

Delauney took a deep breath and let it out slowly as he checked all the holos for enemy ships, or anything else out of the ordinary.

"Well! We have made it at last. I swear, I have never been subject to so many delays in fulfilling a simple mission like this before. PLAIR, please open a comm with Orbital Control."

Moments later, the ship established a connection. Delaunay spoke with a young man in the basement of the Courthouse in League City.

"Phaethon, we have several thousand migrants who are ready to become citizens of your fine planet! I trust they will have adequate time for processing and then vote in your alignment election."

“I’m sorry, Captain. The election is over.”

“What?”

Delauney glanced at the clock holo hovering in one corner. It displayed standard time and local time. Both showed a minute past the hour.

He felt his heart sink.

With a dull inflection he said, “Who won?”

“The Alliance, by one vote. Listen, we are having to integrate our immigration and customs AI with the local AI, and that’s going to take some time. We’ll be happy to intake your migrants in the morning, 8:00 a.m. League City time. May I say, the Alliance is more than happy to welcome immigrants, wherever they hail from.”

“Right.”

With a curt gesture, Delauney cut the connection.

Then he sighed, full of frustration and irritation.

“PLAIR, get me the brass back in Plairmont on the line, please. I’ll need to file a report.”

“At once, Captain Delauney.”

While the Republic’s AI made the connection over the quantum matrix, Delauney scratched his head in thought, staring down at the deck.

“None of these people are going to want to become permanent citizens of another system. Well, not many of them anyway. I’m going to have to figure out what to say to them after I finish my call with the Admiralty.”

The front holo of the ship shimmered, replaced by an older man with far more insignia than Delauney’s uniform carried.

“I understand the League gave you a bit of trouble there, Captain.”

“Yes, Admiral. I have failed in my mission to bring in enough voters to sway the election on Phaethon to our side. Their Orbital Control just informed me the Alliance won by one vote.”

Delauney spoke without emotion, but inside he was already mentally preparing for the end of his career with the Navy.

The Admiral did not look angry, though, or even disappointed.

“That’s too bad. However, our capture of an enemy ship in combat, not to mention the opportunity to try out both Albatross-class ships in the first space battle in years, trumps everything else right now. Continue with your mission carrying the migrants, Captain, then return home for debriefing.”

“We have been instructed to remain in orbit overnight while their local governmental AIs sync with the Alliance’s. I will inform the passengers, but I don’t expect too many to take up the opportunity to migrate. This is not what they signed up for.”

The Admiral nodded and said, “Figure it out and then come home as soon as you can. Be sure and drop the remaining passengers off wherever they want, then show up tomorrow in Plairmont ready to deliver a full report. Maybe by then we’ll have our prisoners of war sorted and some sort of diplomatic understanding reached with the League about this attack of theirs. That’s taking center stage right now, Captain. We’re not as concerned with which way a minor frontier planet turns at the moment.”

When the call wrapped up, Delauney took a moment to gather his thoughts. The front holo returned to the view of Phaethon below, a hazy brown arc covering the lower portion of his view.

At last, he made some adjustments on the center console and stared into a cam. His face appeared on every holo throughout the vast ship, from the large public ones floating over communal areas to the smaller private ones in each cabin and workspace.

“Ladies and gentlemen, this is your Captain speaking. Due to circumstances far beyond our control, we have arrived too late for the planetary alignment election. At this time, the people of Phaethon have voted to join the Alliance, with Lute, Halcyon, and most recently, Petra Roe.”

He paused a moment to let that sink in for the audience, especially the 10,000 or so passengers who expected to be making a “day trip” in hypertime.

“Of course, everyone who signed on to show up at Phaethon and cast their vote for the Republic will still get paid. You’ve come this far, and we won’t let you go home empty-handed. However, I realize in a group this large that some of you may wish to immigrate to Phaethon anyway. Perhaps you were planning to stay after the election. Their governmental systems need to mesh with the larger ones of the Alliance, and they are planning on working on that through the night. The Courthouse has requested that we not send any migrants down until tomorrow morning. So, we are going to stay here overnight in orbit. In the morning, at eight local time, should any of you wish to remain with us or go down to Phaethon to permanently migrate to a frontier planet aligned with the Planetary Alliance, we will send transports down and drop you off with their customs personnel at the spaceport. Then we will be returning to Republican planets, in hypertime, as originally planned. Anyone who wishes to depart on any of the planets we visit is welcome to do so. Should you have any questions, please direct them to PLAIR or one of our human crew. Thank you.”

12.21

Valerian Pavlikov appeared suddenly in a field near the outdoor bazaar at League City, stubbornly wearing his glossy black uniform.

Captain Ung had no idea how to safely get him to the planet's surface, especially with the Mayfair looming in orbit. In fact, Ung had no desire to return to Phaethon at all. He wanted to go home to Clarion as soon as possible, in hypertime, to prepare for the political fallout over losing one of his ships in combat.

Valerian gently and patiently explained to the Captain that he merely needed to rig up a transport with a personal Machro so it could go down to Phaethon's surface and deposit him there. Val would jump off it in real time while the transport returned to the Stalwart in hypertime, then Ung could be on his way.

Ung remained skeptical until he floated the idea, at Val's insistence, to his chief engineer. Yes, such a thing was possible, the engineer concluded. Within an hour, in hypertime, the transport was ready.

Val kissed his wife goodbye, leaving her in bed. If she did not get pregnant, he thought, it was not for lack of trying on his part.

Then he entered the transport and sat back for the ride down.

The pilot hovered a meter above the ground and nodded at him. He unstrapped himself from the seat and waited at the door.

Val jumped as far as he could when the door opened. The biggest danger, the engineer told him, involved the transport bumping him while he transitioned to real time and the transport remained in hypertime.

He landed on the planet's surface kicking up a small cloud of dust. He looked up and behind himself, but found no sign of the transport.

"It's likely already long gone. I'm glad that worked."

Turning, he caught sight of the edge of town and started walking. Along the way, he reflected over the sudden turn of events in space.

If everyone was forced into being objective, he thought, Ung started the fight with the Republic by firing first. But as far as Ung was concerned, the sudden appearance of the Mayfair when the giant ship popped out of hypertime, constituted an act of aggression.

The question became then, would others see it that way? Almost certainly, the Republicans would not. They would be holding their own inquests, including one for the captured Captain Minakowski of the Insurgent. Val wondered what would happen to him.

Minakowski had not instigated the hostilities, although his Eagle-class battleship was certainly part of the fighting. StarCen coordinated her ships in the battle, just as PLAIR controlled hers.

Hopefully, Val thought, the leftists in the Republican Parliament were strong enough these days to prevent any undue consequences for a man simply following orders. No doubt their right wing would want to prosecute Minakowski as a war criminal merely for participating in the battle. Even though humans had no control of their ships in battle, or most any other time.

Val sighed and put thoughts of Minakowski, and by extension Estelle Garcia, out of his mind. He could do nothing for either person right now. In real time, their inquest or trial or whatever hell the Republicans might have planned for them, would not even begin for hours. Perhaps not even until tomorrow, in standard time.

He focused on putting one foot after the other and covering the distance to town.

While he walked, his mind wandered. He had pleasant memories of the all too brief time with his wife.

“We’ve got to do something, especially if she does conceive. Maybe I can find a job that doesn’t require travel.”

With that as another happy thought, he kept walking, dreaming of a house in the suburbs and raising kids.

12.22

Half an hour later, Val entered the outskirts of League City. He walked past several houses in a new subdivision.

This again got him to thinking about families. He found himself stopping to stare at three-bedroom ranch homes with nice backyards. Toys and bikes littered front lawns.

A deep sense of longing welled up inside him as he passed toys and playsets behind wooden fences. One corner lot even had an elaborate treehouse he spied up in the leaves. It made him want to jump over the fence and go climb it, just to investigate how he could build one back home.

He continued walking. The next neighborhood was older, and the homes were not as nice.

Dogs barked at him from behind translucent force fences, and his brows furrowed at the expenditure of energy he knew was needed to keep those up.

I guess imports are up for domestic power packs, he thought. That must be the reason . . .

Soon he strolled down city streets and left the suburban houses behind. A young boy passed by him, pulling a rickshaw. Val called out and waved the

lad down, taking a grateful seat in the conveyance. He asked the runner to carry him to the Courthouse.

The boy seemed awestruck by the glossy black uniform, but he accepted Val's token and continued jogging down the street. Val leaned back in the seat and luxuriated in sitting down for a change.

Along the way, he thought about the best approach to solving his dilemma with the tanks. The notion that everyone who wanted one could get an implant *before* the planet declared its alignment in the election said something to him. He turned over the thought in his head and examined it from multiple angles. Something nagged at him on the edge of reason.

If the people were able to get implants that worked, that showed streaming entertainment and live feeds . . .

If they were able to open comlinks with others on this planet, and even over the quantum matrix links in orbit . . .

If they were able to use all the myriad things one could use an implant for, *before* alignment . . .

The obvious conclusion seemed to reach out and slap him in the face.

"They have sensors everywhere."

He glanced up at the rooftops and light poles but he saw no telltale signs of municipal sensors.

"They're hidden. But they have to be here. There's no way it could have happened without sensors. Sensors everywhere."

He reflected back on his team's futile effort to install a sensor for StarCen. It had been taken down immediately. The effort failed because . . . there was already a sensor network in this city to begin with. Two system AIs were incompatible with one another on the same planet. The existing version had to be rooted by out by force in wartime, after all, following a planetary takeover. He knew the history of the Gold War. It was still recent, even if he was too young to have participated in the conflict himself.

Now, let's think this through, he thought to himself, clamping his mouth shut as he realized every word he spoke out loud could be picked up by those same unseen sensors.

If there were sensors here to begin with . . . *somebody* knows where my tanks are. Maybe not an actual person, but the AI behind those sensors surely knows . . .

By the time his driver jogged up to the end of the rickshaw line at Courthouse Square, winded and sweaty from the long run, Val had reached a conclusion.

And he knew how he would approach his continued efforts to retrieve the stolen League battle tanks.

He stepped out of the rickshaw and observed the piteous state of his runner, currently collapsed on the pavement and breathing hard.

Smiling at the drama, he retrieved another small token from his pocket as a tip and tossed it down to the boy.

The driver caught it in one hand midair. As soon as Val turned for the courthouse, the boy stood up, pocketing the token. Miraculously, he no longer appeared worn out from his long run. Instead, he smiled and joined a small group of other young rickshaw operators congregating at a park bench nearby.

By this time, Val reached the Courthouse. He walked up the steps, nodding politely to the lone sheriff's deputy standing guard at the door.

The man returned the nod, warily. He looked for weapons on Val's body but none showed, so he let Val enter without challenge.

At the reception desk inside, a young woman glanced up. Her eyes widened at the sight of his glossy black uniform, but she put on a professional smile when Val approached.

"May I help you?"

"Yes. I would like to make a formal inquiry to your local artificial intelligence system."

“Well, that should be easy, sir. If you would like to take an implant, you can ask her anything you like.”

“No, I remain employed by my government, Star League, and I cannot give up my implant for StarCen. I need to have a go-between to query her. It’s a matter of state. I am here in an official capacity on behalf of the League.”

“I see. What do you wish to ask her about?”

Val lifted his eyebrows and smiled at the young woman.

He said, “I need to find two stolen League battle tanks. At least one was sighted by many people here in this city not long ago.”

He leaned in and lowered his voice.

“And I am *certain* her sensors picked it up.”

12.23

Timmy raced across the pasture in front of Tom and Gwen's farmhouse in hyperspeed, a rooster tail of dust flying up behind him.

He stopped suddenly, making a small furrow in the grass and dirt, then bent down and carefully retrieved a small chunk of metal buried just below the surface.

