

CH: 1 So it Begins

"I don't remember how I came to that rundown hovel of a city. Somehow I drifted there, carrying myself on my one leg. For as long as I could remember I had lived off of scraps and pity cash of passersby. No place, no purpose, all I was to the universe was a flea limping along; until that day."

She sat dazed and listless resting in the shade of a buildings ally as it blocked the afternoon sun. The hours passed and the sun sank lower, and peered its rays through the space between the opposing skyscrapers. She heard footsteps as if off in the distance, but sooner than she expected a shadow cast itself upon her and instead of moving on as so many did this one lingered. She turned her head at the mouth of the ally where she could see only the figure of a man. With the sun at his back little detail could be seen, she could not see his eyes but his gaze was all too apparent with the sensation of his stare. He stared at her a short while, for her the time was indeterminable; his gaze seemed to slow time and make each moment almost tangible.

At long last he spoke in a deep stoic voice "You can stay here or you can come with me."

With that said he held out his hand to her. A flash of light glared as he extended his arm blinding her momentarily, she shaded her eyes to make out the plate armor on his left arm. Her hesitation was only for a small moment, she took his hand and he lifted her up with ease.

As he carried her on his back through the city she looked around and saw the faces of the people as she never had before. The afternoon sun making odd shadows that danced across their faces from the skyscrapers above. Each one of them as if they had their own masks like in the masquerades she heard of when she was little. As they moved through the crowds of people in the streets she heard a steady stream of metallic sounds. One was very deep, like the inner workings of a pocket watch clacking around in someone's pocket. Another was the man's chain-mail beating along his chest. The final was the gentle rattle of his armor. The symphony of sounds created a melody that served as a lullaby for her, the first of her life that she could remember. The gentle sounds of this song and the rocking of the man's steps while the warm afternoon sun washed over the girls back soon put her to sleep.

She awoke writhing in pain, reaching for the stump of a left leg only to find that it was no longer a stump. Where the leg once ended there was now a mechanical appendage. She was in awe and perplexed by its sudden appearance. The sounds it made as she bent it back and forth in new discovery were very cog like; the sounds it made seemed very familiar. With a start the young girl realized it had been that deep sound she heard as she was carried on the man's back and with that she turned her head frantically looking at her surroundings. Shifting from side to side she spotted on a desk the arm that had been attached to the man. She attempted to stand on her new leg so she could investigate the severed appendage only to fall flat on her face.

"Owww!" She yelled.

She shook the pain off and crawled her way to the desk built into the wall and pulled her-self up. She proceeded to examine the arm.

"Laid out like that it seems strange, lying so lifeless while not long ago it was attached to someone, being used to carry me here." She thought to herself.

There it was with a copper tint to its body and the sight of a few gears in the opening where the joints meet. It definitely wasn't a new model. It didn't have the resilience and impressiveness of the new synthetic mussels made of carbon fiber, and artrinium; but it did hold a certain charm that was immutable. Her leg was built in the same manner. Then it struck her, for the first time in her life she would know what it was to walk under her own power. Truly walk, to not just be a girl on make shift crutches and canes.

Suddenly the door to the room slid open and the man from before stepped through. She was so startled by his entrance that she lost balance and fell on her face.

"Not again!" She thought.

Without a word he quickly stepped over and lifted the girl up from under her arms and set her back on the table she awoke on.

He then said "The new leg will take some getting used to."

Still in shock she quietly uttered a "Ye-Yeah."

He sat on the stool by the desk on the far wall, took in a deep breath and exhaled through his nose. He cocked his head slightly, looked at her, and spoke.

"You have a choice. You can go back and do whatever you wish, or you can come with me and work as crew on my ship.

In her mind she paused for a second. She was thinking how her life had been just a struggle until now, aiming for nothing. At least if she worked on this ship she could be putting purpose towards her life. What seemed like an eternity of contemplating had only been a second or two.

She looked up from her contemplation and replied, "What's my job?"

He attempted to smile; it was halfway in-between a grin and a smirk.

