**Prisoner 164**

**Chapter 1**

Prisoner 164 did not particularly enjoy playtime.

He recalled a time when he once had, a time when stepping out into the open yard had been liberation from the confines of rusted bars and stained walls, when interaction with his fellow inmates had been a game, and best of all, a challenge – that flash of anger and impulse and pride that flickered behind their eyes.

But now, it was always the same. Ever since the incident, it had always been the same. The looks that met him contained none of the aggression and defiance that was hardwired into these men. It was fear. It was fear that followed him through the prison, his own personal demon that was, in its own way, more terrible than any of the criminals surrounding him.

For fear brought isolation, that constant cloud of nothingness, the darkness of solitude that left him empty and lost. And this, though he would scarcely admit it, was the root of the problem. He was lonely.

As utterly repulsive as he found his fellow convicts, the company of animals was surely better than the company of none. He found himself longing for their crude humor and frenzied laughter, their fierce, if fleeting, friendships, that savage camaraderie that existed between them. But it was far too late for that. He had shown them what he was. He had crossed a line of violence that even they dared not tread. He was an animal to the animals.

Prisoner 164 shook himself out of his self-pity. It did no good to lament the past. He had done what had had to be done. He would bear the consequences without regret.

Besides, he relished what he had now. It was power, far and vast, power in its purest form – not of bargain or bribery, but of threat and violence, the means by which the alpha male achieved dominance in the most primal of societies.

But the alpha male usually had a female to keep him company. A family whose genes he was passing to the next generation.

Prisoner 164 knew about family. He had been there before. He had experienced love and warmth and kindness given unconditionally, without reason or expectation, bargains or trades. And he had a name, a proper name – all letters and no numbers. And he knew that if he reached far enough into the back of his mind he could retrieve it from the forgotten chambers of his old life. But he didn’t want to. Jonny Smith or Bernie Bradson or Alan Lennard just didn’t quite have the same ring to it, didn’t carry that tinge of fear that *Prisoner 164* did when it rolled off the tongue. It wouldn’t help him survive.

For he had realized, within weeks of arriving at the prison, that his family and his old way of life had been senseless. It was foolish to give without receiving; to subvert part of one’s existence solely to the appeasement of another was subservience and inferiority. And to do so when circumstances did not demand it, in the name of hollow and fickle emotions, that was the greatest human delusion of all, he had decided.

Because when the artificial layers we have built around ourselves are stripped away, when we are forced to exist without even the most basic of securities to keep us company at night, we are nothing but savages. The human mind is but a mere step above those of baboons and chimps who eat their young and kill with their bare hands to survive. We may be born in stainless hospitals, but our origin is that of the feral grounds, and it is inevitable, at some point, that we should revert to our most primal and basic nature. Those who forget that, those who are fooled by our illusions of comfort and sentimentality, those are always the first to die.

And he believed it. With all the conviction and faith he could muster, he had made it into his fundamental decree, the very core of his existence that defined his every thought and action.

It had begun as a coping mechanism – thoughts and words he would repeat to himself day in and out to grant him the will and purpose needed to survive. But what he had once subconsciously acknowledged as cynical untruths, prison had shown him to be stark and unwavering reality.

And so it was this that drove Prisoner 164 to do as he did, to adopt a level of brutality and violence that exceeded criminal – it was truly psychopathic. Both convicts and guards saw this and stayed clear of his way, for they knew that the most dangerous enemy was one who would go any length and beyond to cause pain and destruction, who had no regard for himself or his opponent.

But Prisoner 164 knew the truth. He was no psychopath. He took no joy or pleasure in harming others the way he did. He was merely convincing. He knew how to sell the tale and had the guts to do it – that was all. It was this that had brought him to where he was now, the alpha male of a pack of savages, the apex predator that not a single soul dared to challenge.

And all of this was true until someone slapped him across the back of his head.

He staggered forward, partly to distance himself from the attacker, partly because it had actually hurt. He cursed himself for being so careless. If his assailant had truly wanted to harm him, he might be dead by now. As it was, he saw as he spun around, it was a newcomer, someone who hadn’t yet learned the hierarchy at Mas Eros Penitentiary – or perhaps, was perfectly aware of it and had decided to make a statement by striking at the top. Probably the latter.

Prisoner 164 scanned the yard. No one was noticeably watching, but the distant chatter had died down slightly and heads turned just enough to catch him in their peripherals. Everyone was watching.

