

From Archangel to Oslaun and Beyond

Kalan pressed his face to the glass pane and stared out at the port the *Crescent* just docked in. Banners whipped in the wind and blinking light poles over fifty meters high circled the port in a perfect circle. The poles suctioned out the poisonous fumes the moon, labeled Archangel, released, leaving breathable air for traveling sentients.

“Kalan,” Joab called over the ship’s PA. “Get down here, we have a schedule to keep.” Kalan exited the ship’s gun hub from the ladder. He raced past his bedroom, Joab and Zula’s, and the galley. He walked down a steep, narrow set of stairs and met them at the opened ramp. Joab tried to ruffle his hair dyed navy blue, but he scooted underneath his arm. Zula grabbed him by the elbow and he realized Joab distracted him so he would get caught. She held a finger up to his eyes.

“No scurrying off, ya hear? We need to meet the smuggler, get what we came for, then leave right away. Clear?” she said.

“Clear,” he bobbed his head, though there was a gleam in his eyes that bespoke betrayal. Though that may have been the fluorescent lights reflecting off them. They stepped off their home together onto cracked dirt. Four out of the six gauntlets, two on his ankles and four bracing his wrists, whirled, acclimating Kalan’s center of balance to this moon’s gravity. His pseudo-guardians’ had matching gauntlets on themselves. Joab’s bright green hair and Zula’s light pink skin basically glowed in the bright lights of the docks.

Archangel was a barren moon with pale, almost white, earthen ground. It was the second moon to a giant, noxious gas planet called Miasma. Cheap gray buildings and mud huts matched the colorlessness of the moon, yet the residents compensated with multicolor cloths and flags placed artistically throughout the streets.

The moon was small, so much so you could see the circular dip on the horizon, and it was also crowded. Sentient species of a dozen kinds surrounded him. Different skin tones, different types of skin, horns and tentacles, multiple eyes and oddly shaped nostrils encompassed Kalan’s sight.

Though Archangel had a pretty and biblically ancient name, it's atmosphere was that of illicit activity. A low funded colony of the United Oligarch, law enforcement was low and underground criminality was the unofficial trademark. It was their kind of place.

As Joab and Zula headed deeper into the market, a maze of makeshift shops crammed between houses and bars, Kalan struggled to keep up. His short legs couldn't keep up with their pace. So many vendors and consumers talking to one another created a dim, annoying Kalan. He reached up and adjusted his hearing aids, lowering his ears' sense of sound down a bit. Kalan being born deaf, had ear implants installed at birth and it allowed him to adjust his hearing above or below the average Homo sapiens'. Someone shoved a hybrid vegetable in his face and said something.

"What?" Kalan asked and the man with reptilian eyes repeated himself.

"You look like you could use some nutrients. Best garmas in the galaxy. Only eight enos a pound," he said gleefully. Kalan shook his head and moved on. He was perusing some hunting knives Zula might like and baubles to add to his collection when Joab grabbed him. He dropped the current conductor he was admiring.

"What are you doing?" he yelled and shook Kalan. "I thought you were behind us."

"You were going too fast," he said innocently. Though Joab was holding his shoulders hard enough to bruise and spoke angrily, his eyes revealed how he really felt. He was scared, not having Kalan by his side. He sighed and dropped his head.

"We'll have to work on your endurance then," Zula said from behind Joab, smirking at Kalan. He smirked back. "Now come on," Joab picked up the current conductor from the ground and handed it back to the salesman, all while keeping a hand on Kalan's head. "J, please, he's not gonna disappear with you keeping a hold on him. You worry too much," Zula said, rolling her eyes at Joab and making Kalan role his eyes too. Her barb didn't deter Joab. He kept a grip on Kalan's shoulder as he snarked back,

"I have good reason to worry. He's like a rat. Too hard to catch yet too hard to get rid of."

"Hey!" Zula laughed at that. Joab started poking a rhythm on Kalan's shoulder. Joab taught him and Zula morse code years ago. It was a game to them, more so than a strategic skill. He tapped out *BRAT* and Kalan elbowed him in the gut in retaliation before breaking from Joab's hold so he couldn't ruffle his hair or smack the back of his head.

They passed a stand selling jewelry and Kalan's eyes, seemingly normal from a distance, reflected unnaturally on one of the mirrors. His eyes had no pupils nor irises nor scleras. In fact, he had no eyes at all. In their places were a CPU, central processing unit, where the right eye should be and a hard drive where the left eye would be. It was basically a simplified computer separated in two components molded to fit and look like his eyes. Though the cyberoptics main function was simply to analyze Kalan's surroundings and allow him to see like everyone else, with increased details, he had a few upgrades added that made him a useful teammate to Zula and Joab.

The trio weaved through a few more streets and stalls before reaching their destination. Zula and Kalan walked three steps down through an opened hatch with beads hanging as an entrance into a club. Kalan's cyberoptics automatically adjusted, brightening the dim room to normal levels. Tables littered the path to the bar and booths looped around the perimeter. They sat down opposite each other in a booth and tapped on the menu screen screwed to the wall to order.

Six and half minutes later, Joab entered alone and sat down in a booth four down from Kalan and Zula's across from a man with two horns sticking out of his forehead and muscles aching to break out of his jacket. Kalan spotted him immediately upon entering before. He raised the volume on his hearing aids as Zula pressed something in her ear. The device in her ear was a radio piece that connected only to Kalan's hearing aids, allowing her to hear what he hears.

The clanking of the kitchen and murmuring patrons agitated him at first, but he focused on Joab's voice and tuned the rest out.

"You're Nix, I presume?" Joab asked as a greeting.

"Not officially, obviously. But, yes, you can call me Nix. And you are?"

"Jo," Nix snorted.

"That's your cover?"

"Says the man named Nix. I heard through the Chatterbox you got a job."

"Yes, but one none will take. Too risky."

"I like risky. Bigger payout. What is it?" Kalan's and Zula's meals arrived. He was too focused to let food distract him from the conversation.

“Need some people to smuggle a couple dozen atomizers from Koth to Yudanda,” Joab whistled quietly.

“That’s far, along heavily patrolled routes too. I see why most would be reluctant. How much it pay?”

“5,000 enos to pick up the supply and another 5,000 to deliver them to their destination.”

