

Chapter VI - Under the Radar

"What can I do for you, Mr. Rench?" the customs officer asked in a tone that suggested he did not want to do much.

"I want to know where the spacecraft Knight and Steed will land. I shall also need to see its cargo manifest and the manifests of the shuttle carriers it will be unloaded to."

The customs officer, a portly man with a thick, oily mustache, wrinkled his forehead. "The manifests are not public property, sir, as a man of your station must be aware. Whatever do you want them for?"

"One wants cargo manifests to know what goods are being transported, as a man of your station must be aware."

"I'd sooner attend other, more important matters, sir, if you don't wish to answer my question," the officer said flatly.

You ask too many questions, Zablaron thought as he shifted the wearisome, thick-rimmed spectacles he wore. "As I said, I am from the Metalloy Health Department, and I currently reside at the Metalloy Embassy on Karomoz, working in close collaboration with the Karomozian government." Zablaron had hoped that marching into the spaceport from that oh-so-secret tunnel meant that he could order these fools about as he pleased, but as it turned out, this man was way too wary. "There is a serious health concern which I am here to investigate."

"What health concern is that, may I ask, that you will address by poking into cargo manifests? Is it your unhealthy amount of curiosity?" the customs officer asked ever so innocently, gently placing his hands on his desk. Zablaron had never liked these slimy Karomozians.

Zablaron ran a hand through his hair. "If you ever leave this office of yours, you may have heard about a deadly epidemic that has broken out on Karomoz and several other planets, including Metallon. No one is sure if they are isolated cases or if they share a common source. I am just here to make sure the common source is not Metallon. There are several spacecraft from Metallon that are suspected of cheating out of having regular disinfection. The Knight and Steed is one of them. I want to know where in Karomoz its cargo is distributed so I can investigate if the epidemic broke out in those areas."

The customs officer considered Zablaron for a moment with black, beady eyes. "I don't recall seeing you here ever before, nor have I ever heard about you. Only the most frequent visitors to Karomoz know about the VIP tunnel. How did you come to know about it?"

As Ferrina had revealed to Zablaron, the common citizens knew only two ways of going to or from the spaceport — shuttle aircraft or ferries. There was, however, a third way, known only to the most distinguished of dignitaries. An eight-mile-long, underwater tube ran from the spaceport to an isolated airstrip on the mainland.

Zablaron's small space cruiser had landed directly onto the airstrip, and then it was a half-an-hour ride through the tube to the spaceport. The tunnel had split into a dozen different directions, most branches leading directly to the multiple aprons at the spaceport. Zablaron had continued to the cargo terminal and had taken an elevator. It had emerged into a panel in the office.

"You forget your station, sir," Zablaron said, bristling. "I came from that tunnel — that is enough for the likes of you to know. If I have to put up with another of your pointless questions, I will have to notify your superiors you are obstructing an investigation into a critical health concern." The officer was putting up too much resistance. He is in on the smuggling — he fears I will find out. "I would have just had one look at the manifests, and I would have been out of your hair and on my way. But it looks like I will have to be your guest here until the authorities arrive."

That seemed to smooth out a few wrinkles in the officer's forehead. "Alright, Mr. Rench, but don't take your time," he said warily.

As the officer tapped a few times, Zablaron took off his glasses and wiped them on his shirt before deciding he could not let his guard down even here on Karomoz and immediately put them back on.

The Karomozian weather was moderately warm, and he had dressed accordingly. He wore a short-sleeved, maroon dress shirt while dark-purple suspenders held up slate-gray, corduroy dress pants. He accessorized with burgundy loafers, a silver wristwatch, and those wearisome glasses — his VBP lay hidden in his pants pocket.

He did not need the glasses to see, though, as even in the dim light, he could clearly see the mahogany panels lining the office walls. He had tried to make out any distinction in the board through which he had entered but had found none, whatsoever. The floor was slick, black marble that reflected everything in the room like a mirror. The officer sat behind a computer on a small, wooden desk on one side of the room, opposite the main door.

"Alright, here it is. Get a pen and notepad ready. Take one from the desk if you—"

"I don't need a pen and paper. I just need one good look," Zablaron declared as he edged toward the computer.