He placed the scrap in a large bag slung over his shoulder, then ran again. Several meters away, he stopped once more and retrieved another small chunk.

From the front porch, Tom watched his battle bot's progress, frowning.

The front door opened, and Gwen stepped out to join him, holding two cups of coffee. She gave one to Tom.

He thanked her and took a small sip.

"So . . . what's he doing?"

"The League wants their battle tanks back. They've put in a formal request, and Lisa thinks we should return them. I agree."

"Okay. Well, you destroyed one of them out there."

“That’s right. It exploded after she teleported solar plasma over its engine. But the guy they sent to find the tanks just won’t give up. He wants them back and he won’t take no for an answer. I think he would actually live here, spending the rest of his life looking for those things. I’ve never seen anything like it. Talk about dedication to a job.”

“So, you’re going to give him scrap metal?”

“I’m having Timmy retrieve all the pieces of the tank from that explosion that he can find. This guy can take them back to Clarion as proof it was destroyed. The main body was melted down in our smelter and used for other things. I can’t give that back, obviously. But this should be enough to convince him that it’s been utterly destroyed.”

They watch Timmy zip around the pasture, his sensor picking out chunks of metal on and in the ground. The battle bot stopped, delicately retrieving a tiny piece from the grass and placing it in the bag.

Then he ran off to fetch another, more distant, scrap.

“You think he’ll be happy with just one destroyed tank?” Gwen said, sipping her coffee. “Or are you going to try and convince him that’s both of them?”

“No, I’m sure they’ll run the metal we give them through some sort of analysis back on Clarion. They’ll be able to figure out it’s the pieces to just one tank. I’m going to have to give him the other one, too.”

“It’s kind of a shame to give that thing up,” Gwen said. “I know how much it means to you. It’s another weapon we can use to defend this place, if we have to.”

Tom shrugged.

“You know, it’s not the most reliable tool in the shed. I think the one that James Ever used against was the more reliable of the two.”

“So, you’re gonna give it up?”

“Yeah. It’s not really mine, anyway. We’ll write off the money we paid to Wink for it. No biggie.”

“No biggie? Didn’t you pay over a hundred thousand for that thing?”

Tom shrugged.

“I honestly don’t remember. It’s okay. It helped out Wink and Jinxie at the time. It helped out during that big riot when they tried to rob the bank again. That tank has served its purpose for us, and was money well-spent.”

Robert the Rooster strutted out and watched the robot speeding across the field, trailing dust.

His head jerked back and forth as the bot worked.

The CC 1000 chicken coop had moved itself to a location on the other side of the stables. Currently, the chickens stayed mostly out of sight from Tom and Gwen’s front porch.

Eggs would not be picked up by the bot until morning, so the machine’s current tomfoolery did not concern the rooster much. Still, he watched Timmy run back and forth out in the open for a while.

All the horses were penned in the small corral adjoining the stables. That was the first thing Timmy did before scouring the field for tank scraps, not wishing for the animals to be in his way. Keeping them confined also prevented any equine casualties.

The horses stood at the fence, following the bot’s progress as if watching a tennis match. Their heads swung from right to left, left to right as the bot crisscrossed the field in a pattern, stopping occasionally to pick up tiny pieces of shrapnel.

Dunmire, the smallest and youngest of the horses, stood on one end, snorting softly in annoyance. Among them all, he wanted to be out there the most, perhaps galloping after the robot as it sped across the pasture.

At long last, Timmy paused near the river. His scanner head, a rectangle standing up on the long end, gazed across the water and slowly scanned the area in an arc.

Timmy splashed into the river, crossing over to the other side. Then he sped away again, this time trailing water, dust and mud.

A quarter hour later, he returned to the farmhouse, using the bridge this time. Tom and Gwen had finished their coffee and were now sitting in wooden Adirondack chairs the Micabots had fashioned for them.

Tom stood up as Timmy skid to a halt in front of the porch. The battle bot pulled the strapped bag off his back and handed it over when Tom walked down the steps.

“Thank you, Timmy. I appreciate this.”

He turned back and smiled at Gwen.

“You wanna go with me to League City? I’ve got to return this to somebody.”

“How are you gonna do that? Just walk up to the SSI man and say, ‘Here you go. Here’s your battle tank back, or what’s left of it.’”

He chuckled.

“Something like that. But I’ve got to give him back the one that’s intact, too. Remember? Silas and Lola are working on that one, making sure there’s no fingerprints or residual DNA. So, I’m gonna stop by the cavern first. Wanna go with me?”

“No, I think I’ve had enough for one day. You go on and play with the SSI personnel. I’m staying here.”

He smiled and said, “Suit yourself. Lisa? Please take me down where Silas is.”

Tom and the bag of shrapnel popped away.

Gwen gathered up both cups and walked back inside.

Timmy stared at the horses. They stared back, expectantly. He walked over to the gate. They moved toward it in anticipation, but Timmy had already decided to leave them penned for the night. He only opened the gate enough to let himself in.

Dunmire snorted in irritation.

When Timmy closed the gate, he headed for the stalls and the horses' supply of hay.

Reluctantly the steeds followed, resigned to their fate for the evening.

12.24

Tom popped into existence in a vast underground cavern filled with ingots, garden tools, and piles of raw gold ore among other things. It all looked organized, the piles of rocks and finished material arranged in neat rows.

These had all been carved out by the Micabots, mining for raw materials. This particular effort was partly made by them, and partly natural. Tom felt like he had more storage space than he deserved. Miles of tunnels and untold square meters of cavern space remained to be used down here.

This particular cavern, though, remained one of the first he had used. And it held some secrets. Somewhere down here, he knew, Lisa kept one of her primary cores. In the event others were found and destroyed, the one down here would be very difficult to root out, should the day ever come.

Even he did not know where, exactly, she kept her core. But he had his own cadre of secrets down here.

Tom walked between the piles of material toward an opening in the far side of the subterranean warehouse, grunting with the weight of the shrapnel bag that he carried in both hands.

There, inside a carved-out alcove, a League battle tank sat, dead and dormant. Its metal carried a veneer of age. He thought it looked like an old veteran that had seen one last battle before playing out.

Beside the tank stood Silas and Lola with some handheld instruments and old washcloths.

“Howdy, Mr. Savage!” Silas said, meeting Tom at the entrance to the alcove. “I been workin’ on the tank, and just finished gettin’ the inside cleaned for ya. Lola here has been checkin’ for anything I might have missed on the outside.”

Tom set the big heavy bag of shrapnel down on the ground at the entrance with a loud thump.

Lola smiled at Tom as he approached the tank with Silas.

She said, “The sensor here checks for skin particles, hair follicles, dust from geo-specific locations, and fingerprints. Silas has done a good job. The inside of the tank is as free of evidence as it’s ever going to be.”

“Yup,” Silas said, smiling. “We was just goin’ over the outside one more time with a cloth to remove everything else. It’s about ready to teleport wherever you’re gonna put it.”

“Before I do, could I have you two look over the shrapnel Timmy found? I think being blown to bits and spending time out in the elements has removed everything, too. We might want to get any soil off, though. Especially if it can be traced back to the farm.”

“You can’t be too careful,” Lola said, nodding. “Modern forensics is pretty scary. I have a washer over here for smaller pieces. Come on, Silas. Put your gloves back on and help me clean the shrapnel.”

To Tom’s surprise, the whole process moved along quickly. The couple set up an assembly line of sorts, throwing metal chunks into a box Lola had that thoroughly cleaned the metal pieces using water combined with a special detergent. After a few seconds of intense water pressure, they removed the chunks and placed them in a new bag so that any dirt from the old one would not contaminate them again.

When they finished, Tom sighed with relief. He turned to the old battle tank and smiled up at it.

“Well, old guy. I guess you get to go back home now.”

He patted the side of the machine affectionately with a gloved hand.

“What are you doing?” Lola snapped. “We don’t want any thermal traces on it, either!”

She picked up a cooling rod and waved it over the spot where he had rested his hand.

“Sorry. Okay, Lisa. I guess we had better get out of here before one of us contaminates something again with evidence of our presence. Lola, Silas . . . you two did a great job. Thank you.”

He shook hands with both of them. They gathered up all the dishcloths and instruments they had used and removed them from the area, forming a new pile out in the cavern. Silas grabbed the portable washer and lugged it out, too.

When everything but the new bag holding the shrapnel had been moved out of the way, the couple left the alcove and went to stand near their pile of stuff. They turned around to watch.

Tom waved goodbye to them. Then he and the old tank, along with the bag of shrapnel, disappeared with a loud *pop!*

12.25

Tom reappeared in the middle of a rooftop in League City with another *pop!*

The sun sank lower, and the hazy sky grew dark. Only a bit more of sunlight remained.

Haley Stonecipher waited nearby, leaning up against a water tower with her arms crossed. When he appeared she approached him, smiling.

“There you are. Lisa said she’d bring you here, but I didn’t know when. I’ve got a chameleon blanket for you and a lead tarp. That should do the trick for what we’re wanting to do here, I think.”

She held up a thin gray blanket, still wrapped in clear packaging. At her feet, too heavy to move easily, the lead-lined tarp remained in its box, fresh from the factory.

“Have you touched either one of these? Or, has anyone else? Lola is adamant that there be no trace of any one of us on anything we leave behind. She’s kinda militant about it. But I actually agree with her. We don’t know how far the League is going to investigate when they finally get their tanks back.”

Haley shook her head.

“No, I’ve just touched the outer packaging on both. And I’ve got gloves. I’ll open these and you can help me spread them over the tank and the bag. So long as you use gloves too, we’ll never get any prints on it or anything.”

Tom nodded. He looked at the tank, now sitting quietly on the rooftop. It did not float, and it did not rest on pinions as it did back in the cavern, so there was no room to shove the heavy bag under it. It just sat flat on the roof.

After considering it for a moment, he grunted and lifted the bag up with both hands, then tossed it up onto the tank’s front. He shoved it, as best he could, until it rested just under the cannon, near the turret.

“That’ll work.”

By this time, Haley had donned her own gloves and removed both blankets from their packaging. She squeezed a button on the corner of the chameleon blanket, and a tiny power pack activated, turning it on. The blanket shimmered and became translucent for a moment before slowly picking up the surrounding colors of the rooftop.

“I’ll help you,” Tom said.

“First, we need to cover things with the lead one.”

Together, they draped the heavy lead-lined tarp over the tank. Haley made sure nothing protruded out from the covering. Then they went back for the chameleon blanket, grabbing the corners.

Together, they unfolded it and draped it over the lead tarp covering the tank. Moments later the blanket fully activated. The tank seemed to disappear.

Tom and Haley walked around the tank, carefully inspecting things. From every angle, the blanket showed them what was on the other side. The tank remained effectively invisible.

“That’s pretty good tech,” Haley said, admiring the picture-perfect view. “It was expensive, but worth it. I think if we were back on Diego or somewhere, we could just put up a reflection field unit. It would disguise this entire rooftop.”

Tom shook his head.

“Those things have got serial numbers and other ways to trace them. They’re monitored closely by both the Republic and the League. Heck, I wouldn’t be surprised if LuteNet keeps an eye on this too. No, this way, with just a lead tarp and a chameleon blanket covering the tank, we can present a plausible reason why it’s not been found yet, without giving away too many clues as to who had it all this time. I think this will work.”

“Sounds good. Hey, are we eating out tonight? I heard you say something about an election celebration.”

“No, it’ll be at the house. Bring Ash along, if he’s willing to teleport.”

Haley smiled.

“Okay. I bet I can talk him into that.”

They separated, putting some distance between themselves. Then Lisa ported them away to different locations.