“Do you have proof of all this? The supply and payment, I mean. I’d like to see it. You know, make sure this ain’t a hoax,”

The 3D holograph of the information sprung upward from the rectangular pad and Nix handed it to him. As his hand brushed over the bottom, his index finger stuck a circular device thinner than paper to the tablet. They were called bridges. Being so small and skinny and clear, their one and only purpose was emitting a signal that linked Kalan to the device upon which they attached to. Kalan now had access to the entire tablet as well as other systems it was connected to.

As Zula drank her tea while consistently watching their surroundings, Kalan’s sight was somewhere else entirely. As Joab looked at Nix’s dummy account to verify he had the money to pay them with through the screen, Kalan was looking deeper, decoding Nix’s passwords to access his digital finances and other storage units. Joab handed the pad back to Nix.

“Looks legit. I accept.”

“By yourself?” Nix snorted again. “You wouldn’t be able to complete the job alone.”

“I’m not alone. I got a crew.”

“Where are they?” Nix growled a little with the words.

“Back at my ship. You never know what may happen with these deals. We’re cautious. That’s a good quality for a job like this, I’m sure,” while Joab kept the smuggler talking, Kalan secretly transferred 50,000 enos from Nix’s account of two million enos to Zula’s, going through twenty-four servers and pinging the trail off radio stations across the galaxy in a matter of milliseconds, to ensure no one could track it. He intercepted and deleted the message of a change in bank statements before Nix could see it; all without moving his body. While the usual hacker would need a physical computer to do all this, Kalan’s cyberoptics had four slim cords that weaved through the brain to fuse with three of the main lobes: the occipital, parietal, and frontal. The fourth cord connected to a miniaturized computer located in the center

of his brain, squeezed between the two hemispheres. It was one inch long and 1/8 of an inch in width. It was this device that allowed Kalan to interpret the digital universe of code without going mad. This device acted like his hands on a computer, typing and hacking. It was, in a creative sense, virtual telekinesis, since Kalan did everything throughout Nix's pad with a thought.

"Hey, there," a sultry voice broke through Kalan's concentration, because it was so unexpected. "You look like you could use some unwinding," said a light blue-skinned man with black eyes. He was talking to Zula, who scowled at him.

"I'm here with my son," she said through clenched teeth. A lie, but it was their coverup. The man looked from Zula's pink skin and short spikes extending out of her scalp, to Kalan's tanned skin and dark blue, almost black hair.

"Son?" he asked with a raised eyebrow.

"*Adopted* son," that was technically an unofficial truth. They possessed no legal documentation that Joab and Zula were his guardians. They were simultaneously his saviors and kidnappers, actually.

"He can take care of himself for an hour, can't he?" he reached out for Zula's arm and she reacted with a slap, accidentally knocking over Kalan's cup. It startled Kalan and he looked up. Before, he'd kept his head down, his long locks obscuring his eyes, but not anymore.

"What's wrong with your kid's eyes?" the man said loudly, attracting attention. When Kalan wasn't hacking, his optics were a clear screen that depicted a pixelation of normal eyes, a sclera with a pupil and iris in the middle, though they didn't move throughout the sockets to follow objects like normal eyeballs did. But when he was hacking, that image disappeared. A black background with lines and lines of bright blue code scrolling down replaced it. Though Kalan's condition was rare, people knew that cyberoptics had the capability to work like a computer if a blind person chose to have the MC, mini-computer, installed in their brain. Well, only certain people. Such as underground criminals, because having an MC in your brain was illegal. The United Oligarch knew the amount of doors such an ability opened for someone with the machine.

Thus, they outlawed the surgery and the device years ago. To be found with one was a sentencing of at least a decade and mandatory surgery of adding a blocker, a device screwed into the side of the skull

that blocked an MC's ability to send and receive signals and access the larger network. Once an MC was installed, it couldn't be uninstalled, death more likely than recovery for the host.

Noises increased around the bar, hurting Kalan's ears, due to the sensitive level at which the hearing aids were raised to. He heard Nix cursing and chairs clattering. Two patrons at the bar stood up and marched toward him and Zula. Nix met his two thugs at their booth, holding the near invisible bridge Joab had planted. Joab pushed himself out of the booth and reached for his gun, but one of the thugs beat him, leveling his own gun to Joab's head. The other pointed his at Zula before she could reach her's strap to her hip. Kalan quickly exited the handheld tablet, with what use that would do, his eyes returning to normal. Nix cursed again.

"We got a bugger," he said. Kalan hated that name. He was a *hacker*, but because he was a different kind of hacker, people decided to grace those like him with a new name, and an unflattering one at that. Nix grabbed his arm, dragging him from the booth while his thugs did the same with Zula and Joab. They marched them toward the door for the kitchen and Nix tossed a handful of enos to the bartender.

"No charge this month if you keep these witnesses quiet, got it?" the bartender nodded silently. Nix led them through the kitchen, where employees watched with apathy, and into an office. Nix and his goons released the three of them before the desk. Nix leaned over the desk with the tablet and the other two stood side by side in front of the door. They'd already relieved Joab and Zula of their weapons. Kalan glanced around, taking in minute details. The office was sparsely furnished, just the steel desk and a chair, with no windows and metal-wood meshed walls.

Kalan's gaze snapped back to Nix when he shouted and smacked his fist on the desk. He must've found the message Kalan deleted.

"50,000 enos? *50,000 enos*?" he turned to face his captives. "You think you could steal from me and get away with it?"

"How can you be sure it was us? You're just assuming," Joab said, trying to placate the man.

"I checked my accounts an hour before I met with you," he answered, leaning inches from Joab's face. "And at the same time we're talking, a bugger is in the middle of hacking ten feet away? That's not a coincidence, that's a plan." He moved to Kalan and grabbed his face. Zula and Joab stiffened, but knew better than to protest. "What else did you do in there?"

“That’s as far as I got before I was interrupted. Honestly it’s not that big a deal,” Nix shook him and Kalan grunted. “You have two million enos and that’s just *one* of your dummy accounts. Were you really gonna miss 50,000?” Nix violently jiggled him once more before releasing him.

“Who are you? Who’re working for?” he asked, looking to each of them separately.

“Nobody,” Zula answered.

“Galldung! What were the three of you gonna do with 50,000 enos?”