"That will come later; first let's get you some food. You won't be able to work on an empty stomach." He said nonchalantly. "Come on I'll show you the galley." He said as he got up and walked to the door.

"My name's Melanie, What do I call you?" She said in earnest relief.

He paused a moment in the doorway facing away from her, almost as if he was trying to remember his own name, and then he said calmly but sternly, "Max." He then proceeded through the door, Melanie slowly followed after.

After twelve years of pain and suffering; twelve years of loneliness, of wandering, of starvation; after all that I had somewhere to call home. For the next two years I ate, slept, and trained among the crew of that ship. I had no idea what laid in store for me.

15 years later.....On Cencharus 3, a young woman with short brown hair; clad in a chainmail vest, approaches a rundown bar nestled among the factories and warehouses. If not for the odd, now archaic sign that hung above its door that read "Tartarus", one would not know it to be any different from the surrounding buildings. It was a windowless block of

concrete with but a trickle of light emanating from the bottom of the cold steel door.

She entered and gazed slowly at the faces of the people inhabiting the room. Visually riffling through the workers and dregs slouched over the bar, and tables. Glancing over the drunkards singing in the back corner, she found her contact sitting at a small round table in the middle of the room. She approached the man with slight haste and proclaimed "You always had bad taste in bars."

The man looked up with his head cocked to the side and a smirk and replied, "You know I could never drink any fancy booze. For me it was either rotgut or nothing." He then gestured for her to sit, she complied.

"You're an odd man Nigel. You're an informant and yet you sit out in the open where anyone can see you." She stated in a stern yet whimsical voice.

"You know what they say, 'The best place to hide is in plain sight.'" Nigel replied.

"What do you have for me?" She stated urgently.

"Why such a hurry?!" Nigel exclaimed. "How long have I been your contact? Ten years now?" He asked.

"You haven't known me ten years." She curtly stated.

"Okay okay it just feels like ten years. I've never seen you so cut and dry on getting information about a bounty before. It's got to be more than just the reward. Why are you in such a hurry?" He inquired.

"I'm the one getting information from you, not the other way around." She Said

"Oh, is it that personal? I know I can't force you to divulge anything but if you entertain me with a story I'll reduce my finder's fee." He suggested nonchalantly.

"You're not going to give me my information unless I tell you, **are** you?" She asked.

"I haven't decided yet." Replied Nigel.

"You are ever a pain in my ass Nigel." She said. "Fine I'll tell you why I'm a bounty hunter." Melanie said sternly. "Do you recall me mentioning the man that took me in as a kid?" She Asked.

"Yes I remember you mentioning him." He replied.

"This happened about two years after he took me in." She said.

On some barren planet in the Turaias system the Falcon class ship set down in the desert. The sand flying about revealing the little bit of bedrock as the thrusters lowered the ship gently down.

"Alright people we are dealing with desert out there so I want everyone properly equipped; that means goggles, breathing filters, water packs, heat reflective clothing; and don't forget your APIs. I don't want you guys being taken out by unexploded mines, micro-drones or anything of the like, that ship may be old but defenses from that era are notorious for running for centuries without maintenance much less decades." Max coached.

"Relax Max the derelict is only about 500 meters away. I doubt any of us will even get

thirsty.” Said Grantz; a rather stalky, rotund human.

“That may be but the desert can be unpredictable, you never know when a storm is going to crop up and you may be pinned down where you stand for hours. The desert is unforgiving and the lax or ignorant do not escape its wrath!” Max retorted. “I want all of you suited up and ready to go in ten minutes; and be thorough, make sure you have everything; I don’t want any slip ups out there.” Max said.

The six scavengers departed the airlock and moved steadily across the sand. Melanie with her metal leg found it difficult to tread through the shifting grains, the artificial limb sunk down into the sand with each step as such she had to use extra effort to stride forward, each step staggered and uneven. Even with her pants and tight seals sand found its way into her leg making it even more difficult to traverse the wastes before her, but she kept up none the less even if she was at the back of the group.

The cadre of scavengers approached the derelict, half buried in a dune all paint or other marking had been eroded by the abrasion of sand and wind.