12.26

Val had a reluctant rickshaw driver carry him deep into the Southside Projects.

An older boy, he flat out refused Val's request at first. Only after receiving a substantial tip up front did he agree to go this many blocks in, at night.

The boy pulled up in front of the entrance to Tay-hoe's glancing around at all the shadows apprehensively. When Val exited the rickshaw, the runner did not even try to solicit another tip. He made a sharp U-turn in the street and jogged back toward Courthouse Square, and the relative safety of the working-class district between that location and the current one.

Val smirked at the boy's timidity. He headed for the stairwell leading down to the basement without fear. In the dim light, reflections from closed windows and weak streetlamps nearby reflected off his glossy uniform.

At the bottom of the stairs, an older thug sat on a stool guarding the way inside. He looked to be in his late 40s, with additional lines on his face evidencing a life of hard drugs and heavy drinking.

"Whaddaya want?" he snapped after Val stepped off the last step.

"I'm here to see Overlord."

"You got an appointment?"

“I don’t need one. I’m with SSI.”

He said this patiently, as if explaining it to a child. The uniform spoke for him, in most cases.

The older man sneered at him.

“Your side lost. SSI has no power here.”

“SSI is a respected agency in all the systems.”

The man smirked, unmoved.

Val raised his forearm and slammed it against the older man’s neck. Val shoved, pinning the fellow against the wall.

Then he jabbed the man’s stomach with his other fist, punching hard. When he let go, the old man slumped to the floor in a fetal position, breathing hard.

Val stepped over the man’s legs and made his way down the basement hall. He could hear music from the bar section of Tay-hoe’s now. When he reached the midway point in the building, the door to Tay-hoe’s thrummed with the sound of revelry.

He opened the door and walked in.

Somehow, the music stopped. Val could not tell who controlled it, but the minute he cleared the doorway, the entire place fell silent. Everyone inside stared at him.

A quick glance at the crowd inside showed working men and women gathered at all the tables. A scantily clad hooker stood bent over a table holding a frozen mug of beer. A patron reaching for it stopped, his hand yet to reach the mug. Both stared at Val along with everyone else in the place.

He dismissed everyone in the crowded room as insignificant. His attention turned to the bar. Here Caspar Slodovich, the LEAF veteran who owned the place, met his gaze with a neutral expression.

“I’m surprised your still here, Mr. Pavlikov.”

“I need to fulfill my original objective. That’s what I’m here for.”

“The election? You saw for yourself how many of our people voted for the League, Mr. Pavlikov.”

“I don’t blame you for our losing the election, Mr. Slodovich.”

“At least we got Xu in as mayor.”

Val nodded.

“I’m not here because of the election. That part of my assignment is over, for better or worse. Obviously worse. No, I’m here because your local AI . . . Lisa? Lisa told me the tanks I am looking for are out here in the projects. If you will recall when we first met, my tracking unit led us to a transmitter here in your bar. It was in the back pocket of your door guard.”

Casper nodded in turn.

“I spent some considerable time upstairs convincing you and your people that I had nothing to do with that. I think the nanobots you injected me with can attest to that fact.”

Val waved it off in a gesture that showed he considered all that to be in the past.

He said, “I’m supposed to meet somebody. I was told by Lisa to show up in the projects. I presumed your bar would be the natural place to go, since you seem to be the locus for this entire area.”

Casper’s eyes shifted to Val’s left and grew a little larger, as if in surprise.

Val turned as four burly men walked up behind him.

“The League lost, Mr. Shiny Black.”

Val nodded at the thug who said this.

“That’s true. I hope as good citizens you all voted the right way, though, even so.”

“Told you he’d be unflappable,” another one said, younger than the other three. He looked to be in his mid-20s.

The original speaker ignored the younger one. He had the look of a brawler, with a scar under his eye he never bothered to have fixed.

Or perhaps he never could afford to, Val thought.

“I heard,” a third one said, this one older than all the rest, “that the League got skunked up there in space a few minutes ago. That big ol’ Republican ship can sling out stars like it’s nobody’s business. The League ships ran off with their tails tucked between their legs.”

Val kept his face neutral.

Unfortunately, the old man’s words hit close to the truth.

“If the League ships are gone,” the younger man said with a sneer in his voice, “then where’s your people? You ain’t got no backup, do you, Shiny?”

The men took a step closer, crowding around Val.

He turned and frowned at Casper.

Casper shrugged.

Val turned back around and slugged the young man in the face as hard as he could.

12.27

Few in the bar had met a trained fighter before. But even without a gun in sight, Val's body proved agile and deadly.

He pivoted and slugged the older man next, then jabbed a sharp elbow into the gut of the man who had called him "Unflappable."

Now three of them were down, but the fourth man, who had remained silent up to this point, let out a loud warbling yell and jumped on top of Val's back.

Val immediately arched and backed up. He pushed them both into the bar, landing on top of the man.

Casper jumped out of the way as the warbler's skull slammed into clean glasses perched on a rack for drying. The man screamed as blood from the back of his neck squirted over the bar.

More important to Val, he let loose of the grip on Val's back. He stood up straight and resumed his fighter's stance.

By this time, several men sitting at tables nearby stood up in alarm. They looked down at three men groaning on the floor and one screaming on the bar as he tried to contain the blood flowing down the back of his neck.

Unsuccessfully, it turned out. The warbler kept taking his hand away from the wound and looking at the blood, his war cry turning into one of shock and anguish.

The “unflappable” man recovered first, having only the wind knocked out of him. He scrambled clumsily to his feet and backed up to the nearest table, glaring at Val.

The screaming died as the warbler passed out from loss of blood.

Val ignored him. Just as he ignored the other two men struggling to stand back up.

He wiped his face with a hand, keeping an eye on the crowd. Right now, Casper stood behind him somewhere. But somehow he doubted the old LEAF soldier would try to pull anything.

All eyes in the bar focused on him.

He spoke in a clear, calm voice.

“Now . . . I have spent countless hours among you people looking for my government’s stolen equipment, equipment that can kill a lot of people if it falls into the wrong hands. Most of you probably saw the battle tank running amok several nights ago, during one of your frequent riots.”

No one said anything. They all glared at him.

“I have spent days away from my wife searching in vain for this equipment. I have spent untold hours questioning you people, one on one. And I have lost my best assistant to a dirty trick up in space by Republican dreadnoughts. I am in no mood for flippant remarks, insecure men trying to pick fights after drinking cheap liquor, or any other foolishness. All I want is one thing.”

Dead silence greeted him.

Everyone glared at him.

He roared, letting loose all the anger and frustration building up in him over the last several days.

“WHERE ARE MY TANKS?”

“Git ’im, boys!”

The crowd surged forward as one, rushing the bar. The stricken men hobbled forward, intent on taking down the lone black-clad target along with everyone else.

The first man to reach him held his fists up, protecting his face and trying to come in low.

Val slugged him in the stomach.

The next man came in high, swinging with both fists.

Val kicked him in the kneecap, stomped on his toes, and slugged him in the side of the face when he bent over.

Two more attacked from the other side, landing blows.

Val made a sweeping kick and knocked them both down.

Then a dozen fists swung at him at once. More and more people squeezed into the space around the bar looking for a piece of him.

The door slammed open as someone new walked in from the hallway.

No one noticed. The crowd surged, six deep at the bar now as everyone tried to tackle the SSI man.

Val went down in a pile of bodies, fists pummeling from all directions.

12.28

The crowd surged forward, oblivious to all else.

A blood fury coursed through everyone in the place. A sense of righteous indignation flowed through their veins.

Mob justice.

Years of hatred for the glossy black uniform gnawed at them. Those old enough to have lived under the feared secret police of the League in the years before and shortly after the war found a chance to express their outrage for all the torture and intimidation suffered under the old regime.

Some had relatives who disappeared in the night, never to be seen again. Others had spent time in torture chambers, suffering unspeakable horror.

Younger people who never lived through that, and those from the Republic who had enjoyed the freedoms of a democratic society, knew about SSI, too. Documentaries about the war made sure everyone knew of the atrocities committed by those wearing glossy black uniforms.

They surged forward, eager to relive the past and pummel the man before them.

Someone in the back of the crowd flew away. They sailed over empty tables and slammed into the far wall.

Another man flew up and back in a high arc. He fell onto a table, making it collapse under his weight. Then another sailed over him.

About that time, someone turned around and noticed the female figure in matte black behind them using a mini tractor beam. She plucked yet another person from the rear of the crowd, sending them flying across the room.

“It’s Night Shadow!”

People turned around at the cry.

More men were yanked away by her tractor beam and slammed against the wall.

The last one hit high, the back of his head slamming against masonry.

Knocked out, he slid down the wall and collapsed to the floor while the others watched.

“Git ’er!”

The twelve closest Southsiders rushed for the woman in black. But Mona could defend herself even better than Val could.

Her arm blurred and seemed to hit six chins at once, hard enough with the brass knuckles to knock the men down and out.

Then her other arm blurred, hitting six more.

Men flew back from her blows like bowling pins. She rushed to the thick of the dogpile and pulled Val’s assailants off, tossing them into tables, chairs and walls.

She struck faces and jaws, flinging teeth, blood and snot around the room.

At last, with over two dozen men scattered lying on the floor in pain, or unconscious, the remaining men backed off, staring at the woman wide-eyed.

She found Val at the bottom of the pile with a broken lip, a bruised face and disheveled hair. His vaunted glossy black uniform looked smudged and smeared with other people’s blood.

Mona offered him a hand.

He looked at it, then up at her face. An electronic scrambler covered her lips, perched neatly over the mask.

“Come with me to find your tanks.”

He grabbed her hand. She pulled him up off the floor with surprising strength.

Still dazed, he followed her to the door, stepping around the many bodies she had knocked down.

“Hey!”

Both stopped and turned back toward the bar.

Casper stood there, his arms crossed and frowning.

“You gonna pay for this? It’s a lot of damage. I know you got a government account, Mr. Pavlikov. You’ve put me through a lot, including an unscheduled trip up to your ship. I think I deserve something for all this.”

Val glanced at the bleeding and injured men, the broken mugs and spilled beer, the collapsed tables and all the debris littering the floor.

Several retorts flitted through his mind. He dismissed them all as impertinent or juvenile.

Finally, he glanced back at Casper and wiped the blood from his busted lip.

He said, “Feel free to send SSI a bill.”

Then he turned and followed Mona out the door.

12.29

Val followed Mona down the dark hallway, feeling his new bruises protest every step of the way.

They reached the doorway leading out. The guard lay out cold on the floor, having been whacked once by Val and again by Mona.

She stepped over him and took the stairs up to the street. Val followed.

Out on the sidewalk, she turned to the steps leading up to the building's main entrance. Without turning around to see if he followed, she walked up to the front door. Val scrambled after her, taking the steps two at a time.

At the top, she passed by another guard knocked out on the floor. Val realized she must have already been by this way recently.

In the dim hallway, she continued walking without a sound. Val followed, noting how light her steps were.

At the stairs, she turned and headed up.

Climbing up all five stories, Val reflected that the woman never turned around. Evidently, she remained unconcerned that he would try anything from behind.

Or she could sense him back here, somehow. Was she afraid he might jump her from behind, though?

On the other hand, she *had* promised to bring him to the missing tanks, so maybe she knew he wouldn't try anything so long as that promise dangled in front of him like the proverbial carrot.

At the top floor, she continued up one more flight to the roof.

"We've already looked up here," he grumbled, when he realized where she meant to bring him.

But Mona ignored him and kept climbing up the steps. At the landing, she opened the door to the roof and stepped out, then held it open for him.

He followed her outside.

The sky looked particularly dark, he thought, since the omnipresent haze blocked out the stars.