“I’m going through puberty,” Kalan said, startling everyone with the seemingly random knowledge. Joab and Zula along with the three gang members all looked at him bug-eyed. “You think these things,” he said pointing to his eye sockets. “Come cheap? Every time I go through a growth spurt, which is *a lot* recently, I need new ones. 10,000 enos for each eyeball and another 30,000 for the surgery to replace them,” the surgery actually cost only 15,000, but Kalan sure as hell wasn’t going to tell him that, “we were stealing out of necessity. And we still would’ve completed your job. We just thought we deserved a bigger check,” Nix came at Kalan with his hands outstretched, but Joab got in front of him and swung. Nix blocked and returned Joab’s punch with one of his own to the gut. “*Hey!*” Kalan yelled and crouched over Joab’s slumped form.

Nix grabbed his tablet and moved the camera lens in the top corner from Zula, standing, to Kalan and Joab, kneeling. He pressed a button along the side of the desk, powering up a hologram in the center. He highlighted the pixelated photos of Kalan, Joab, and Zula and transferred them from his tablet to the hologram. He opened up the UO’s facial profiles. Anyone on the UO’s record, citizen or criminal, deceased or alive, could be looked up on the program; all it took was an image of their face. The majority of the decent population didn’t, however. It was considered an invasion of privacy; similar to looking at someone while they changed clothes.

Within seconds, Nix had three very different histories lined up next to one another. Joab’s official picture was a mugshot, his list of petty thievery, breaking and entering, and resisting arrest, multiple counts for each, next to it. Zula’s was a normal, everyday picture one would take at the local bureau building. The only thing listed next to hers being a classified folder detailing her brutal assault and subsequent investigation and trial of her assailant from ten years ago. The picture was taken right before she dropped off the grid into the criminal underworld eight years ago.

Kalan's most recent profile picture was taken when he was eight. He's listed as missing, though no one's been looking for him for years. In the picture, he has both his original eyes. Kalan hated pictures of himself before the surgery. It reminded him of what normal looked like and he hated normal. He's also clearly malnourished, yet Species Protective Services never bothered to inspect why he was below the average weight and height of a regular human child.

Nix's smirk slowly grew as he read over their profiles, chuckling at anything he found amusing. Joab and Kalan slowly stood up, Joab wiping his bleeding nose on his sleeve.

"And I thought you were spies for Gaona or The Maverick Brothers sent to mess with me. But instead, you're just a couple of low-level swindlers," Nix said, mocking them with his smile. He locked gazes with Kalan, a smug gleam irritating Kalan and urging him to snipe back a comment. "Says here, bugger, your father's Halvin Stoker. He was a really good smuggler before he got caught."

"Good smuggler, maybe, but a dungy father," Kalan's tone was flat, refusing to let Nix goad him into lashing out.

"50,000 enos doesn't seem low-level to me," Zula interjected, redirecting attention from Kalan.

"It ain't. If you hadn't got caught, that is. Maybe next time leave the woman at home, *Joab*, they're a liability," Zula reacted, predictably, with anger, grabbing her hidden knife in her necklace, but was forced to stop by the barrel digging into her skull from behind. Nix's face lit up with glee. Joab put his hands out in negotiation.

"Okay, how about we skip to the part where you punish us for stealing from you, take our belongings as compensation, and throw us out into a mud puddle or something similar. No need to drag this out," Joab sucked at negotiation. Kalan was going to recommend they vote Joab never talk when they get caught again.

"Oh, I have a much more fitting compensation than that, actually. Your little bugger here will be assisting me in my endeavors until I deem your debt paid."

"*What?*" Kalan exclaimed while Joab and Zula shouted simultaneous protests. Nix's fist wrapped completely around Kalan's bicep and he dragged him to the door. Joab managed to hit the thug restraining him and Zula slashed the other with her knife, but guns deterred any further effort of escape.

“Kalan,” Zula shouted as the door shut. Kalan quickly heightened his aids, painfully too loud, but he was able to hear the rest of Zula’s call. “Kalan! Triple Dex! *Triple Dex!*” Kalan tuned them down after that, receiving the message he needed to hear. He kicked and punched at Nix fruitlessly, but Nix had at least four feet and a hundred pounds on him, as well as a gun. When Nix grew tired of his temper tantrum, he pulled it out and marched Kalan down the street with it pressed against his spine.

“This is completely unfair,” Kalan said, hoping to first, annoy Nix with his babbling, and second, to convince Nix to let him go by annoying him. “You said endeavor-*s*. Plural. We were only gonna rob you once, that’s our shtick. And we still planned to complete your job for you. Trust me, we would have got it done easy and with no trouble. At this rate, you’re gonna owe *us* compensation.”

“Shut up, bug,” Nix grunted. They reached the port and Nix led him to a large cargo ship. Kalan could see the ship he lived in only a couple rows away, minuscule compared to the one whose ramp he was steered toward.

“You know they’ve probably already escaped your goons, right? They’re probably watching us right now. They’re gonna sneak onto your ship and together, we’re going to escape and steal waaaaay more money now. You know, as compensation for ruining our heist,” they’d walked up the ramp to the lower deck, a couple metal crates stacked in the corners. Nix, fed up with Kalan’s snark, used his neck as a holding point to throw him across the room and slam into the wall, barely missing the crates. Kalan groaned then gasped when Nix fisted the back of his shirt and pulled, tightening the collar around the front of his neck. Nix pulled him up to his knees and his breath brushed his cheek as he spoke.

“You better get used to being quiet, or else I’ll pull that tongue out. Clear?” Kalan’s nose twitched, tempted to test Nix’s threat.

“... Clear,” Kalan acquiesced. Nix, however, didn’t release his pinched hold on his shirt. Kalan felt him pull the collar down lower. He tensed when he realized what Nix was looking at: the tips of scars seared into his back by a whip. They reached all the way up to his collarbones, thus Kalan typically wore high-collared apparel. The whip, he remembered, was an electrified one. When whoever drew it onto another’s back, electricity coursed threw the leather, adding a spark of additional pain to each stroke. It left the scars looking like Lichtenberg figures, in neat, uncountable lines.

“Where’d these come from, bug,” Nix asked, “your friends back there?” Kalan bared his teeth, practically growled, and squirmed out of Nix’s hold. Nix let him go willingly.