"No, you don't," the customs officer spun toward Zablaron as he hurriedly tapped a button in quick succession.

"Yes, I do. You don't want the authorities poking here, do you?" Zablaron now stood in front of the computer. The manifests had apparently been minimized, revealing a paused video player on the internet.

The phone on the officer's desk rang loudly. The officer eyed Zablaron for a moment and then leaned over to pick up the phone.

"Yes?"

Meanwhile, Zablaron tapped a button to open the first manifest. The officer jerked to block Zablaron but was just as soon occupied by the phone. "Open?" the officer was saying in bewilderment. "Which one is the Miracle? What was it transporting?"

Zablaron studied the manifest of the Knight and Steed. He glanced at the time and place of discharge, then scrolled through the list below. Soon he found the entry saying 'Point Blank products.' Under the column of 'quantity,' the number 'three hundred' was written. Zablaron then opened the manifests of the shuttles, one by one.

"Are you sure nothing is missing — did they check if the cargo hold was still secure on Qragenyal?" the customs officer asked as he wiped his brow. "Darn it."

Zablaron was about to double-check when the computer screen went black.

"I have to go right now," the officer stated matter-of-factly as he withdrew his finger from the screen. "See yourself out, please. Now."

"I have what I need. Thank you for your cooperation," Zablaron said, running a hand through his silver hair. He had already calculated the total number of units being offloaded to the shuttles to find that they were a good sixty units short of the three hundred brought in by the Knight and Steed.

Time to catch 'em right, Zablaron thought as he exited the office through its main door, into the cargo terminal's lobby. There was plenty of time to scope out a vantage point.

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As Jayrock weaved his way through the crowds of people bound for one of the various terminals, he looked around, taking note of all the security guards. Gylith was following, separated from him by a few couples of people.

They had swum toward the shore of the island, soaking wet. It had taken them forever and consumed a lot of their enertrons, whipping up enough sand to absorb all the moisture from their bodies and their clothes. The clothes still looked suspiciously crumpled, and Jayrock was uncomfortably aware of the musty odor his clothes gave off if he held his nose too close.

They had circled the perimeter fence at a distance so as not to trigger any intruder alarms until the pier was visible. Here the wall ended, and the ferries dropped off boatloads of travelers bound for the spaceport. Jayrock had moved on and stood on a nearby rock on the coast facing out toward the lake until a guard had shepherded him into the spaceport premises, saying travelers were not allowed to loiter around the pier. Gylith had entered behind them as the guard was distracted. Then they had fallen in with the crowd.

Jayrock felt oddly exposed to the elements on other planets, as did most other Grebriks who lived in the underground cities of Grebros. The sun shone brightly overhead, occasionally hiding behind a passing cloud — also filling the sky were the dozens of spacecraft and aircraft taking off from and landing at the spaceport like spooked birds scattering away. Throngs of people from all over the galaxy moved in columns toward the terminals, piers, restaurants, hotels, cinemas, and museums built on the spaceport's landside.

The spaceport was ringed by a half-crescent of twenty terminals on the east side, which was the landside. Concourses led from these terminals into the spaceside to the west, which had eight runways working simultaneously.

Jayrock noticed security guards moving through the crowds, accosting staff and travelers alike, especially those bound toward the ferries. They hardly paid any heed to the ones alighting at the pier. Apparently, they were convinced that the Miracle's cargo hold could have only been escaped from after landing. Jayrock hoped the rock platform Gylith and he had created had dissipated into enertrons before the spacecraft had landed.

Jayrock slowly edged away from the column of people bound for a domed terminal ahead and moved to the left toward a sidewalk lining a four-lane road. The road ran past the terminal toward a chain-link fence a few hundred meters away. The fence, which divided the landside area from the spaceside area, had a small door with a keycard reader set in where it joined the terminal wall.

Jayrock walked along the sidewalk and approached a security guard coming in the opposite direction.

"Excuse me, sir, is something wrong?" Jayrock asked anxiously.

"Absolutely not, sir. Please continue onward to your designated terminal or wherever—"

Jayrock interjected, "Look, even a blind man can see those guards hounding every other person. Clearly, something is wrong! What is it?"