“Here it is.” Max Said.

“Are you sure? There is nothing left on the outside.” Said Leeanthra, a tall half-elf female.

“Definitely, look at the shape of the tail and the resilience of the hauls metal. It has to be it. You don’t see craftsmanship like this anymore.” Said Max.

As they were readying themselves to enter the discarded craft they felt the ground rumble and could hear the roar of thrusters. They all paused with tense anticipation. The ominous vibrations intensified as the source ascended up the adjacent dune. It was then that each member darted back towards their own craft without need of instruction. They treaded the sand as quickly as they were able. Melanie turned to look over her shoulder at the approaching craft as did most of her companions. A black mass of rounded metal arose from behind the dune, with two distinctive humps almost as if the ship had eyes; as if it were not a machine, but a living creature.

“Oh shit! It’s the Mougrons!” Grantz shouted.

Suddenly there were explosions all around them. The obliterated sand filled the air stifling vision while the blasts effectively deafened them. Without warning Melanie’s synth-leg seized up causing her to trip and slide face first through the sand snapping the strap of the goggles and filling her eyes with sand before tumbling from the metal limbs momentum. Her cries for help went unaided as the constant barrage of blasts from the ships weapons masked all her efforts.

After what seemed like an eternity of blinded terror Melanie heard the familiar hum of her own ships engines. The young girl expected to hear a fire fight commence overhead but instead she heard the ship that she knew as home ascend through the atmosphere. She didn’t know if they hadn’t noticed she was gone or if she had been abandoned. Several minutes later after her eyes had cleared of the sand and regained her vision she caught her first glimpse of Mougrons. They stood ominously over her peering down through giant black eyes at their prize. The eyes were enormous in size and proportion, with no variation in shade from the rest of the body; if not for the bulges one would not know that they even had eyes, and the mantis-like mouth that seemed to spew forth odiferous slime every time they opened

their mandibles.

“They ended up selling me into slavery. I was tossed into the artrinium mines, a year and a half I worked in the hot stagnant air of those mines. Eventually I escaped after a malfunctioning reactor exploded and caused a cave-in. I spent two days climbing my way through the rubble, when I made it to the surface everyone was gone. They had packed up the entire operation, they didn’t even check for any survivors. Those mines had hardened me; hardened me in both body and mind. That combined with what Max taught me I forged my way as a bounty hunter.” Said Melanie

“So now after all this time you are trying to find the man who took you in and abandoned you.” Said Nigel.

Melanie stared coldly at Nigel for a moment then spoke. “You are too fucking perceptive. Alright you stalky bastard I gave you your story now what about my information?”

“One question first, what are you going to do when you find him?” Asked Nigel.

“I....I’m not sure.” Melanie said with sudden clarity.

“An honest answer. I suppose you’ll cross that bridge when you come to it.” Said Nigel

“The information Nigel!” She said curtly.

“Settle down, since you told me such an amusing story I will forgo my usual fee.” He said with a smirk on his face. “My sources tell me that the man you are looking for has been bouncing around the Velosiss sector.” Nigel stated.

“What! The Velosions barely tolerate outsiders. They usually eviscerate intruders that don’t have any official business.” Melanie thought aloud. “That aside if that’s where he is that’s where I’ll go.” She said as she rose from her seat with her hands on the table for a brace.

“Hey sugar how you lookin’ for some action!” Yelled a rather large miner in a drunken stupor.

“Out of the way! Fucking lush.” Melanie exclaimed while she pushed him aside with one arm and walked past.

Hey you can’t talk ta me like that!” Exclaimed the drunkard.

The miner raised his stein above his head and swung it down at the young woman. Without turning around she raised her arms to catch the man’s over-sized arm by the wrist. She then flung the man over her shoulder three meters ahead of her. The hulking mass of a man toppled over a small table that two disgruntled Arnboran traders had been sitting at.

They arose in discord, approaching Melanie with no intent of reasonable discourse. As they approached the scarf’s covering their leathery yellow faces flapped at their sides while they pulled the knives from behind their backs as they drew near. A moment before the first Arnboran reached her one of the drunken miner’s friends decided to attempt retribution for his humiliated comrade with an albeit vocal attack.