“They *saved* me from the people who did that. Mind your own business,” Nix tugged Kalan from his kneeled position and shoved him to the elevator shaft going up.

“Your skills are my business, ergo, all of you is my business.”

“You know you’re not the first person to exploit me for the tools lodged in my head,” they conversed as they walked through the bridge where a few more members of Nix’s gang lounged or readied the ship for takeoff.

“You know your *friends* are exploiting you the same way you say I am.”

“I *want* to help them. I like them. That’s the difference.”

“I understand,” Nix patted his arm, condescension in the action. “A kid like you is malleable to other’s manipulations.”

“I’m sixteen,” Nix snorted in disbelief.

“Sure.”

“Malnutrition tends to stunt growth,” Kalan said in a tone implying exactly the thoughts such a statement was meant to induce.

A hatch opened automatically in front of them, displaying a wide hallway with cages down the entire length. The ceiling allowed three cages to stack atop. Each cage was filled with animals of different species. Some smaller creatures, like cherumes, a rare reptile, were piled together in one, while other corrals could only fit one animal, such as a magnam, with fangs longer than Kalan’s arm and scales like the extinct armadillo from OE, Original Earth. Nix led him down the hall, past a four-way intersection and to the end where an empty cage sat between an aviary filled with cawing birds and a couple of starving snauks.

“I’m assuming the same people who gave you your scars also starved you. Were you being punished?” Nix threw him into the empty cage.

“Punished for not doing what they wanted with my optics. And I resisted when I was thirteen, so don’t think you can break me.”

“Hmm,” Nix looked at him like he was one of his priceless, smuggled animals imprisoned around them. Kalan was starting to feel like it too. “You know, I met your dad back in the day. Maybe I should give him a call. I’m sure he could pay ransom while in prison,”

“He could, but he won’t. You saw the missing person’s report. You see the date it was listed? That’s a month after I’d already run away. He doesn’t care, believe me,” Nix closed the cage door and swiped a metallic card over the lock. He set it against a magnetic holder on the back of his belt.

Two of the gauntlets on Kalan’s wrists were acclimators, because no planet or moon had the same gravitational pull. So, to prevent the uncomfortable feeling of a too heavy or too light body one would normally be assaulted with during every pit stop on some celestial colony, everyone wore the aforementioned gadget. But the other two gauntlets, thicker than the acclimators, on his wrists were manually operated, high-powered magnets, allowing Kalan to grab anything metallic from as far as thirty feet.

Since there were many nicknacks, weapons, and everyday tools made from metal, the gauntlets included a laser pointer. As Nix turned his back on Kalan, he aimed his wrist at the card, a small red dot landing in the center of it, and pressed the button to activate the magnet. The card flew silently threw the air and he reached his other arm between the bars to grab it mid-flight. He stuffed it in his boot.

He waited and listened as the ship’s rockets burst to life and felt the vibrations of the massive vessel lifting into the vastness called space. Implanted in every ship ever made since the year 3404 were wormhole synthesizers, a device that created an artificial wormhole through which crafts could navigate through. It cut the distance of space in half by eighty-seven times. A journey that would take over a hundred years was now hours.

Plasma Miners, as they were christened, were those responsible for harvesting the exploded remnants of a supernova, the material used as fuel to manufacture the synthetic wormholes in spaceships. Astromen, the weathermen of space, tracked supernovas close to eruption throughout the universe, and when said supernovas were about to fulminate, Plasma Miners arrived to collect as many fragments flying outward into empty blackness as possible. They remain however, far enough from the blast zone to avoid death, but close enough to still catch the debris. Special pincers attached to thick-hulled single-passenger ships capable of withstanding over a dozen nuclear bombs possessed the technology able to grab the

pieces of the collapsing supernova. The best comparison Kalan learned was that it was man-made photosynthesis, absorbing the energy of the supernova through the pincers at an exponential rate.

He raised his hearing aids to a detailed level and took great effort to tune out the caws, mules, and roars of his neighbors. He listened to snippets of conversation throughout the ship and echoes of feet. When he felt the ship settle, indicating they were now zooming through the wormhole, he swiped the card over the scanner to unlock the cage and headed down the left hallway, hearing fewer sounds that way.

Every time he passed a door, he leaned his ear against it to determine if it was vacant or not. It took six doors, two rights, and a left before he found an empty one. The scanner was imbedded in the wall alongside the doorway, but Kalan didn't want to risk using Nix's card, for the ship's computer might record the usage, unlike it did with Kalan's cage, since it was a separate scanner not linked to the mainframe.

However, the scanner was still vulnerable to bridges. Kalan hardly carried any weapons on his person, only a knife Nix confiscated from the beginning. But placing your weapons on display tended to discourage anybody from thorough frisking. They convinced themselves that's all you had. Therefore, hidden within the thick lining of his cargo pants, was his packet of bridges, a dozen at least, for quick hacks when needed.

He stuck one to the corner of the scanner and unlocked the door's code in 5.61 seconds. He heard footsteps walking toward him, so he peeled off the bridge, entered, and locked the hatch behind him. The empty room was a crew member's bedroom, twelve by ten feet, containing a bed, a sink, mirror, and, thankfully, a computer. The computer was built into a desk stretching out from the wall, while the screen was put up on the wall just above it.

Kalan placed the bridge on the screen and dived into the ship's network. He found the route the ship was scheduled to take easily. They were to arrive on Oslaun, a more wealthily colonized planet than Archangel, in six hours. Kalan sent the information to the *Crescent's* server, knowing Zula and Joab had already escaped and would see it. The Triple Dex protocol was their code phrase for ordering the person separated from the other two to find some way to send them their location and they would come for the individual.

He also sent the ship's schematics, its ID code, and every crew member's name and face. They should be able to memorize the majority of it during the trip from Archangel to Oslaun. Kalan heard nobody near the cabin, so he decided to start the procedure to download a copy of all of Nix's assets into the memory bank in his left eye's hard drive. Through his mind's eye, he saw less than a millisecond of documents and transactions, pictures and profiles, over five hundred terabytes worth. While his brain could never hold that quantity of information, the hard drive could. He watched the number in the corner of his vision steadily rise and transferred another 50,000 enos into Zula's account as compensation for being kidnapped.