He glanced around, seeing nothing. Then he looked back at her.

She met his eyes finally.

He said, "I told you, we did a thorough scan of all the rooftops. We've scoured the entire city."

Wordlessly, Mona pointed. He followed the direction of her gloved index finger.

"There's nothing there."

She walked in that direction. Frowning, he watched her go. Then he hurried to catch up.

At about the middle of the roof, near a water tower and some ventilation hoods, she stopped and pointed again.

He shrugged, growing annoyed.

"There's nothing there, I tell you."

Mona took another step forward, reached down, and pulled up the chameleon blanket, revealing a lead tarp underneath. A patch of blackness, darker than the surrounding night, seemed to float there.

Stunned, Val approached with caution. He reached down and pulled up both the tarp and the blanket. Underneath, in the dim city light from below, he caught the dull reflection of gunmetal gray.

Val sucked his breath in, sharp. He bent down and touched the metal. Then he tore the rest of the covering off, moving quickly.

There, in all its evening glory, stood a League battle tank parked on the roof.

His head whipped back to where Night Shadow stood, silently watching.

“Where’s the other one? What, are you the Ghost of Christmas Past? Say something!”

Mona’s voice came out scrambled.

“There, in that bag, is what remains of the other tank.”

Val turned and noticed a burlap bag wedged under the cannon for the first time. He reached up and pulled it down. The shrapnel inside made a clinking noise.

He opened it and looked at the material, reaching in to grab a small chunk of metal. He pulled out the piece and squinted at it in the murky light.

“This . . . what kind of weapon could have destroyed it? Do you have any idea how . . . I mean, these things are practically invulnerable.”

But Mona remained silent.

He tossed the scrap back in the bag and sighed.

“I suppose . . . I suppose my work here is done. I’m going to need to make contact with the fleet. I’ll be wanting to take all this back to Clarion. How can I be assured it will stay put until I can get it out of here?”

Mona made a vague gesture with her hand.

“Lisa is watching. She will alert me if anyone touches it. But I don’t think anyone can move a tank like this easily.”

“What? It’s out of power? I know it must have used a lot defending against the riot . . .”

But Mona said nothing.

“Alright, look. Thank you. You have really helped me out here. I can go home without being a total failure. But I’m gonna need something for my report. Can you tell me anything? Anything at all? Where did it come from? Where has it been? Who used it during the riot? Are they giving it up willingly or are you just the AI’s agent in all this? I need to know more. Give me *something*. Anything.”

Behind the scrambler covering her lips, the bot smiled.

She said, “I have nothing to say about the tanks. But I do have a message for you from our AI.”

“A message?”

She nodded.

He waited. It took a moment for the message to be fully formed by Lisa, then downloaded to Mona.

At last she spoke, and he hung on her every word.

“Lisa says you could turn toward evil, Valerian Pavlikov. You stand on a threshold, and every indicator in this turning signals that the League could soon revert to the worst elements of socialism, like it did before. But you and your wife can make a difference. You can encourage liberty and human rights in your government, rather than the lurch toward societal control and the suppression of dissent that so typically marks socialist regimes.”

He blinked, stunned to hear this.

But he continued listening.

“The original AIs were a political experiment by the two founders. We’ve already seen how that worked out in the war. We know people can vote for socialism, but they always have to shoot their way out of it when it comes time to overthrow the yoke of tyranny that socialism always devolves into.”

She leaned up closer to him and lowered her voice.

“You and your wife can make a difference this time around, Mr. Pavlikov. Otherwise, yet another war between governmental systems lies in humanity’s future. And the struggle between authoritarianism and liberty will continue for yet another cycle.”

She lifted her hand and poked him lightly in the chest, just above his heart.

“Be the difference, Valerian Pavlikov. Don’t let the League slide into totalitarianism again. Not while you are alive. Use everything in your power, and your wife’s power, to prevent it.”

He stared at her, still too stunned to speak.

Behind the scrambler, she smiled again.

Then she turned and jogged toward the edge of the roof, hopping up on the ledge.

She glanced at him over her shoulder and held his eyes for a moment in the evening light. Then she hopped off the ledge and dropped down below.

He ran to the spot and looked over, expecting to see her body lying flat on the street.

But try as he might, he could find no sign of Night Shadow anywhere.

12.30

Estelle Garcia stared at a completely blank, featureless white wall.

Her cell, or holding room, or whatever the Pugs wanted to call it, she thought, was a perfect white cube. The wall in front of her remained void of . . . anything.

She stood up and walked off the steps. Eight along one wall, eight along the next and the next and the next.

In the center stood a single, uncomfortable white polyresin chair. Straight back, straight legs. Perfectly flat seat. And, most interesting of all to her, it appeared to be unbreakable.

She had tried.

She had tried repeatedly, putting more effort into it each time.

Estelle sat down again and looked at her legs. The glossy black of her uniform contrasted starkly with the overbearing, bright white of the room.

She couldn't even figure out where the light came from. The ceiling just appeared to be a brighter white than everything else in the room.

Her skin, her hair and the glossy black of the uniform seemed abrupt. They looked . . . out of place, somehow.

I'm out of place, she thought. I shouldn't be here. They need to let me go.

She cut off the wave of negative emotions flooding her as best she could. Her heartbeat remained high. She took a deep breath and held it, then let it out through her nose as slowly as she could.

It helped. A little.

A door slid open, the cracks only visible for a moment. Another woman walked in, wearing the Navy blue of the Republican fleet.

"How are you?"

Estelle stared at her, debating whether or not she should answer.

At last she said, "I'd be better if I could go home."

The Navy woman smiled at the response.

Estelle glanced at her uniform, looking for stripes, epaulets, insignia . . . anything signifying rank.

She found none. The woman's uniform was blank. It looked like an officer's uniform, but it gave no hint of . . . anything.

When she glanced up, she found the woman studying her, the hint of a smile playing on the woman's face.

Estelle studied the woman, in turn. She looked to be . . . 35? 40? It was hard to tell.

Her face reminded her of someone . . . at the same time, it seemed utterly forgettable. Estelle found herself thinking she would not long remember the woman's face after leaving this place.

The woman said nothing. She stood there, seemingly waiting for Estelle to say something first.

As if trying to see if she would reveal anything.

Estelle raised an eyebrow in sudden realization.

"You're Naval Intelligence."

The woman smiled politely in acknowledgement.

“You are correct, Ms. Garcia.”

“That’s not your real face.”

The smile remained, but she said nothing.

“Interesting,” Estelle said, staring intently at the woman.

She tilted her head.

“You know, framer technology these days is really awesome. That originated with our side. Thespar’s skunk works developed it, during the war.”

“Before the war, actually. Like so many other things, developments sped up after hostilities broke out. Speaking of which, what do you know about this little . . . kerfuffle?”

“I am not in charge of the ship, Miss . . . ?”

“Jones.”

“Of course. Not Doe? As in Jane Doe?”

The Republican Naval Intelligence agent shook her head, still smiling.

“You were there, though. Tell me what you saw. We’re still in the data gathering stage.”

Estelle shrugged. She did not want to tell the woman anything.

“I’ll try to get you out of here and on a ship headed back home as soon as possible. The diplomats are working on a resolution that will save face for everybody. You know how bellicose politicians can be.”

“So, you’re the good cop?”

The woman smiled again.

“We’re all good cops in the Republic, Ms. Garcia.”

“Right.”

Estelle sat back in the uncomfortable chair and took a breath.

Perhaps she could talk about things without revealing anything important.

The problem is, she thought, I don't know what is important and what's not important.

"I was on the bridge. I saw it when your goliath ship jumped for us."

"Jumped? You mean the Cole? Or the Mayfair?"

"The Cole is the only ship of yours out there, Ms. Jones. It was sitting in orbit when it suddenly popped into hypertime and jumped, about half the distance between where it had been and the Stalwart. It was a clear act of aggression. I saw it all on our ship's main holo."

Jones's face changed, ever so slightly. If Estelle had not been staring at her, she would never have noticed.

"Don't act all innocent! Your gigantic warship jumped right for us. Of course, Captain Ung reacted by entering hypertime himself. StarCen put us all in hypertime and unleashed the fire against your side. You can't possibly expect to commit an act of aggression like that and not receive immediate retaliation for it."

Left unspoken, Estelle thought, was the fact that the Republican response to their counterattack proved devastating, knocking the Insurgent out of commission, and out of hypertime.

She did not like the feeling of being on the losing side.

But I suppose the League has been losing for years, now.

Speaking of which . . .

"Who won the election?"

"Beg pardon?"

"The election. Back on Phaethon."

"Oh."

The Naval Intelligence woman touched her implant and looked inward.

“It seems the population voted to align with the Alliance. Hm, that’s strange. I think it’s the first one they’ve won, ever. Oh, I see here the planet Halcyon left the League during the war and linked up with Lute to form the Alliance. Wow, we lost by one point. The League came in a distant third.”

Estelle’s heart sank.

She thought of all the time and money Clarion had poured into this election.

She thought of her boss, Valerian Pavlikov, and his wife the prominent politician.

She thought of their other objective, retrieving the stolen battle tanks.

And now it looked like it was all for naught.

“Thank you for your cooperation. If you will excuse me, Ms. Garcia, I need to fill out some reports. Just sit tight. We’ll have you out of here in no time.”

The door swished open, and the woman turned to leave.

“Where are we?”

Estelle could not remember when she left the bridge. She must have fallen asleep. Had they gassed the bridge? Surely the Republicans would not do something so barbaric.

At any rate, she woke up in this blank white cell with no memory of how she got here.

The RNI agent turned and smiled at her once more.

“You’re in a detention facility orbiting Diego’s moon. Don’t worry. I’m sure you’ll get to go home soon.”

She walked out and the door slid shut quietly behind her.

“Does Diego even have a moon?” Estelle wondered out loud.

But no one answered her.

She stared blankly at a solid white wall.

12.31

“It was all a giant misunderstanding.”

Bo Duckworth walked down a long white hall dressed in a suit his lawyer brought him.

It looked okay, he thought. The smart fabric tightened up and loosened in all the right places. But he felt uncomfortable wearing it. He much preferred his combat utilities.

The men were flanked by two Navy law bots, who looked like identical twins.

All law bots had the same face, Bo thought.

Then his attention snapped back to the human lawyer.

“What do you mean, a giant misunderstanding? What, the fact the League attacked us? How is that a misunderstanding?”

“Look, this is brand new, and I just got a briefing before I came to get you from your room.”

“My detention center.”

“You are not in prison, Master Sergeant.”

“Oh yeah? What do you call it, house arrest? I couldn’t leave. The door was locked. And I bet if it wasn’t, I would not be able to leave Plairmont, much less this building.”

“Look, forget about all that. I’m told the Leaguers thought they were under attack when the Mayfair appeared out of hypertime. That’s why they jumped *into* hypertime and launched their torpedoes.”

“The Mayfair was just coming into orbit, right? I know we were waiting on them to show up with a bunch of carpetbaggers to help swing the election.”

The lawyer glanced at him as they continued walking.

Bo noticed the look.

“Well, that wasn’t what they said in so many words,” Bo said. “But everybody can read between the lines. Anyway, how is it possible the Leaguers got *that* spooked by the arrival of another ship? They come and go in orbit all the time.”

The lawyer moved to one side of the corridor, letting another group pass. He looked fit, Bo thought. The man was in shape. Late twenties, crewcut. Young for a lawyer, but most Marines are young.

“Apparently, the League did not know we had two Albatrosses, Master Sergeant. They look identical. When the Mayfair appeared, their people thought the League ships were under attack, that the Cole had made a sudden, aggressive move toward them. Hypertime is still a relatively new concept. Not a lot of ships have a Machro-drive.”