The sudden charge took Melanie by surprise and diverted her attention from the approaching threat. As she turned to deal with drunken oaf yelling like a lunatic the Arnboran

took the opportunity to thrust at her. The attack fell short however, for as he came within centimeters of piercing her at her kidney the voracious trader's face was met by a fist about as large as his own head. He flew back across the room colliding with the wall by the door.

A Laudian stood from his barstool to take a defensive posture for Melanie's flank. He stood a towering 211cm tall with lean muscle for his size which by almost anyone else's standards would be enormous. His skin was between blue and obsidian; his hair was black and as with most of his race was what humans would call cornrows running straight back, then down the back of his head and stopping just above his shoulders.

He raised his hands in front of him with open palms and clenched fingers ready for a fight. The horizontal slits in his eyes seemed to gaze into the very being of the remaining trader.

Melanie turned back only half a moment later after dealing with the boozier to see the back of her giant savior and the vicious trader flying through the air.

The other Arnboran trembled and slowly slid and stumbled back until he tripped over his own chair that he had been sitting in. Still trembling he reached into a pack that had been under the table and pulled from it a plasma grenade. He nervously twisted and pulled to extend the shaft thus triggering the mechanism.

In an instant Melanie and the Laudian synced without a word or even so much as a gesture. She threw a small knife from her belt into the throat of the Arnboran and in the same moment her giant protector moved towards him to retrieve the grenade, once he grasped the explosive he stepped through the door which was left open by fleeing patrons of the bar and hurled it to the sky. Several seconds later a blue flash and the sound of a shock-wave appeared above the small industrial buildings of the area.

Melanie stepped outside and looked up at the fading blue burst of the grenade. She sighs and begins to speak. "I'm gonna get out of here."

"Shouldn't you stay and give a report to security?" The Laudian inquired.

"I'll transmit it to them after I leave orbit. It's not like this is the first time I've done it." Melanie stated nonchalantly. "You coming?" She asked without facing him walking away casually.

"Might as well." He stated as he shrugged following after. "So, where we headed?" He asked. "First to the space port, and then to the Velosiss sector if you want to come." She replied.

"Fine by me." He stated.

Melanie and the Laudian arrived at the dock around dawn. As they approached the Falcon class ship the rising sun gave the normally steel gray ship a deep orange hue that with its long pointed fuselage and blade like wings at the rear made it appear that it was a craft of fire that could pierce the stars and the universe itself.

The Laudian paused for a moment to revel in the splendor of the ship's glow.

"Come on! I want to get out of here." Melanie abruptly expressed. He quickly followed after.

"What's your name anyway?" She inquired.

“Ladrion.” He simply stated.

“Well then Ladrion, welcome to Desert’s Wrath.” She articulated as she opened the hatch.

They climbed inside the hatch and Ladrion looked around with a child’s wonder. Taking in every detail of the ship’s interior with splendor.

Melanie turned around to check that he was behind her and ended up having to do a double take when she saw him gawking at everything. “You okay?” She asked.

“Yes, yes, it is just that this is my first time in a space ship.” Ladrion stated as he continued to gaze up at the ships interior.

“Are you serious? Not even an inter-system shuttle?” She asked in disbelief.

“No, I only left home for the first time a week ago. I have been traveling via jump gates until now.” He said.

“Great so I’m going to have to teach you everything I suppose.” She stated with a sense of dishevelment, and placed her hand on the top of her head and began scratch it in frustration.

“You needn’t worry. I have studied ships systems and operations. I am also a computer expert and a quick learner. I merely was awestruck by the sight of the actual thing.” He stated in a reassuring tone.

“You’re not gonna do that every time you see a ship are you?” She asked with a certain disdain.

“No, now that; what is that human expression? Ah yes, ‘my cherry has been popped’ I have moved beyond the initial sensation.” He said earnestly.

“Let’s hope you can regulate systems as well as you talk, come on.” She said with an inward wave of her arm.