It happened in 0.04 seconds. Impossible for normal eyes to spot it. The information swishing past his sight was nonsense, pixelated numbers and criminal-oriented activities, all of it, but one, and only because the person's face was already scarred into his worst memories. The panic attack hit without warning. Kalan literally felt like a fist punched him in the chest and he collapsed backwards as if it actually occurred.

His brain overrode with flashbacks of bloodied torture sessions combined with his MC still downloading the ship's documents. It was a nightmare awake, the edges hazed and memory fusing with imagination, code scrolling in glitching patterns over it all. He heard his own screams drowning out Makai's laughter, the man who took his freedom, took his blissful ignorance of true pain, took him.

Took his eyes.

He never learned his real name, until now from Nix's pilfered information. Goem Repark, but he was told to call him Makai, for the dead language Hebrew's meaning "resembles God".

"As far as you're concerned, I'm your God, kid." Kalan whimpered, both back then and now in the cabin. Eventually the overuse of oxygen from hyperventilating ran out and his body forced itself to calm down, for risk of dying from panic. He rose to awareness like a mirkle easing its head and giant ears out of its burrow to check the safety of its surroundings. He half expected to be back in that room, alone and cold and never knowing what's coming next. That's what he hated most. Not knowing, not being able to prepare. Makai had many flaws: cruelty, greed, perverted pleasure in pain, but his one positive aspect was his creativity. It didn't matter what you were creative in. Nix was creative in money laundering and

smuggling. Zula and Joab were creative in hustling and manipulating other criminals. Makai, unfortunately for his victims, happened to be creative in torture.

Kalan lifted himself to his knees. Drops of sweat dripped between his splayed palms. None of them were tears, the ducts were removed along with the eyeballs. While many who looked closely at his cyberoptics exuded emotions of pity, uneasiness, and even queasiness, he preferred that over intrigue and, the worst, covetousness. Those people never considered *how* he lost his eyes. That he was awake and drug-free, feeling every tendon slowly tear asunder and pain receptor react in detailed sense. Not to mention, much like losing a limb, losing eyes gave the occasional phantom pain.

Kalan hated Nix the moment he looked at him like Makai had looked at him; a pet, an asset, a tool. He was a business associate of Nix. The download was complete. Kalan disconnected the bridge, but placed it underneath the desk. He waited a few seconds and fortunately the bridge connected to the computer between the slim metal barrier of the desk. He set the bridge to notify him of any actions within the ship's mainframe involved with Makai then moved back into the hallway toward the makeshift menagerie. At the last turn, he heard a swath of footsteps overlap one another and as such he couldn't determine their direction ahead of time. By the time his ears organized the echoes, two sets were coming from both directions of the hallway.

Thinking recklessly, Kalan leveled both pointers of each gauntlet to the ceiling above him and activated the magnets. He yelped when his feet left the ground much quicker than he anticipated. His wrists hit the ceiling at the point of the gauntlets, hard, and he grunted in pain. The bang wasn't loud per se, but someone certainly heard something. The hallway was narrow, which allowed him to push his feet on each side in a split, keeping them up and out of eyesight. Large, steel pipes were built horizontally in equal distance from the other all along the ceiling and Kalan was nestled between two of them, providing him with some form of cover. The ceiling was over twenty feet at least. He had to hope anyone walking wouldn't look up. Two men came from one end and a third came from the other, the latter calling out to the formers.

"Did you guys hear something?" he asked.

"Eh, just the animals riling each other up," the shorter one said.

“Probably because of that bugger being near them. They’re hungry for a snack,” the third man said while smirking.

“Hey, that’s not funny. He’s just a kid,” said the first one.

“He runs with Leeches.” A slang word for criminals who hustled other criminals. “He lost all mercy just by associating with them.” They continued their conversation back to the bridge. Kalan waited for any other noises before pointing the gauntlet at the wall. He allowed it to drag him to it, then turned off the magnet and slid down. He bent his knees to lighten the landing.

He reached his cage without any other encounters, but paused before entering. Nix would need his card back or else he’d be suspicious. Kalan left his cage open, raced to the end of the hallway, and dropped the card by the first cage. He returned to his own and locked himself in to wait during the rest of the journey. He shut his earring aids off completely, to not have to listen to the screeching and growling. He settled down and spent the next six hours in his head sorting through all the pilfered data of Nix’s.

He learned of several potential prospects he, Joab, and Zula could hijack as soon as they were back together. He discovered that Nix had a deal with a low-level politician within the UO—bribery in exchange for route schedules to avoid the patrolmen of space highways. If Joab and Zula were feeling frisky enough, they could blackmail that guy for an exchange of their own. He also learned that Makai had a meeting with Nix in one month, on the desert colony, Prion. His mind swirled with ways of how he was going to convince Joab and Zula to go along with the plan forming in his head. For the first time ever he had a feeling associated with Makai other than terror and hatred. It was excitement.

The cages and walls, floor and ceiling all started to vibrate. They were leaving the wormhole. The shallow shaking of the ship continued for a few minutes, riling the creatures up even more, before it settled. Kalan saw the hatch at the end of the hall open. Nix strutted toward him while reaching behind himself for his card. When his hand felt nothing, he stopped and turned around in a few circles, looking for it. Kalan knew if he laughed, he’d be found out. It was still a struggle not to. He eventually retraced his steps and found the key card where Kalan had left it, then proceeded to walk to Kalan and unlock the cage before dragging him out by his leg.

Kalan, not expecting it, shouted when his head banged against the floor. Nix hoisted him into the air, upside down, by his ankle. His arms were longer in proportion to his body than a human's, so he was able to lift Kalan to eye level. They glared at each other.

"Is this s'pose to be intimidating? Cause all I'm feeling is vertigo," Kalan said, teeth clenched in annoyance. Nix smiled, showing shark's teeth. It wasn't a trait of his species, he had them filed to a point, as a weapon no one could take from him. It was a popular, but painful procedure.

"Nah. Just wanted to get a closer look at the merchandise. I've seen first hand what those things can do," he said, referring to the cyberoptics. "Why do you think the UO banned them so harshly?"

"They were so fashionable, it was a crime?" he answered sarcastically.

"You're a walking AI, bug," Kalan bristled at the nickname, "but an AI that can think for itself. I'm sure they taught you in school the fallout of Original Earth," Nix started walking back to the bridge, carrying Kalan with him in the same position. "They relied to much on AIs. But those AIs couldn't think for themselves, their programs couldn't be changed when made. You can. Which makes you just as powerful, but free to do what you want with that power."