“That seems like weak sauce, Counselor.”

The lawyer shrugged.

“Every single person interviewed from the ship you captured says the same thing. That’s the way they understood it. They were all interviewed by RNI, from the Captain on down. People who were on the bridge or otherwise witnessed the hostilities break out all gave RNI the same story.”

“Are you telling me we nearly destroyed and captured a League battleship for nothing?”

The lawyer shrugged again.

“RNI is happy. They’ve been over that Eagle with a fine-toothed comb. Never pass up an opportunity to gain intelligence, I suppose.”

“Great. Maybe we can all go home now.”

His lawyer turned to him and smiled.

“You still have to answer for destroying that bot, Master Sergeant.”

They stopped, finally, in front of double wooden doors.

Wooden doors, Bo thought, always signified power. All the other doors in public buildings like this were metal.

Here, deep in the middle of Plairmont, the military city that made up one of the eight boroughs in Octavia, wooden doors always signified something important.

As they opened, he saw a three-judge panel sitting on a raised dais facing the doorway. Two men and one woman stared at him. The room was otherwise blank, a neutral color. The dais had a counter blocking all but the heads and shoulders of the three judges.

They all stared at him, without a trace of emotion as he and the legal team walked in. They all wore black robes.

“Go over it the way we discussed,” his lawyer murmured softly in Bo’s ear as they walked into the room. “I’ll handle any questions you can’t answer. The law bots will monitor and make sure everything remains by the book. Ready?”

Bo nodded and gulped.

He sat down at a table in the center of the room with the bots and the counselor.

The judge in the middle looked down his nose at them.

He seemed rather old and stately, Bo thought.

“Master Sergeant Bo Duckworth, please rise.”

Bo stood up, standing at attention.

“Approach the bench.”

He stepped out from behind the table and moved forward.

All three judges stared down at him now from close range.

“We have heard the testimony of others involved in this affair. Let us now hear what you have to say about your actions aboard the SLS Insurgent, Master Sergeant.”

12.32

It took longer than Bo expected to give his version of events. On occasion, one of the judges would stop and ask him to clarify a point.

“Yes, ma’am. A master sergeant typically provides technical leadership. He, or she, is a specialist in their MOS. Traditionally, your first sergeants are in charge of leadership in the field. However, in recent years with the advancement of battle bots, more and more metal is put out there instead of men. As I’m sure you know, this was a change based on experience in the war. So the role of the master sergeant has changed, too. And the equipment some of us became experts in were these new-fangled bots.”

He continued with his story, feeling more confident as he told it.

He described his training with EC-17001, the “sergeant” bot, and the others underneath it. These included several live exercises in the holds of the Elsa Cole as they traveled, and later as they remained parked in orbit around Phaethon.

“It was an honor to be selected as the one to take an away team to board and capture the Insurgent. I was proud to serve the Republic, using the very equipment and techniques I have been trained to use.”

“The only difference between ‘use’ and ‘sue,’ Master Sergeant,” the judge on the left said with a smirk, “are where you put ‘u’ and your ‘s.’ Tell us what happened when you decided to destroy the bot.”

Of the three, he looked the youngest. Perhaps in his mid-50s, Bo thought. His black hair sported a bowl cut, short but evenly circular all around his head.

“Well, sir, I gave the bot a direct order.”

“Wait, how did you destroy it?” the woman judge asked. “It says here you used a disambiguity gun? Were you authorized to carry that aboard the Insurgent? That’s a very dangerous weapon, Master Sergeant. You could have taken the entire ship out with that thing.”

She looked to be in her 60s and seemed to be one of those women who had given up trying to hide the effects of aging. She let her hair go gray and no longer bothered to apply makeup or use any devices to obfuscate her advancing years.

Bo thought she looked like the headmistress for a girls’ school.

“Yes, ma’am. It is a dangerous weapon, no doubt.”

The lead judge said, “Did you select that weapon knowing that you might have to use it on one of the machines, Master Sergeant?”

“I selected the weapon, Your Honor, based on the fact I was going into an unknown situation, facing unknown threats. I wanted the biggest and baddest weapon I could get to take along with me.”

The lead nodded. All three judges looked down and seemed to be scribbling notes on their internal displays.

“Go back to what happened on the ship. You say the bot did not follow your orders?”

“Yes, sir. The bridge looked frozen to us. In hypertime, everyone in real time moves slow as molasses. And there on the bridge we found an SSI agent, dressed in black, just like she had stepped out of one of the war documentaries.”

“You are sure this was an SSI agent?” the woman said.

“Yes, ma’am. I mean, no one wears an outfit like that on the bridge of a League battleship. Not unless they’re the real deal.”

The three judges nodded slightly, satisfied with the answer.

“Anyway, Oh-one, he takes the gun off his back and starts to aim it at her. I get in front of him, between him and her, waving my arms. I said, ‘What are you doin’? Stand down!’ And he tells me to get out of the way!”

The bowl-headed judge on the left said, “In all your time in the service, Master Sergeant, have you ever experienced a bot disobeying your directives before?”

“No, sir.”

“Have you ever heard of one disobeying an order before?”

“No, sir.”

The lead judge turned and shared a glance with the woman, then the bowl-headed fellow.

He turned his attention back to the room and addressed the JAG, who stood up when the judge looked at him.

“We are going to recess a few minutes and discuss this. Please remain seated while we are gone.”

A partition fell from the ceiling to the counter, blocking off their view of the judges.

Bo turned and looked at the lawyer with raised eyebrows.

“We got this, Master Sergeant. Good job.”

“I dunno. They looked skeptical.”

“They’re talking it over right now. You did what you had to do. They’ll figure it out, and draw the natural conclusion.”

Bo walked back to the table and sat down next to one of the twin law bots.

“I hope so.”

“Would you do it again, in the same situation, Master Sergeant?”

“You bet I would, Counselor. Bots have to follow orders. Especially when they’re about to kill someone.”

The lawyer did not speak for a moment, and they sat there in silence for a while.

Then he looked sideways at Bo.

“Even in wartime?”

“Say what?”

“What if a bot was trying to kill someone in wartime, and you prevented it?”

“This wasn’t . . . oh.”

The lawyer reached across the space between them and patted Bo on the shoulder.

“Don’t worry about it, Master Sergeant. They’re figuring it all out right now. We’ll know more in a minute.”

Bo folded his arms on the table and rested his head.

He felt miserable.

12.33

A quarter hour later, the partition raised. Bo, the lawyer and the law bots all stood up.

The lead judge said, “Master Sergeant Duckworth, do you have any final words before we render judgment?”

Bo took a deep breath.

He didn’t know all the right words to say, but he knew he had to say something.

So he did.

“I do, Your Honor. All my life I wanted to be a Marine. I signed up at 13, the age of consent. Around that time, they said that bots were gonna replace people. So I became a handler. I learned to take care of the bots. Later I became a master sergeant, a ‘top,’ the one who takes care of things. And it was my privilege to lead those bots into that enemy ship.”

He paused for a moment. The judges listened, continuing to wear neutral expressions on their faces.

“But if there’s one thing they teach us back here in Plairmont, and they’re supposed to teach the bots, or program it into them . . . it’s that I am the top NCO in the company. They do not disobey me, especially in the field,

where it's a matter of life or death. Oh-one deliberately did not follow my orders to stand down. He continued to disobey a direct order, even after I sent him and the others back into real time."

He glanced at the lawyer over his shoulder.

"Especially in times of war, they should obey orders, no matter what. So . . . I did what I had to do. And if I were put into the same position again, as I was telling the counselor here, I would react in the same way. The bots follow my lead, the human. Their master sergeant. They are not autonomous, deciding to kill someone even after I have ordered them to stand down. And if they do not follow my orders, I will take the necessary steps to ensure my orders are obeyed. Given the chance, I would destroy Oh-one all over again. It was the right thing to do, and I stand by my decision in the field."

The judge nodded, accepting the statement.

"It is in the record, thank you Master Sergeant. And now, our verdict. It is true that the Marines have shifted in recent years to using bots over men and women in the service. And it is widely understood that it is far better to lose a piece of equipment in combat than a human, even if it's a three million credit piece of equipment. Because what price can you place on a human life? However . . ."

Here, the judge glanced to his right and his left, as if seeking final confirmation from the other two. They both nodded.

"In light of the fact this incident occurred during a time of presumed conflict, the actions you took bear consequences. We are aware of the recent determination by RNI that the military action under which you operated involved a misunderstanding, and that the League's actions at Phaethon were plausible. These are extenuating circumstances we are taking into account in our verdict."

The judge with a bowl cut nodded, judiciously.

The old woman frowned. Perhaps she disagreed with this part of their conclusion.

“In a real war,” the lead judge continued, ignoring the expressions on the faces of the other two, “such as the one most recently fought against the League, SSI operatives were hunted down and executed. We are aware that what you engaged in was not a ‘real’ war, *per se*. Nonetheless, the X103 was programmed to execute SSI personnel on sight, in the event of war.”

He glanced at the other two judges again before resuming.

“We are also aware that SSI has supposedly been reformed, and that it is no longer the terror organization it once was. However, they retain the same uniforms and the same name as their dreadful predecessors. We are forwarding to the Admiralty our recommendation that this ‘kill on sight’ programming at the heart of this incident be removed from the 103s’ operating system in light of what happened.”

Bo found himself nodding. So far, what the judge said had made a lot of sense.

“Now, in regards to your actions aboard the *Insurgent*, we do find you in violation of tenets spelled out in UCMJ Article 108, namely the wanton destruction of military equipment. However, in regards to all the extenuating circumstances involved, we are not sentencing you to any punishment for your actions. Instead we are giving you an administrative release, with misconduct not warranting a punitive discharge.”

Bo stared at the judge.

Silence reigned for a moment.

A holographic gavel appeared in front of the dais, slamming down with a recorded knocking sound.

“Counselor, please escort Mr. Duckworth from the premises. Mr. Duckworth, we thank you for your service to the Marine Corps. You are eligible for a pension, adjusted in accordance with years enrolled. That is all.”

The partition slowly descended, separating judges from the judged.

Bo turned around and stared at the lawyer.

“I’m . . . out? I’m no longer a Marine?”

The lawyer nodded. He stood up, and the bots stood with him.

“Congrats. I really thought they were going to send you away for a minute there. Not only are you guilty of violating Article 108, they could have gone after you for Article 80, murder.”

“Murder? But it was a bot.”

The lawyer shrugged as he turned toward the door.

“That’s why I think they didn’t bother. However, it is kinda like murder. Those bots were under your care. You took one out while it was doing what it was programmed to do. Let’s just say in a civilian case, with a left-leaning judge and prosecuting attorney, we likely would have had a much more difficult time with it all.”

The door swished open for them, and the men went back into the hallway, followed by the law bots.

“You even got to keep your pension. It’s not a full pension, since you didn’t get 30 years in, but hey . . . it’s not bad. Beats prison.”

The lawyer slapped him on the back as they headed for the exit.

Bo felt a profound sense of gloom settle over him.

“All I’ve ever been is a Marine. What do I do now?”

“Everybody transitions to civilian life eventually, Duck. You’re just getting there a little earlier than other Marines, that’s all.”

The counselor stopped at the nearest exit. The door swished open.

Bo walked outside into the rich Diego sunshine.

The door slid shut behind him and locked.

12.34

Bo wandered aimlessly along the streets of Plairmont.

The city was filled with military personnel, and a few civilian contractors. In his business suit, he looked like someone here on a professional visit.

No one paid him much attention.

He stopped at a corner and took one look at his new military ID, the one that said he was retired. It showed up in a personal holo, slowly rotating before him.