"I said, there is nothing wrong, nothing that concerns you! Now move on! Do you understand me?!" The guard was getting really agitated now.

"Excuse me, does not concern me? I don't wanna board a spaceship only for its hull to get blown open in space! I don't wanna die—"

"What's going on?" A woman had joined them, hauling luggage with one hand and holding a kid's hand in the other.

"I think I heard them say bomb!" the kid chirped.

"Has something happened?" This was Gylith, joining in with several other people who had come over to see the commotion. "Sir, I really wish you would just already come out with it!"

As the people started bickering with the guard, it was the easiest thing for Jayrock to lift a keycard from the guard's pocket. He slipped away and hurriedly made his way toward the gate in the fence. A camera was mounted on the gate, so Jayrock first hid behind a tree and chucked a deep-saffron rock at it to disable it. He then ran over to the gate and swiped the keycard into the reader. As the gate slid open, Jayrock flung the keycard into nearby foliage and made a run for it.

He crossed a few yards of a grassy field in a full sprint toward the multistory cargo terminal that loomed ahead with its shimmering blue glass. He arrived in a massive open space in front of the terminal and ducked next to one of the numerous cargo pallets loaded in dollies parked there.

Steadying his breath, he pulled out his transceiver from his pocket. "Gylith, I'm in. I threw the keycard into some bushes near the gate in the fence. Grab it and cross the fence before someone comes investigating the camera I disabled. Over."

"Got it," came Gylith's reply. "What're you gonna do next?"

"Steal a vehicle. Then I'll go to the fuel tanks — you watch over the freighter. Can you do that?"

"Of course, I can. On it."

"And Gylith?"

"Still listening."

"If either of us gets caught, we can't betray the other. The mission must go on. You hear me?"

"Loud and clear, Captain. Now I must get moving. Out."

"Out."

Jayrock peeked out from his hiding place to look ahead. The massive cargo terminal stood like a mountain over the parking space. A fleet of dollies with cargo pallets, tugs and tractors, unit load devices, refuelers, and other ground support equipment stood waiting — some were being used by ramp agents who milled around the place wearing their reflector vests and caps. The air stank of smoke and grit, while agents yelled on top of the noises made by running engines.

Just next to the cargo terminal, to its left, Jayrock's attention was drawn toward a much smaller outbuilding whose entrance apparently was just a doorway. His eyes soon followed a ramp agent taking off his vest and cap, tucking them under his armpit, and walking toward the outbuilding, all the while wiping his sweat. So that's where it is, thought Jayrock.

Workers at the Karomoisian spaceport were provided accommodation on-site, on the upper floors of the cargo terminal. This was most probably their communal changing room.

Jayrock moved furtively among the crates and pallets and vehicles and made his way closer to the outbuilding. Ducked next to the side of a pushback tug, he was about to sneak onward when he heard voices yelling over the noise.

"For real?"

"For real! He just left half an hour ago from here, that silver-haired punk! Badgering the chief about this epidemic nonsense, who does he think he is?"

"Ah, these Metalloids and their overcrowded sewer holes they call cities! I bet they're the ones spreading all these ugly diseases."

"I bet that pompous punk had a bug or two on him as well."

The voices were growing louder, coming close to the rear of the pushback tug. Jayrock sidled along toward its front. When he almost emerged at its front, he glimpsed a loader gunning down that way.

Jayrock hated having to hide in cramped spaces, but with no other option, he found himself rolling into the tight space under the tug. He waited until the footsteps passed along the rear of the vehicle, and the loader rumbled past its front.

A fuel truck passed across the tug, heading to the left. Jayrock rolled out of his hiding place and ran as fast as he could along with the truck, stooped low so he wouldn't be visible in the side mirror. Hidden from workers beyond the vehicle, he ran until it passed the last aisle of cargo in the area and dived behind a cargo pallet.

He peered around the left of the pallet. The changing room stood directly ahead, just a stone's throw away. Jayrock moved along the parking space's left side, alternating from cover to cover until he reached the cargo pallet closest to the changing room.