"Actually, not. Because there's always people like you greedy and cruel enough to use them for yourself. I'm just the middleman to everyone."

"That sounds like it's coming from personal experience."

"Who do you think gave me my optics? People who pull a twelve year old's eyeballs out only care about one thing. Themselves." Nix dropped him without warning. Kalan cushioned the fall with his arms. Two men, with fins on the top of their heads and eyes bulging out of their skulls, each grabbed an arm and set Kalan in between them. Nix leaned down and showed Kalan the bridge he'd kept from the bar on Archangel.

"Here's the plan. You don't follow through with it, you lose a hand."

"I just told you I had my eyeballs ripped out of my skull, without any medication, I might add. Do you really think anything you do will be more painful than that?"

"Probably not. But I think you also don't want to lose anymore body parts than you already have. So, I'm meeting up with a supplier of Dope." Dope was the street term for the hybrid hormone Dopamine and Adrenaline, a synthesized combination that, in high doses, increased feelings of pleasure to an

overwhelming degree. People usually used it to go on sex binges or parkour on skyscrapers. “When I get this bridge on his tablet, you will find where he stashes his product.”

“Why?”

“That’s not pertinent to your role.”

“Are you gonna raid the stashes and take it for your own to sell without the go-between?” Nix grabbed Kalan’s face and pushed him back. He stumbled a few feet, but remained standing. Nix, along with two other illicit employees, walked past him and one of the amphibious cronies pushed at his back to follow. “You’re not a very loyal colleague, are you. If you constantly betray your business partners, people will stop working with you. Isn’t it more important to have amicable connections?”

“Isn’t it more important for you to shut up?”

Kalan tsked in a mocking sound, “no, not really.” But he did shut up, if only because they exited the ship and he wanted to scan his surroundings. It was evening, a deep purple over the horizon creating soothing tones. Lights from ships, edifices, and street lamps dotted the environment. Unlike Archangel, Oslaun had the funding and high enough troposphere to construct buildings taller than two stories.

Kalan traversed behind the horned lawbreaker, between his henchmen, into alleyway after alleyway. He thought Nix was making the trek purposely difficult to follow. Nix, however, was unaware of every ability cyberoptics held. His eyes automatically catalogued each turn and significant feature of passageways, making a map within his head for later use, potentially.

They eventually reached a staircase, stuffed in the corner of a dead end and leading into darkness. Kalan hesitated, but Nix grabbed his arm and pulled him down with him. It was pitch black, but he didn’t need to increase the lighting in his optics because within a few meters, a circular door spiraled open and hanging bulbs illuminated the corridor. The ceiling was low and everything was concrete. The floor was slick with a light sheen of water and Kalan heard something leaking in the distance. More corridors branched off from the main one, leading farther back than Kalan’s eyes could zoom in on. It was a maze below the city, a place where those not wishing to be caught could hide from the authorities.

After more senseless trudging, they stopped in front of a ten-foot tall species with arms reaching his knees and slits as eyes, leaning against the wall. His skin looked like it was stretched too tightly around his face. One of the thugs shoved Kalan’s head down. He didn’t want the other guy to see his

optics. The man led the rest of them down *more* passageways before halting in front of a large storage door. He knocked and it lifted enough feet to allow them to enter. Two of his goons followed Nix inside, but Kalan's guards and himself stayed out. They leaned against the cold concrete wall, Kalan in between them.

"Get to work," one of them grumbled at him.

"He hasn't set the bridge up, yet. Be patient, geez," he retorted and crossed his arms, mimicking their slumped position. Kalan only had to wait a couple minutes before a red dot started blinking in his peripheral, signaling a bridge was linked and ready to be used. He hacked apart the supplier's firewalls, and delved into his travel logs. He knew the three main stashes where the Dope was hidden within minutes, but refrained from saying anything. He couldn't afford to be moved.

If Joab and Zula followed the Triple Dex protocol, it was their job to find him, his to stay put. So, he perused the supplier's bank accounts and emails, learning how deep his connection into the drug business went. For a splash of mischief, Kalan decided to donate a third of the supplier's money to a couple dozen charities for endangered species, orphanages, and more. Kalan, Joab, and Zula may steal money for themselves, but they've never strived for the millionaire-level other criminals sought. They're lifestyle was simple, free, and revenge-tinged toward criminals who hurt, stole from, and killed people. They rob from criminals because they were the only people in the universe who actually deserved it.

Kalan was so engrossed in his hacking, he took no notice of the cloaked, hunched person pushing a cart and shambling past him and his wardens until the person stretched out and stabbed the two men in the neck with a taser. Kalan shouted and backed as close to the wall behind him as possible, exiting the supplier's tablet abruptly. The cloak's hood was lifted and Joab's face stared back at him. Kalan exhaled and his taut body eased in tension.

"Geez! A little warning, next time?" he said, struggling to calm his pounding heart.

"Let's go," Joab said, grabbed him by the bicep, and started running away from the slumped figures. He struggled to slow Joab's pace, figuratively digging his boots into the concrete.

"Wait, I need to—could you slow down? . . . I just. . . gotta—Joab, stop!" he said and pulled his arm out of Joab's grip. He skidded to a halt and pivoted to face Kalan. "Just give me a second."

“We don’t have a second,” he said. “They’d’ve heard you yell. No time for one of your games, Kalan!”

“This will help us escape,” he shouted back, “okay, so just. . .” He trailed off and reconnected to the bridge still stuck to the supplier’s tablet. The black background with blue code replaced the screen of his optics. “Initiate self-destruct,” he murmured while also sending the command through the MC. Having done this before, Kalan knew the bridge would burn itself up, leaving a round, black hole on the tablet it was attached to. If the smuggler pieced it together, he’d accuse Nix of attempted thievery, which would slow Nix down in his pursuit of them.

His optics returned to their normal pixelation and he resumed running next to Joab. He increased his hearing aids slightly and heard a distant “-ing thief!” which made him smirk.

“Where’s Zula?” he asked as they turned corners and passed shambling passersby.

“Still in route. She’ll arrive in about an hour.”

“Wait, so, how are you. . .” Kalan said, confusion spilling out of his mouth.