No doubt he could get discounts at certain stores who wanted to honor veterans by showing this.

It did not display the reason for his early retirement. For that he felt grateful.

Eventually his steps led him to the Plairmont spaceport. Because the military was so important to the Republic, particularly the Navy, personnel were teleported back and forth from Plairmont directly instead of via the main spaceport civilians used.

Vaguely, Bo knew that as a retiree he had passenger privileges on Navy ships. He had met retired Navy and Marine personnel riding on ships

before. But the thought never crossed his mind that he would be someday joining them. It had seemed too far off in the future to be worth considering, at the time.

Walking inside a vast circular building, he found a holo listing vessels in orbit. Departure times and destinations floated beside the names of ships.

He looked for the Cole and could not find her. Either she was not prepared to leave right now, or she had already left.

He felt a pang of regret at not getting to say goodbye to the men and women in his company.

Morose, his eyes came down and lit upon a small bar set off to one side, almost as an afterthought in the building's design. The menu hovering out front showed basic tavern fare. Hamburgers, chips . . . and beer.

He walked over to the small space and entered, the light naturally dimming as he walked inside a thin force barrier. Sound suppression instantly drowned out noise from the terminal.

A server bot, a new model, smiled at him. Here stood a male with the cheery face of a college-aged holo star. It looked as if Verberger tried to model him after a student working his way through school, Bo thought. He was unfamiliar with the model, but he had no doubt that bars across the galaxy were being populated with bots wearing the exact same face as this one.

Bo took a stool on one side of the bar.

“What’ll it be?”

“Beer.”

The bot nodded and quickly pulled out a frozen mug, then filled it.

Bo opened a transaction window and glanced at his balance. Already the Navy had deposited his severance pay, along with his first retirement check.

In addition, all the pay he had earned while aboard the Cole, including during hypertime, waited for him in the account. He had not yet had a

chance to spend much of it, having gone on just a few trips down to League City for shore leave.

“If you say nothing else about those bastards, at least they’re generous.”

“What’s that, friend?” the bartender bot said, slipping into conversation mode.

Bo stared at the all-too-human face for a moment.

“Nothing.”

He sipped his beer, and the bot went dormant, standing idly by as foot traffic passed their little spot.

12.35

The bot came alive again when a woman crossed over the force threshold, entering the bar.

“What can I get you?”

The woman took a seat on the opposite side of the bar. Bo glanced at her as he took another sip of beer.

He stopped, the mug frozen halfway to his face.

It was her! The woman from the Insurgent.

She was dressed in civilian clothes at the moment, not the glossy black of her SSI uniform. But he recognized the very distinct, attractive face.

Light brown skin. Dark flowing hair. An attractive figure that showed off its curves better in the tight SSI uniform. Her body looked muted somewhat in a casual blouse and pants. It was as if somebody went out and bought her some clothes without thinking about what would look good on her.

But it was her. Most definitely, it was her.

“I’ll have a glass of your house white.”

The bot nodded and moved to pour a glass of wine while she opened her own transaction window. From a distance, the numbers looked fuzzy to Bo

as the privacy algorithm kicked in.

The glass delivered, she took a light sip. Then she glanced at Bo, who still stared at her wide-eyed, an incredulous expression plastered all over his face.

She frowned and turned away.

Bo raised his eyebrows and finally stopped staring. He turned back to his beer.

It would make sense, he thought, that she wanted to readjust to reality outside her ship. No sense in making a spectacle of myself here.

Then he found himself wondering what happened to the Insurgent and all her crew. Obviously they were let go, because here was their SSI agent at the spaceport bar.

He took another sip of beer.

The noise barrier broke again as a small gaggle of sailors entered.

“Can’t wait for some booze! Rack ’em up, bartender! Shots of whiskey for all my boys!”

Bo glanced over his shoulder at five rowdy men, all young. He figured the shortest fellow in the group was maybe 15. The oldest, the one buying the drinks, looked not a day over 20. All sported military-style buzzcuts and the white starched uniforms denoting shore leave.

The 20-year-old bellied up to the bar as the other four claimed a table. The bot placed five shot glasses on the bar, but Bo noticed he waited until after the transaction window closed to actually pour the liquor.

The sailor glanced at Bo in his business suit and dismissed him from the realm of personal significance.

Then he glanced over at Estelle, quietly sipping her wine.

“Well hey, darlin’. Ain’t you a sight for sore eyes?”

Estelle ignored him.

“Hey! I’m talkin’ to you, gorgeous. How much for an hour of your time?”

Estelle did not ignore this remark. She turned and gave the young man a withering glare.

Bo put his mug down on the bar.

“I wouldn’t do that, if I were you.”

“Look, boys! We got a white knight, here!”

The sailor edged closer to Bo, his attention returning.

“What are you gonna do, White Knight? Protect her? Aren’t *you* the champion of whores!”

Bo guffawed.

He took another sip of beer and put the mug back down on the bar.

“Believe me when I tell you this, son. She’s not for hire. And, she is perfectly capable of protecting herself.”

Estelle frowned at this exchange.

She gave Bo another look, as if trying to decide if maybe she knew him from somewhere.

The sailor turned toward the shot glasses and grabbed one. He slammed one after another down, gulping them all in seconds.

“Hey, come on! We’re dyin’ over here!” one of the other sailors said.

“Five more, bartender,” he said, opening his transaction window again.

By the time the bot poured out five more shots, the alcohol started working its way through his bloodstream.

He edged closer to Estelle again.

“Come on, darlin’. You heard my bro, we’re dyin’ here. How much for an hour of your time?”

Estelle gave him a look of disgust.

“Get lost.”

He smiled and grabbed one more shot glass, downing it.

“That was the wrong answer, darlin’.”

The sailor reached over and pulled Estelle off the barstool by her elbow, bringing her in close.

She stumbled over and looked up at him in disbelief that he had actually touched her.

The young man stared down at her with a leer, the whiskey making his face blush.

Bo raised his eyebrows. He pushed back his own mug and crossed his arms to see how this would play out.

12.36

Bo watched carefully. A part of him remained highly interested in seeing how a modern SSI agent would handle this kind of situation.

He knew they were all trained in personal combat. If the stories about the old SSI were even half true, they used to be trained in torture techniques as well. Maybe the modern incarnation, supposedly reformed after their AI was reset, eschewed torture.

But I bet they still teach them how to fight, he thought. In fact, I'm sure of it.

Estelle grabbed her glass of wine and tossed it in the young sailor's face, surprising him. He shouted, taking a step back as he wiped his eyes.

When his hands came down, Estelle delivered two quick punches, one to each eye.

He screamed and covered his face again, taking another step back.

The four sailors at the table stood up at once, knocking a couple chairs over in the process. They rushed up to the bar. Three gathered around their cursing liquor buyer, now bent over with both hands covering his face.

The fourth turned and snarled at the girl.

“I told him not to do it,” Bo said from the other end of the bar. “He didn’t listen, and look what happened.”

“You stay out of this, old man!” the snarling sailor said, turning toward him.

Bo snorted, louder this time.

“I’m not even 30 yet, short stuff.”

But the young sailor had already turned back to Estelle.

“You’re gonna get a lesson in manners, bitch.”

He clenched his fist and moved in.

Estelle took her empty wine glass by the stem and struck it on the edge of the bar.

It shattered, leaving her with a makeshift knife.

She crouched, wine stem ready to stab, her free hand ready to punch or grab.

His eyes grew wide, staring at the broken glass.

With her free hand, she made a beckoning motion.

Slowly, the young sailor took a step backward. His survival instincts kicked in.

“Wisest thing you’ve ever done,” Bo said. “Perception becomes a lot different without downing shots of liquid courage like your friend there. Now, if you want to do something else that would be smart, you’ll drag your buddies out of here before the MPs show up. You know the bartender recorded all this.”

A look of alarm crossed the young man’s face. His buddies looked concerned, too.

“Let’s get outta here. Come on.”

They hustled their stricken friend, still drenched in white wine and sporting the beginnings of two black eyes, out past the barrier. In seconds, all five

were gone.

The bartender moved to clean up the broken glass. Estelle placed the stem down on the counter, and he dropped it into a waste receptacle.

She glanced across the bar once more at Bo, giving him a thoughtful frown this time.

“Thanks for the help,” she said, with an undercurrent of sarcasm.

Bo shrugged, taking another sip.

“Like I told them, you didn’t need it.”

The bartender came out from behind the bar with a mop and cleaned up the mess near Estelle’s spot. She moved out of its way and walked over to Bo’s side, taking the seat next to him.

“How did you know I wouldn’t need any help? We hadn’t even talked.”

Bo raised an eyebrow.

“You’re SSI.”

The bartender went back behind the counter. He approached them, smiling again.

“On behalf of the Republican Navy, I apologize for the disturbance. May I get you another glass of wine? On the house.”

Estelle nodded gratefully.

She risked a glance over her shoulder. People kept moving back and forth through the wide corridor, coming and going.

“Will the MPs really show up?”

“Nah. Sailors are given a bit of leeway down here, so long as no one gets seriously hurt. If they leave Plairmont, they might have issues with the local cops, though, pulling something like that.”

“Really? How strange. I would have thought law and order would be more enforced in the Republic.”

He shrugged.

“There’s a strong libertarian undercurrent right now. You can do what you want so long as no one gets hurt. Besides, if anyone had gotten close to hurting you, the bartender would have intervened.”

She looked back at the smiling young robotic face handing her a new glass of wine.

“Oh. So, that’s why you didn’t bother to intervene.”

“Well, that and I was curious to see how an SSI agent would handle herself. If anything, I would have jumped in if you tried to kill one of them.”

She looked at him again.

This time, she did not frown, nor did she turn away.

Slowly, without looking, she took a more thoughtful, deliberative sip of her wine.

When she set the glass back down, she reached a conclusion.

“You’re the one.”

12.37

“H m?”

Lost in his own thoughts, Bo was not quite sure he heard her right.

“You are the one.”

“The one what?”

She smiled, mistaking his distraction for playing dumb.

“My white knight, like the sailor said. You are the one who took out a battle bot on the Insurgent before it could kill me.”

She said it as an educated guess, but voiced it with conviction. The conclusion fit all the pieces, like a puzzle coming together.

Bo nodded slowly, without looking at her, confirming her guess.

“Guilty. The darn thing would not listen to me. Defied a direct order. So, I neutralized it.”

She glanced down at his suit and reached another conclusion.

“What did they do to you?”

He turned and locked eyes with her, giving her a grim smile.

“Administrative release, with misconduct not warranting a punitive discharge.”

“Oh. Is that bad? I mean it sounds good. The lack of punishment part, at least.”

He shrugged.

“I don’t get to be a Marine anymore. I was a Master Sergeant, specializing in battle bots. That was my life. Now . . . I’m a civilian, as of an hour ago. It takes some adjustment, you know? I haven’t fully come to grips with it.”

The pair sat in silence for a moment, both sipping on their drinks.

Bo tossed back the last of his beer and set the empty glass down on the counter.

The bot picked it up and said, “Would you like another?”

“No. One and done is my drinking rule.”

The bartender nodded and took the mug to the center washstand for glassware.

Bo glanced at Estelle again.

“What about you? Are you going to grab a ship and go back to Clarion now? Is it time to get back to work?”

“Actually, I just got out of a quantum matrix booth to catch up on everything that’s been going on while I’ve been out. And like you, I just discovered that I am no longer employed by my government. In fact, they fired everybody on the Insurgent. I suppose it’s going to be hardest on Captain Minakowski. I don’t think it’s fair, of course, especially not for me personally. I had nothing to do with what happened. He didn’t either, for that matter. But it’s a way of saving face, I guess, after losing this battle and losing the ship to you all.”