Off to the right were a few workers busy working with a robotic crane stacking up cargo pallets on a loader. Jayrock waited for a few moments, but there seemed to be no point in time when at least one of them was not facing the general direction of the changing room. Jayrock gauged the distance between him and the room. He wondered if he could reach over quick enough without the workers noticing since they seemed quite engrossed in their work.

He decided not to take the risk. Alright, here comes the time-tested stone, Jayrock thought as he created a small stone in his hand. He peeked over his cover and was about to send the stone sailing high over everyone's heads when suddenly one of the cables holding up a cargo pallet snapped. The pallet crashed down over the concrete with a resounding clang,

as if some giant gong had been struck. The workers scurried for safety, screaming out in shock.

"What in the...?! Who the heck was supposed to secure that?"

"That did not just happen!"

Jayrock wasted no time and burst out of his cover. In two seconds, he was crouching against the sidewall of the changing room, safely out of sight.

He felt his transceiver vibrating in his pocket. He took it out and pressed a button.

"You're welcome," Gylith's voice rang out cheerily.

"That was you? Where are you?" Jayrock looked around at the parking space. There were ramp agents aplenty but no sign of Gylith.

"My hiding place would be very lousy if you could spot me that easily, wouldn't it?" Gylith replied. "Let's just say that from here, my sniper rifle bullet will find itself in your rear if you don't hurry and get into that building you're squatting against."

"Alright, I got you. Out." Jayrock put the transceiver back.

A familiar pain returned to Jayrock's right shoulder as he scaled the wall of the changing room, sprouting rock from his hands and feet. More than a week had passed since that night, but somehow there it was, resurfacing like a nagging doubt.

Jayrock did his best to ignore it and grabbed the windowsill of the awning window set high in the wall. He dragged himself up and brought his eyes to the level of the window, which

was slightly ajar. Inside, everything was dark and still. A row of lockers colored in green and white jutted out of the wall opposite with fixed benches in front of them — a reflector vest and a cap dangled enticingly from an open locker door. To the right was the labyrinth entrance leading into the changing room. Shower stalls lined the wall at the left, and two of them were closed with the sound of running water emanating from inside.

Jayrock pulled his head down and yanked the window wide open. Then he stuck his head through the opening. He heaved himself inside until most of his torso was past the window frame. He formed deep-saffron sand on his hands and feet and let go of the windowsill. He landed inside on his hands only to somersault back onto his feet in one graceful, noiseless movement.

Wasting no time, he tiptoed over to the lockers and donned the vest and the cap. As he hurried outside through the labyrinth entrance, he felt a small object in one of the vest pockets. He fished it out and examined it. It was a little red key fob with a circular depression evidently meant for haptic feedback. He figured it out to be remote access for the ground support equipment.

As Jayrock stepped outside again, he pulled down his cap and discreetly made his way to the parked vehicles. The scene near the crane was still in mayhem with the workers arguing and bustling around, trying to hoist and secure the heavy pallet once again. Jayrock kept driving his thumb into the key fob, looking around for a response from any vehicle.

He felt his transceiver vibrate again.

"What's that in your hand?" Gylith's voice came out as Jayrock activated it.

"A fob for these vehicles. I'm trying to find—"

"Yes, figured. There's one flashing like crazy to your one o'clock. A big, blue tanker or something. A little farther on from the huge stack of crates to your two o'clock."

Jayrock strafed past some cargo obstructing his view, and sure enough, ahead and slightly to his right, the indicator lights of a blue truck were flashing on and off.

"And I happen to be laying on top of that huge stack of crates. Bring that tanker and let's get out of here," Gylith said excitedly.

"Copy that," Jayrock responded.

He jogged his way to the truck and entered its cab. He inserted the key fob into a slot, and instantly the engine revved to life. He grabbed the steering wheel and navigated his way toward a towering stack of metal crates labeled Quinns Furnishings that stood a few yards ahead. He pulled over next to it and honked. Soon enough, in his side mirror, he could see Gylith vaulting down from the crates. He gave Jayrock a thumbs-up before he disappeared behind the truck. Once Jayrock heard the trailer's doors open and close, he stepped on the accelerator once again. He left the parking area from its east side and raced off onto the wide apron beyond.

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