“I stowed away on the ship,” Joab said, smiling at him. “In the plasma room.” The room closest to the engines of a ship filled with tanks containing highly dangerous, highly hot amounts of stored supernova fuel. Nobody ever went in there except to fill the engines. “Zula took care of the two guys for me so I could tail you and Nix.”

“You were in there for six hours?” Kalan exclaimed, shocked and impressed. “You’re probably gonna get radiation poisoning.”

“Well, then we’ll just have to use that extra 50,000 enos you put in Zula’s account for some heavy-duty medication, huh?” Kalan laughed as they exited the underground and emerged from the stairs. He turned left, opening up the map his optics had stored for him to head back to the port, but Joab stymied him by gripping the back of his shirt. He choked comically.

“Not that way. This way,” Joab said and turned right, lugging Kalan with him.

“Why? Zula will be *that* way.”

“Yeah, and we need to lie low til she does,” Joab speed walked until he found a doorway leading to some electronics shop. They went to the back and browsed a set of protective data chips for sensitive storage.

“We can’t just hide here for an hour, looking, but buying nothing,” Kalan said.

“How do you know? I doubt Nix will check to see if we stopped to window-shop. Just stay away from the windows.” Kalan snorted.

“Ironic considering what you just said.”

“Would it kill you to not be a smart mouth for five minutes?” Joab sounded exasperated, but that was just his sass pushing back against Kalan’s. He tsked in a mocking sound.

“No, not really,” he said, but smiled at Joab and he returned it. They killed a good amount of time in the shop, wandering through the shelves, observing different species with skin tones and eyes and limbs, coming in and actually purchasing stuff, unlike them. Though the original planet containing human life was long gone, its descendants spread across the universe were alive and well-evolved.

While evolution on OE was a slow process, transforming creatures across millions of years’ time, the unusual and sometimes harsh conditions of certain colonized planets produced some expedited changes to the denizens. Accelerated Evolution was the official title of the condition. Planets just barely matching the environment of OE caused the creatures, human and less-than intelligent animals, to develop features vastly different from others on another planet. So people like Zula, Nix, the amphibian thugs, and more may not look all that human, they were still classified as such. Whereas Kalan and Joab, for example, were born on planets more closely similar to OE’s terrain and thus, looked like their ancestors who first left Earth over 1500 years ago.

As they looked lazily at radio systems and tablets, Kalan’s mind thought about Nix’s spiel about the dangers of AIs and he connected that reasoning to Makai and why he chose to implant not only cyberoptics, but an MC in Kalan. He wanted to ask him why he thought Kalan was a good candidate for making a willful, walking AI in a human body. He looked up to Joab, who was staring intently at a new sound system that could be installed in the *Crescent*. Kalan opened his mouth, closed it, then opened it again.

“Joab. . . I-I want to tell you something,” Kalan said, hesitant and not sure it was the right time. But thoughts of Makai were invading his mind, distracting him.

“Yeah, K?” he responded.

"It's about Ma- galldung!" Kalan cut himself off with a hissed curse. Joab followed his line of sight to the front of the store where one of the amphibious guys Joab had knocked out entered. They both moved into the corner of the shop, a pillar in the center of the store helping to block them. Joab took off his cloak and fixed it over Kalan's shoulders, lifting the hood to cover his face.

"I'll distract him," Joab said, "and you'll run."

"The other guy's probably outside waiting for that." There was also no back door.

"And since you're aware of that, you'll be prepared to fend him off. Alright, now wait here."

Kalan scowled at Joab's retreating back. He watched him walk up behind the thug, tap him on the shoulder, and body-check him into a glass shelving, appliances raining down around him. Kalan sprinted for the door and when it opened automatically, he rolled on the ground, expecting someone to aim for the upper air to grab him. He stopped in the middle of the sidewalk to look back, but didn't spot the other amphibious guy or anyone else looking suspicious. He heard a shout and distinctive smacking of a fist to a face. He stood up from his crouched position.

He waited for Joab, nervously scanning his surroundings until Joab ran out of the store, lip bleeding and an enraged, overweight store owner holding a taser behind him. They outran him quickly. Joab's longer legs set him ahead of Kalan by a few feet, and thus he got clotheslined by an arm in the alley they turned into a few blocks from the store. Kalan didn't startle, what with his veins overrun with adrenaline, and leaped over Joab to slam his booted feet into the guy's stomach. He twisted midair to land on his hands and feet instead of his back. He rolled onto his back, ended up next to the man lying on his back, then axe-kicked him in the throat.

Kalan got to his feet and moved to Joab, who was already back up. They were only halfway down the street when the other two thugs who were with Nix stepped out in the open at the end with guns. Joab sidestepped into a side-alley for protection, but Kalan kept running, picking up speed.

"Kalan!" Joab yelled. Kalan ignored him and flipped a switch in his head, setting his optics' visual perspective to 3,000 feet per second. The average bullet traveled 2,500 feet per second. He observed dust particles in the air floating like snow flakes, each individual strand of cloth forming a suture in his jacket, and the beads of sweat on the gunmen's brows. Everything within Kalan's line of

sight appeared, from his perspective, to slow down. He, however, didn't. So when the bullet discharged from the barrel, Kalan saw it coming and moved to the right, feeling it fly past his head.

Despite advances in technology throughout the centuries, no one managed, or perhaps refused, to create bullet-less, laser-like firearms, seen in classic sci-fi films and novels. The amount of energy needed to sustain even one shot of a heated laser from a barrel could never be downsized in a container able to fit in a person's hand.

The gunman was so startled by his feat of dodging, Kalan was able to knee him in the crotch without any defense on his part. He spun to gain momentum and elbowed him in the nose. Blood splattered over both Kalan and the victim.

Before he could kick him into unconsciousness, he felt a gun press against his neck. He stood rigid as the man behind him breathed heavily.

"You're more trouble than you're worth, bug," said Nix from behind Kalan.

"Kalan," Joab called, pointing the gun at the thug still standing, who held his own at level with Joab's

"If I'm too much trouble, what's with the manhunt?" Kalan asked. He saw, in the corner of his left peripheral, a red dot blinking in short and long intervals. It wasn't a signal from a bridge. It was morse code.