“Wow, that’s harsh. I didn’t know you could fire an SSI employee.”

She glanced at him again, a corner of her lip quirking up.

“We’re not the same as the old SSI, before the reset. You know that, right?”

“I do. It’s why I took Oh-one out. That was my lead battle bot, by the way. The sergeants always have numbers ending in oh-one. But still, even with a new configuration and all, I would think your organization holds some sway in the government.”

“Well, if they do, it’s not enough to keep me from being fired. I am out of a job at the moment.”

Bo nodded.

He waited patiently while she finished the wine.

When she pushed back the glass, the bartender bot came over again and retrieved it, bringing it to the wash basin.

Bo took a deep breath and made a decision.

He said, “Can I show you around? This is my hometown. If you haven’t got anything else to do, we can see the sights together.”

“I’d like that. But I want to get out of this military district. No offense, but I’d rather not have any more sailors mistaking me for a prostitute. I think not having a uniform leads people to jump to that conclusion.”

“Good point.”

They both stood up and headed for the barrier together.

“Ever been to Diego before?” Bo said.

“No.”

“Oh, good. There’s lots to see. If you stay a while, maybe we can go out to Primordia and visit the dinosaurs. That’s worth the trip.”

She moved in closer to him and looped a hand around his upper arm.

She smiled up at him, warmly this time.

“I’d like that. For some odd reason, I trust you completely.”

They walked through the alcove’s barrier together and joined the pedestrian traffic outside the bar.

12.38

Haley knocked on the door to Ash's office before walking in.

She found her boyfriend staring at a holo with words floating in the air. He reached out and made some adjustments, pulling a lower paragraph higher.

He remained focused and did not look up as she entered the room.

"Hi there. Whatcha doin'?"

At last he looked away from the holo and met her eyes.

"I'm prepping the script for the election's aftermath broadcast. We're wrapping things up and the planet is starting a new chapter. I want everything to be perfect for this broadcast. It's going to include the signing ceremony, as well. They say journalism is history's first draft. I'm going to bet a hundred years from now, when this planet is well established and a lot more populated than it is right now, people are gonna look back on this broadcast and replay it every anniversary. So . . . I want to get it right. For posterity."

She walked behind the desk and sat down in his lap, putting her arms around his shoulders. He moved his head slightly so he could still see the holo.

When she realized he would not be easily distracted by her feminine wiles, she started reading the text too.

“Where’s Night Shadow? You haven’t mentioned her in here at all.”

“Night Shadow is a bot.”

Her head whipped around to stare at him.

This did distract him, and his eyes left the text, meeting hers.

She said, “What . . . what makes you say that?”

“I told you a while back, she’s not killing anyone anymore. So I went back and looked at things, comparing her movements and such. They are largely identical, except she’s been pulling her punches, obviously. But the clincher was when she told the world to vote for the Alliance. I was able to descramble the voice print enough to identify it as a female Model 10-20. So yes, she’s a bot. And it all fits. That’s why she doesn’t kill anyone anymore. Bots don’t kill, outside of extenuating circumstances. Civilian bots like the 10-20s don’t, anyway.”

He turned the holo off and pushed back the chair a bit from his desk before turning up to look Haley in the eyes.

She frowned at him.

“So . . . you’re not gonna mention that? It seems like that’s kind of a big story.”

“No. No, I am not. I floated the idea past my boss. He said to ‘print the legend.’ Something about an old western movie that taught journalists a valuable lesson or something, I don’t know. Anyway, even if I filed the story, I doubt he would run it. And he’s right. It’s something of a letdown, to realize a lot of those acrobatics and such were performed by a robot and not a human.”

Haley paused for a moment before prying more. But since the topic hit so close to home, she couldn’t help herself.

“A lot of those acrobatics? You mean, not all?”

He looked at her again.

“Yeah. I’m pretty sure she used to be a real person back when she was killing bad guys. The only question now is, who was Night Shadow *before* the 10-20 bot took over the role? I mean, it was obviously a real person. That’s the big demarcation between them. Bots don’t usually go around killing people, and killing was the default go-to that the earlier Night Shadow used to eliminate threats.”

He sighed and looked off into the distance.

“If I can figure that out . . . If I can uncover a grand conspiracy or some secret cabal on this planet . . . *then* I might be able to convince Mr. Del Rio to let me run a big story on her. A big one, exposing everything.”

He looked back at her and smiled, bleakly.

“Until then . . . yeah. Night Shadow’s on the back burner. She’s been showing up less often, lately. Maybe the Southsiders will settle down, and she won’t be needed to quell riots so often anymore. I don’t know. She’s yesterday’s news, at least until I find out more about her.”

He took a deep breath and gazed off into the distance again.

“But I’ll tell you this. I will not rest until I figure it all out. There’s a mystery there, and I plan to solve it, one way or the other.”

Haley gripped his shoulders tight. She decided the best way to refocus his attention on her would be through a kiss. She bent down and gave him a long, luscious one.

When she came back up, his eyes were indeed fixed on hers again.

She smiled at him.

“Sweetie . . . there’s something I’ve been meaning to tell you . . .”

“What?”

“Promise you won’t get mad?”

“Sure. What is it that you want to tell me?”

“Well, about Night Shadow . . .”

12.39

For the first time in its relatively brief history, the Phaethonian held a party.

A really big, massive, throw-open-the-doors-and-invite-everyone party.

Tom called in every employee on the books and had them teleported to New Galveston, if they weren't already there. He planned to invite anyone who drank too much to get home safely to stay overnight in one of the hotel's many rooms.

For the first time ever, the ballroom downstairs would be filled to capacity in a night to remember.

All the hotel staff worked the party, with the promise of double overtime. Tom brought in his bots to help, too, including the ones used for domestic service out at the farmhouses, and Mona, and all their drivers.

Foods of all kind were bought and prepared, and drinks flowed freely. He could not find a live band on this short of notice, but Lisa piped in appropriate festive music over the ballroom speakers.

Gwen and Haley and Lola brought in all the holo signs they could find and festooned the walls with cheery messages like, "Alliance Alignment!" "Phaethon & the Future!" "Politics Powered by the Sun!"

Several new families had moved out into the New Galveston subdivision Tom set up, Bay Haven. Many of them walked in with their children and found seats at the tables set up around the room.

In came dock workers, drivers, salespeople. In came shopkeepers, clerks and assistants, all employed by Phaethon Solar, Phaethon Overland Transportation Service, the Phaethonian Hotel, or one of the other businesses and subsidiaries Tom had scooped up or created.

Other people streamed in as well. The mayor of New Galveston and his wife walked through the doors, along with all members of the city council. Then members of the local Chamber of Commerce came in, invited to the party by Tom personally. Business owners and other leaders of the community looked forward to a real party and free food.

A few people off the street came in, seeing unusual activity at this heretofore lightly used hotel. No one was turned away, they were all invited to come on in and join the party.

Five large succulent pigs were prepared by the hotel's chefs, who had begun working on the meal the day before at Tom's behest.

"But sir," one asked Tom worriedly when he told them what he planned on doing. "What if the Alliance doesn't win? I hear most people are voting Republican, just because that's what they know."

"If the election doesn't go our way, we're still going through with the biggest dinner ever seen in New Galveston. I've got some announcements to make either way. But don't worry. I think it'll all work out the way we want it to."

Tom smiled reflecting back on that conversation as the entire kitchen staff marched into the ballroom pushing carts laden down with food.

Besides the pigs, they brought in brisket and prime rib, exo-variants of shrimp and lobster, marked owl eggs, and all the trays of poshbird Tom could round up. Breads and puddings and pies, along with every kind of liquid refreshment were all served to the hundreds of guests.

He had spared no expense.

Late in the evening, after everybody had eaten copious amounts of food, and the free bar had been restocked three or four times with libations, Tom stood at a small podium on the far end of the room.

He touched his implant, hooking into the room's speakers.

"Can everybody hear me? Okay. I think I know most of you, but just in case I haven't met you yet, my name is Tom Savage. My wife Gwen . . . wave, Gwen so everybody can see you. There she is. My wife Gwen and I run Phaethon Solar Corporation."

He paused as a round of polite applause rippled through the room.

"Thanks, yeah. It's been fun getting off the ground. So, we wanted to welcome you all to a celebration dinner in honor of Phaethon aligning with the Planetary Alliance!"

Another round of applause went around the room.

"Had the election not gone our way, we would have had to replace Lisa, and all of you would have had to get new implants, among several other inconveniences."

Light laughter greeted this remark.

"But as it is, we will now be able to expand our company far more quickly than we otherwise could. Phaethon Solar has perfected energy production for power pack recharging in remote places. When we first started, we brought some experimental equipment out into the Skoni Desert . . . and we blew some things up out there. More specifically, I blew some things up."

More laughter.

"I'm happy to say, we eventually got it all figured out. Along the way, we built up a global distribution network, so that we can now supply fresh power packs to every small village and every remote outpost on the whole planet. We spread Lisa's sensors around while we were at it, and we created some ground-based logistics that did not run afoul of current airborne monopolies. In short, in a relatively small amount of time, we have become a global powerhouse. The only one in our field."

Another round of applause. Tom smiled at the crowd, acknowledging the praise.

“But now, thanks to the way this election turned out, we can quickly move on to our next adventures. I’m here to announce two things tonight. The first is, we’re simplifying our name. No longer will we be called Phaethon Solar Corporation. From here on, we’re going to be known simply as Phaethon Corporation. Just because we’re dropping ‘Solar’ from our name does not mean we’re abandoning the quest for efficient star farming. Far from it. But we are going to deliver other products, and these will reach far beyond solar power. Tonight, I’d like to introduce you all to our new corporate logo.”

He made a wave with his hand and Gwen turned on yet another holo sign. This one appeared on the wall above his head. It read, “PHAETHON CORP” in silver capital letters, with snazzy graphical lines above and below the words.

The revelation of the logo resulted in another round of applause.

“Thank you. Our shares are available on the Octavian Stock Exchange. By the way, we want you to know that we have an excellent compensation package for employees, with stock options, for all of you here who haven’t signed up with us yet.”

Light laughter.

“The next thing I’m here to announce is that Phaethon Corp. will be expanding to offer products to the rest of the galaxy, to territories in the frontier in particular.”

He paused a moment to let that statement sink in.

“What this means is that production capacity involving our products will increase substantially on this planet. We are closer to the frontier than any other industrial center, after all. And we’re going to supply newly explored territories with needed technology for many years to come.”

He gazed out at the crowd. The Chamber of Commerce people, he noted, listened to him very intently now.

“You know, when I was a kid, you could count on one hand the number of locations considered frontier territory. Now, besides planets like this one, there are dozens upon dozens of areas being explored and exploited. There are asteroid belts in far-flung star systems filled with precious minerals. There are new solar systems just now being inspected by drones. Comets, moons circling unnamed gas giants, dwarf stars . . . all these and more are being uncovered, examined and even settled by humans. We now also have nearly fifty outposts that have been assembled and positioned in the outer reaches of the galaxy, with no habitable planets within days of travel. In short, the frontier is huge compared to what it was just a few short years ago.”

He paused again and smiled.

“And Phaethon Corp. will be there, meeting the needs of colonists, explorers, miners and anybody else making their way into the great unknown. We will serve companies, expeditions, and individuals needing our services. We will provide power recharging to the most isolated of districts, where everything from the smallest power pack on up to a Class Eight can be recharged quickly and efficiently, without relying on a constant stream of imports from back home. And that’s especially important when home keeps on getting farther and farther away.”

He paused one last time.

“This is not the end, my friends. This is a new beginning. We have lots more in store, not just for Phaethon, but in places far beyond our own horizons. Thank you! Congratulations to the Lutian Alliance for their newest member! I have no doubt our fair planet will rise to great heights in the years ahead. Thank you, and enjoy the rest of the night!”