It wasn’t long before they were underway. As the ship detached from the dock it hovered and pivoted in place. The ship ascended and as it rose Ladrion gazed out the starboard cockpit window. There he beheld all the ships and the glorious change in colors and shapes on the ship’s hulls from the raising sun. The hues of orange, yellow, and red as they danced across the ship’s surfaces resembled a grand gesture of a dance that he longed to experience.

With the atmosphere broken, the course set in and near a week before arrival Melanie began the training of her new companion. She found to her amazement that he was most capable. Before long he had all major controls dedicated to memory and could operate them almost as well as she could.

“You weren’t lying about you skills were you?” She queried.

“Why would I do that? It would just get me in trouble sooner or later if I did.” Ladrion stated.

“That’s an excellent point.” Melanie replied. “On that note why don’t we get some food?” Melanie suggested.

“A copious suggestion. I’ll cook.” Ladrion stated.

“Ummm....I’m, not exactly fond of Laudian food.” Melanie politely objected.

“Neither am I, nor can I cook any such.” He rebutted.

Melanie looked at Ladrion with a raised eyebrow and a befuddled look on her face. After an open jaw as if to speak and a few odd expressions Melanie managed to articulate a thought. “You’re not the usual Laudian are you?”

“I’ll explain after we eat. Now which way to the galley?” said Ladrion.

“Follow me.” She stated with a confused inflection to her voice.

Upon showing Ladrion the galley he began preparing breakfast immediately. In light of his focus and zealotry on the subject she opted to leave him to his devices. One and a half hours later she was summoned to the dining area. There she saw her humble bits of meat and lasting vegetables spread out in gorgeous fashion with a magnificent fragrance that matched the splendor of its presentation.

Melanie peered at every dish and took in all the subtle nuances of each dish in both sight and scent. With a gaping jaw and widened eyes she looked up still hunched over the table and spoke. “You are full of surprises.”

Ladrion responded with a genteel grin that carried a pleased and almost childlike innocence. They sat down and began their meal. Melanie delved into her meal with unrestrained fervor. She bit into each morsel with little noise uttered other than the grunts and moans of pleasure for the meal. Ladrion as with being accustomed to his own cooking had more restraint in his dining manner, and a decorum that was uncharacteristic of his species.

With the meal finished and only small specs of food remaining; Melanie sat staring at her companion with a sense of fascination. Ladrion meanwhile sat gazing into space, lost in thought.

“As a rule I don’t usually pry into others business, but.... you are just such an enigma I have to ask; where did you come from?” Melanie imposed upon him.

“I suppose so long as we are traveling together, for however long that is going to be; I should share with you why I’m out here.” Ladrion confessed.

I grew up on Condaloor 4 amongst the Elves, deep into the southern continent where the populace is sparse. There in the fields and cliffs of the Dramoan province I flourished with my adoptive brothers. I learned hunting in the old ways and metalworking as was tradition in the family. Since our house was so secluded in our valley we seldom received visitors. I was perfectly content to run in the fields and forest, or go exploring by the waterfall; at least, until a point.

A knock beat down upon the door of the countryside cottage. An Elvin man with dark brown hair opened the door and gazed up to find an Orrathen on the other side. The two greeted each other with silence. The Elf stepped aside and extended his arm to gesture for the catlike creature to enter. The Orrathen barely fit through the three meter tall door. As he entered young Ladrion who was peering around the corner at an inner doorway caught a glimpse of the massive cat-man. Ladrion was fascinated with his appearance. He wore a sleeveless shirt and loincloth which exposed his arms and legs. The white fur laced with black and blue stripes that seemed to crisscross at random points and angles across his body; the

digits seemed to be something between finger and paw.

Ladrion's father and the visitor relocated to the sitting room. Ladrion pursued them through the adjacent hallway. The words spoken between the two were alien to Ladrion. Lost upon the words that flowed rhythmically from their mouths Ladrion continued to examine this creature of forceful presence. Even with his obscure body and immense presence that almost constrained his breathing Ladrion could not avert his attention from the beings eyes; glass like in appearance they held a depth that he could not fathom, as though they saw something more. After what seemed like an eternity to Ladrion his adoptive father and the visitor concluded their discussion. With only a brief goodbye the Orrathen departed. Ladrion with curiosity ablaze pursued the Orrathen with great haste. Catching up to him at the top of a grassy hill.