"I want more than compensation now. I want revenge," Nix said and Kalan heard the click of a pulled hammer. *S*

"Let him go, Nix," Joab said, sweat poring down his face, revealing he was more scared than his voice did. *T . .A*

"You think you can negotiate your way out of this? I'm not some common thief you can swindle." *Y . .S*

"You couldn't have just left us alone, huh?" Kalan said. "You had to let your pride make the decisions." *T . .I*

"Are you trying to get shot in the head?" *LL*

"No. I'm trying to distract you." A second after he said it, Zula, who'd been signaling him morse code while aiming a rifle from the rooftop two blocks away, fired a shot that hit Nix's hand holding the

gun to his head. Nix screamed as a hole an inch thick replaced the center of his palm. Kalan dived for the gun Nix dropped as Joab shot the last thug. He ran from the side alley to meet Kalan with Nix lying between them. He pointed his gun at Nix's head. "No!" Kalan said, extending his arm to Joab. "Don't kill him." He looked at him with furrowed brows, but listened, lowering the weapon.

Zula ran up to them, a rifle slung across her shoulder. She pulled Kalan into a hug, which he returned, smiling into her side. She released him, stared into his eyes, and cradled his cheek in her palm. Her eyes hardened when she looked down at Nix. He was clutching his injured hand, teeth and eyes seething at the trio above him. Zula produced a knife from a hidden pocket, but Kalan clasped her wrist before she could drive into Nix's flesh. She glanced at him in confusion, silently asking for an explanation and he gave a face that said 'later'.

"Let's go," he said, meeting Joab and Zula's gaze individually, but ignoring Nix. Joab frisked Nix for any weapons he may try to turn on them as soon as they turned their backs. He found two daggers and confiscated them. Zula took the lead back to the *Crescent*.

"You'll regret this," Nix grunted, probably more to himself than them, yet Kalan heard him. He turned around and started walking backwards.

"Look, both sides got a few licks in, both were inconvenienced in some way. Let's leave this at a mutual tie and, in a show of good faith, we won't kill you when we see you again."

"What makes you think we'll see each other again?" He shrugged and waved his hand a flippant gesture.

"Just a hunch. *Goodbye*, Nix. Please do not come after us." Joab grabbed his shoulder and swirled him around, facing away from Nix. He still saw Kalan's smirk directed toward him, though.

They kept their guard up on the walk, one hand on their weapons, but encountered none of Nix's henchmen. The buildings opened up for the port and Kalan visibly relaxed at seeing his home parked hastily between two cruisers. Zula entered a code when they reached it and the ramp lowered down for them.

"So," Joab said when they were settled in the galley, him leaning against the counter, Zula on a high stool next to him, and Kalan propping his legs on the table, while the *Crescent* flew through a

wormhole to a random planet. “Nothing happened during my side-story. I sat next to the contained heat of a supernova for six hours. Zula, you sat in the ship the whole ride over, I’m assuming.”

“While looking through the information you sent,” she said to Kalan. “What about you? What happened while being stuck with that galldunger?”

“Well, he put me in a cage next to a bunch of poached animals.”

“What!” They both exclaimed together.

“Guys,” he said with a pointed look, “I’ve had worse.” They both muted at that. “Speaking of worse. . .” He began and they both had matching looks of wary. “I found out who Makai is.” They’re shoulders tensed simultaneously and their worry shifted to pity and fear. “Goem Repark ring a bell? I’m just wondering if that’s his real name or an alias.” His heart pounded just saying his name, but his face remained calm, like stone.

“No, that’s his name. Kalan, how did you-”

“He’s an associate of Nix. Or Nix is an associate of his. Doesn’t matter. What matters is I found a saved message on the ship’s server, stating the two plan to meet, in person, on Prion in four weeks.”

Kalan said this with excitement rising in his tone. Joab and Zula stared at each other, refusing to acknowledge Kalan’s gaze. That was never a good sign. It was the sign of them ganging up on him. “What?” he snapped, dropping his feet from the table. “You think it’s too dangerous? Too stupid? I can’t handle it? I’m weak, a liability, a tool that can’t think for itself-!”

“Hey, hey, hey,” Joab interrupted his rant and held his wrists. Kalan had stood up and started waving his arms in the air while slowly moving toward the two of them without even realizing it. He was panting. “We don’t think that. You *know* we don’t think that. Come on, breathe with me.” Joab guided him through his breathing, calming him down.

“Sorry,” he whispered. “Nix said some. . .things and it’s just mixing with Makai—I mean, Repark.” Joab nodded and released his wrists. “Look. I thought I was over it. Him. But seeing his face again, knowing where he’ll be. . . I can’t ignore that. I can’t let this opportunity pass.”

“But are you ready for it?” Joab asked.

"I'm not sure. But I know I'll regret it if I don't do it. So that's a risk I'm willing to take. Please help me take it." He looked from Joab to Zula. Joab sighed and wouldn't meet his eyes. Zula, in contrast, was staring intently at him.

"Okay," she said and Joab whipped his head around to look at her. Kalan breathed in relief. Joab must have made a face at her because she elaborated. "I know what it's like to miss an opportunity. To want revenge on someone but unable to get it by yourself. I'll help you all the way through and after, Kalan." Kalan yipped happily. Joab scoffed at her.

"C'mon, Joab. Hop on the bandwagon," Kalan said. Joab shook his head, but couldn't stop his lips from upturning.

"You're a bad influence," he said, poking Kalan in the chest.

"Whatever. Now, listen to my plan." Joab and Zula laughed at that, "what?"

"No way are you making the plan," said Zula, walking out the doorway and heading to the cockpit. Joab mimicked her. Kalan stood aghast before scrambling to catch up them.

"Why not?" he whined and took the seat behind the pilot's chair.

"Your plans lack finesse," Joab stated simply.

"Well, your plans lack creativity," Kalan retorted.

"And that's what's kept us alive," he shouted back in exasperation.

"Alive, but bored." Kalan and Joab kept bickering playfully back and forth while Zula rolled her eyes, fond of them both, but refusing to admit it. The giant, bulletproof window showed the pitch blackness of the wormhole. If he went to the back of the ship, Kalan would see it in a more detailed light from the *Crescent's* thrusters. He would see the wormhole's walls as the inside of a barrel wave, black ripples swishing and crashing against each other. Kalan didn't really like the darkness, but he could appreciate the beauty in it.