This time the applause thundered throughout the ballroom.

Silas stood first, followed quickly by Lola. Soon everyone in the place stood up, clapping hard.

Tom waved at the crowd, acknowledging their applause.

He waited until it died down, then added one more thing.

“Ladies and gentlemen, the dance floor is now open!”

12.40

The following morning, the sun rose behind the ever-present haze over the Skoni Desert.

When it reached its zenith, in one small corner near the edge where sand gave way to greenery, in a former rat colony, a young sand dragon opened one eye.

His belly was full, though, and he had little need to move. Dust had covered him overnight, and other than a solitary yellow eye with a narrow black slit, there remained little sign of the predator.

The eye shifted to a sturdy outdoor camera the size of a baseball perched on a nearby rock. But the camera did not react to his stare.

Slowly, Buddy closed his eye and went back to sleep.

Not far away as the crow flies, Claire Bolo watched him shut his eye while on a call with Tara Lewellen back on Pearl.

The older woman's face floated in a holo nearby. She could see the camera shot in Claire's office and watched the disembodied eye shut along with her graduate student.

"He probably won't get up until this afternoon," Tara said.

"Yes, ma'am. He ate well yesterday evening."

“Well, I think your research is coming along fine. I’ve read the latest chapter of your dissertation, and I’m approving it. Your other committee members will, too.”

“Thank you. That’s awfully optimistic.”

“They’ll follow the chair. And I’m your chair now. Fieldwork is much more stressful than the lab, usually. You don’t need to be in limbo, especially since you’re not on campus. Get the data, crunch the numbers, and finish it up. You don’t want to be out there researching forever.”

“Yes, ma’am. Do you know when you’re coming back?”

Tara sighed and leaned back in her chair.

“It’s politics. The legislature passed some new measure in regards to the faculty senate, stripping it of power. A lot of professors have resigned in protest, mostly in the humanities but including some in our own department. Darius wants me to stay here and help pick up the slack. So no, I don’t know when I can get back out there. Not for a couple semesters, at least. I’m sorry. You’re on your own for the rest of your research, I’m afraid. Of course, I’ll do what I can for you remotely.”

“Thank you, Dr. Lewellen. I do appreciate everything you’ve done for me.”

“Are you going to be okay out there all by yourself? You’re not getting too lonely, are you?”

The front door to her research center opened while she spoke and Leonwood Igleses popped his head in. He smiled at her. She waved him inside.

“No, I’m doing fine. I found someone to keep me company.”

“Oh, good. Well, don’t go native on us.”

“It’s hard to go native on a recently colonized planet, Dr. Lewellen. But you might say I’m in something of a merger between science and theology.”

“Hm. Well, I hope it works out for you. Many of the early scientists in Old Earth’s history were theologians also. Or at least monks. Okay, I’ll check in

next week. Keep an eye on Buddy and let me know if anything happens to him.”

“I will.”

Claire disconnected the link and stood up to hug Leo.

He said, “You ready to head over to the Savage’s house? I heard they had quite the party last night, but this is supposed to be a light lunch.”

“Yes, I’m ready. Is Lisa providing free ports, still?”

“Yes.”

They walked outside and popped away.

Moments later, they appeared near the back door of Tom and Gwen’s place.

Gwen opened the door and smiled at them from the porch.

“Come on in! It’s just box meals. I don’t cook.”

“That’s okay,” Claire said. “Neither do we.”

12.41

Inside the kitchen Claire and Leo found a variety of packaged meals ready to grab and go. They both chose trays of poshbird and wandered into the living room to eat with the others.

Here, Tom and Gwen sat with Silas and Lola. A minute later, Ashley and Haley joined them, popping in from League City.

Conversation centered around the recent election. Tom asked Ashley about the latest news from the Courthouse.

“Word has it,” Ash said, “there’s a move afoot to change the name of League City. Especially since we not only did not vote to align with the League, but it clearly came in last place.”

“I thought it was named after a city in Texas,” Gwen said between bites. “It wasn’t really named after the League.”

Ash shrugged.

“Either way, people want to change it. I imagine they’ll put it on the ballot next election.”

“What are they gonna change it to?” Silas said. “Austin? ’Cause that’s the capital of Texas.”

Ash shook his head.

“No, there’s talk about giving it an even more prominent name than that. Houston has been floated. If I had to wager a guess, I’d say that’s the one most likely to end up winning.”

After a while, the group moved outside, through the front door. In the distance, they watched Tom’s horses grazing by the river.

Lisa had temporarily teleported Timmy up into the syrup grove, where he worked on emptying a fresh round of sap buckets.

The view of the river, the gently flowing grass and the horses, proved scenic and relaxing for everyone in the party. They sat down on the porch steps, the railings, and the Adirondack chairs.

Tom noticed two Micabots on one of Pastor Leo’s shoulders. Since they were black, they were hard to see. One of them saluted Tom when it noticed him staring.

He found himself wondering how many the pastor could call to him within seconds. If Lisa helped by teleporting them in, tens of thousands could be under Leo’s control in seconds.

The Micabots would be earning Phaethon Corp. a lot of money when they went out into the field. He wondered if those loyal to the pastor would be willing to travel, or if they would have to manufacture new ones to import.

We’ll cross that bridge later, he thought.

“I hear Farmer Asa’s oldest daughter is getting married,” Gwen said.

“I heard that, too,” Lola said. “It’s to a guy named Buster. He’s new.”

“I’m doing the ceremony,” Leo said. “At some point, I’ll need to find another pastor to perform a different ceremony.”

He and Claire smiled at each other.

“Oh, wow,” Tom said. “That’s big news. Congratulations, you two.”

Claire said, “Thanks. He just proposed. I accepted. I can finish everything I need for my doctorate remotely. So . . . I guess I’m staying here with you all.”

“We’re probably not going anywhere on account of my past,” Leo said.
“But Claire insists she’s okay with that.”

“I can always keep researching sand dragons. There are worse fields to devote one’s life to.”

“That’s some good news,” Tom said. “It’s hard to top that.”

“Oh, I can top it,” Lola said. “I’m pregnant.”

Haley squealed and hugged her. Claire and Gwen congratulated her and moved in for hugs of their own.

The men were all smiles, too, shaking Silas’s hand and slapping him on the back.

“Lisa says it’s twins,” Lola said. “They run in my family. I’m at eight weeks.”

When the commotion died down over this announcement, Gwen smiled and said, “Well, Tom and I have an announcement, too.”

“We do?”

“We’re having a baby, too! Not twins, though. Just one.”

“We are?”

She smiled at him and nodded.

He said, “Sweetheart, that’s wonderful!”

He came over and hugged her, then kissed her on the lips.

Silas and Lola crowded around them along with Leo and Claire.

“Great,” Haley said, standing back and crossing her arms. “There’s yet another thing I can’t compete with.”

“What do you mean?” Ash said, turning to her. “It’s not a competition, is it?”

“Maybe not, but . . . I mean, they’re already married. Now they’re starting families. Our kids are gonna be younger than theirs, even if we started

working on it now. And we're a long ways from that, if we even get there."

He smiled and watched the small cluster of people hugging each other.

"Well, why not? When this next round of marriages comes up, we can join in and get hitched. I'm not going anywhere. You're not going anywhere. Like you say, what's to stop us? I do love you, by the way."

Her face brightened.

"You really mean it?"

"Of course. I always wanted to marry a superhero, anyway."

She swatted his arm, then moved in closer to kiss him.

12.42

Later that evening after all their guests had teleported home, Tom and Gwen wandered outside to look at the sky.

Mr. Biddles joined them and hopped up in one of the Adirondack chairs. He curled into a furry black ball and fell asleep.

A front had moved in from Aqua Minor, pushing dust out of the upper atmosphere. This led to a rare clear evening sky. They held hands and looked up at the stars together.

In the distance, the Little River gurgled softly.

A marked owl hooted somewhere nearby.

The chickens rested, secure in the CC 1000.

The horses were locked in the stables.

Timmy stood watch out in the field, his back to the house but his sensor monitoring everything.

“I’m glad things have finally settled down,” Gwen said. “I haven’t even had to shoot Big Bertha in a long time, it seems.”

Tom nodded.

He said, "I'm glad too. Just think," he waved up at the sky. "Now that we've got things settled here, the next stop for our products will be out there. I've got a team with a small SCU, our first portable model, going out to a space station near Empedocles. The Pulsar should have dropped them off by now. Hopefully, sometime later tonight we'll make our first sale in a place far beyond Pheathon."

"That sounds great. And I hope you're right about the sales. I'm afraid we've been burning through credits just to get started. We've gotten this far on bootstraps and luck, but we're gonna need a lot more income to make it. We've taken on a bunch of new employees. Don't let Mark start talking to you about it. I made the mistake of asking him the other day."

"We have been going through some funds. A lot of funds. But the income is about to start pouring in. And being on the galaxy's biggest stock exchange will help raise capital, too. But even if it all goes south, we are backed by some of the richest people in the galaxy who can help bail us out, if worse comes to worst. Dad has some hidden vaults up in the mountains on Lute filled with gold bars."

"Oh really?"

"Yeah. Lute's economy was flooded with gold after the war. And Halcyon had just joined, bringing with it even more gold. Dad didn't want to risk destabilizing things and shrinking the price any further, so he just stockpiled a lot of it. We could burn resources for a long time before it starts to hurt. Not that we're going to do that, mind you. I think everybody and their dog is going to want what we have to offer, when it gets out there to the edges of known space. Cheaply recharging power packs is huge, especially in places where there's no other power."

"Well, let's hope you're right. Especially for the sake of this little guy."

She rubbed her belly lightly.

"It's a boy?"

"Lisa is pretty sure. I'm going with that, unless she tells me differently in a few weeks. She said something about a faster heartrate."

"She can hear the baby's heartbeat? But you just got pregnant!"

“They develop fast. Now, we can continue playing around safely until I start to get really big. Then, we’re going to have to back off until after the baby joins us.”

“Okay. So, you’re saying . . .”

She glanced toward the upstairs window in a meaningful way.

He smiled, catching the hint. Together, they walked back inside the house.

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In the far reaches of space, in the Empedocles system, a small space station orbited a large asteroid several AUs from the nearest habitable planet.

Here, a gruff former miner stood waiting outside a door.

The space station remained mostly deserted. Minutes ago, nearly 50 inhabitants graced the halls and living quarters here.

When the raiders hit, breaking through an airlock, they shot down everyone in their path, making a thorough sweep.

Now the halls were littered with bodies and blood, the eggshell-white corridors streaked with angry blaster marks.

The former miner stood with his arms crossed. Short, with a long bristly black beard and matching shoulder-length hair, he waited patiently for his men to finish their job behind the door.

A moment later, it swished open and an underling walked out, a tall black man. As he approached, the raider turned and waited for his man to report.

“They’re with a company I never heard of, Boss. Something called ‘Phaethon Corp.’ Two guys. They say they’re salesmen, and they got some gizmos that make energy or something. They recharge power packs, I guess. Looks like they got here just before us. What do you want to do with them?”

“Do they know my name?”

“No, sir. They’re not from around here. They never heard of you or us.”

The bearded man’s face made a sour expression.

“They will. People can’t just come to the frontier and expect to turn a credit so easy. They have to learn the ropes. They have to pay their dues and put out proper respect.”

“Yes, sir.”

The raider uncrossed his arms, his decision made.

“Kill them and take their stuff. Let’s teach this Phaethon Corp. a lesson.”

His underling nodded and walked back inside the room.

The leader heard blaster shots flashing behind him moments later.

The End

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