"Wait!" Ladrion exclaimed.

The catlike figure stopped and turned to face Ladrion as he stumbled up the last stretch of the hill.

"You are Telloc's adoptive progeny, correct?" Inquired the Orrathen.

Ladrion nodded as he caught his breath. "Your eyes, what have you seen to give you such eyes?" He queried.

"Such a serious question for one so young." The Orrathen replied and then kneeled down to look upon Ladrion more directly. "Many races have said that the eyes are the gateway to the soul. You look into my eyes and what you see is me. No one thing or series of things would necessarily give you what it is you seek. The only thing I can say is take in all that you experience and learn what you can." The Orrathen rose and resumed his previous path.

"Can you see more than I can?" Ladrion blurted.

The Orrathen turned to face Ladrion once more and spoke "I wouldn't know, I haven't seen through your eyes."

What he said has stuck with me through the years. However at the time I was still young and occupied with chores and having fun with my brothers. Gradually my brothers left home. With their absence I found myself with more time on my hands to think. More often I would find those words seeping into my thoughts. For the first time in my life I found myself questioning about my origin. When I was fourteen I finally worked up the courage to ask my parents about where I was from. They informed me about the details of my race, however every time I tried to find out more about my own personal origins they danced around the subject. I became frustrated and demanded them to tell me what they knew, but they abstained.

In my newfound animosity and curiosity I packed a bag for a trip to the city to find my own answers. My parents pleaded with me to stay, saying that my endeavor would prove fruitless. In my aggravation I was unaffected by their words. In a stern silence I left and made my way to the city.

In the end I found no answers in the city. I'm not sure if it was for the same reasons that my parents supposed. I searched libraries, data bases and asked around where ever I could. The libraries and data bases held far too many possibilities of my origin even with

narrowing the range of my birth. While the inhabitants of the city did not hinder me in my search, nor did they aid me. If any did have information they were reluctant to answer any of my inquiries. Most would not even speak to me or acknowledge me aside from the children gawking in wonder.

I wandered through the city of Mōrdarén as would a specter. I still remember the last day in the city before I returned. A storm came in unexpectedly and began to pour upon the city with great force. While most moved through the streets somewhat hurried to get to their destinations I stood gazing up as the deluge came down upon the crystal and stone towers that lined the city.

As I gazed up the people and the rain passed through my peripheral vision, they were little more than blurs; and in that moment I was unsure if I was the specter, or if the people around me were. Either way I knew I had to leave that world.

Upon my return my parents saw my resolve to leave and knew that there was nothing they could do to stop me. So they supported me as best they could. They told me that I was left to them by a longtime friend of my father's. He was a human; he never gave them the details of how he came to look over me. My father knew him well enough that if he asked a favor not to question. They gave me what information they had about him which was surprisingly little and gave me their blessing. They did have one request of me before I left though, that was to prepare myself for my journey. So for the next five years I trained in martial arts and learned ships, customs, technology, whatever I could to aid me in my pursuit.

"That was five years ago that I began my training." Said Ladrion.

"So now you are looking for the man that brought you to them." Said Melanie. "I hate to burst your bubble but I can't be running all over to help you find this guy." Melanie stated as she brought her cup to her mouth for another drink.

"I have no leads, so right now one place is as good as any other. If you don't mind I'll stick with you until I find a lead then I will go my separate way." Suggested Ladrion.

"Sounds fair, but the Velosiss sector isn't exactly a likely place to find a human or even any clues for finding one." Melanie stated in a concerned discouragement.

"That doesn't really matter; even if I don't find any clues there I'm sure that eventually I will find something. Besides, from the little information my parents gave me about Max; all I can say for certain is that he could be anywhere." Said Ladrion.

Melanie's eyes widened and gazed at Ladrion with great intent and simply asked "Max?"