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Prisoner 164 panted and spat blood from his mouth. It wasn’t his. Two hundred pounds of flesh laid in a bloody heap on the floor. As he had expected, the others made no indication that they had seen what they had seen. But he was perceptive. He saw the stiffening of shoulders, the slight tremors amongst those less anatomically inclined, the furtive glances averted as quickly as they were cast. And though part of him was revolted by the sight lying at his feet, he couldn’t help but grin in triumph.

An ironically melodious tune sounded through the air, hailing the beginning of a prison announcement. It was just like them to punish violence rather than prevent it.

“Prisoner 164,” spoke the automated female voice.

“Prisoner 164, please return to the detention center at once. Prisoner 164-” a burst of static interrupted the loudspeaker. Prisoner 164 looked up. This was new.

The static grew softer and softer until he realized that it was being drowned out by the sound of approaching helicopter blades. He squinted at the sky and saw it, a black dot against blue, growing slowly in size and detail so that he could make out a silhouette and its multi-faceted protrusions.

“Prisoner 164!”

This time, the voice was not mechanical. It was a male’s, gruff and hoarse. It came from the helicopter.

“You are, by decree of the Intergalactic Special Forces, to leave this detention facility with our escort. You should consider yourself lucky. You’re being freed.”

Prisoner 164 furrowed his brow in confusion. As far as he could remember, there was no amnesty for life imprisonment. Had the laws somehow changed in his time behind bars? No, he doubted it. It had been a mere five years, and legislation like that took decades, sometimes centuries, to pass. But the helicopter had now settled on the ground, and no one was objecting. Prisoner 164 shrugged and walked towards it, stepping over the body on the way.

A soldier came out to greet him, smiling. He seemed genuine enough.

He shook Prisoner 164’s hand.

“Welcome aboard.”

Prisoner 164 had no idea what he meant, but he stepped inside anyway. He found an empty seat and sat, in the company of fully-armed men wearing cheerful and disarming smiles. Either they were very happy or they had practiced this look a lot.

The chopper blades started spinning. As the craft lifted into the air, the prison compound and its little specks of people grew smaller and smaller. And Prisoner 164, surrounded by half-friendly men, began to think.

After some time, he spoke.

“Raaj. Raaj Ehraad. That’s my name.”

The soldier in front of him nodded, but Raaj didn’t notice.

He hadn’t been talking to him.

**Chapter 2**

The translucent blue of the energy shield shimmered and rippled as the helicopter, now weightless in the depths of space, floated through it. There was no sharp crackle and shower of sparks, no stab of pain as the plasma coating short-circuited the passing vehicle. It all felt alien to Raaj. Five years of incarceration seemed longer after realizing the changes that had transpired on the other side.

The soldiers were still there, smiling and cheerful as ever, but now he caught a few of them eyeing him up and down, left and right. Not in the aggressive and often predatory manner that he had become familiar with, but with a pensive, searching quality, almost as if they were looking for something deep inside of him.

The cruiser that loomed larger and larger outside the chopper window looked remarkably similar to the one that had brought Raaj to Mas Eros in the first place. In fact, the only feature that made him sure it was not the same craft was the unfamiliar insignia that marked the bottom-left of its hull. It looked like a raven, or what a raven would look like if it was crossed with a flesh-eating creature that was easily capable of feasting on a grown man.

Its bottom half had all the splendid majesty of the winged guardian, dark blue feathers overlapping in a perfect crescent that enveloped a sleek torso and a pair of talons. But the top half, past the fold between the shoulders and the neck, belonged to an entirely different beast, a flurry of jagged teeth and a pair of eyes that were piercing and savage. And yet, the two seemed to fit perfectly into a single being that struck a chord of both fear and awe inside of Raaj.

“The Rak’tor.”

The soldier sitting in front of Raaj spoke softly, but his voice carried a brittle quality, as if it had been used many times on fields of battle.

“The wisdom of the raven and the ferocity of the tiger. They are intelligent and self-preserving creatures, avoiding confrontation when necessary, preferring to outwit and outmatch their enemies instead.

“But when cornered, when left with no other choice but to match claw for claw, fang for fang, they fight with a frightening savagery, using tactical ruthlessness to dismember foes many times its size and strength. It truly is a sight to behold.

“There is only one planet in the entire known system that possesses an environment capable of producing such a species. Ethayik. It is known as the warground of nature, and it is there that you will be tested.”

Raaj decided to speak.

“Tested for what?”

The man didn’t respond. Instead, he nodded to his left. The soldier he had gestured at was of a lean build and shorter than most of the men around him. He had shaggy brown hair and a dark complexion.

“Sammy here was born into a Khaf’ka tribe, part of a native population found off the eastern hemisphere of Rangor.

“Khaf’ka are notorious for killing their own. They pride themselves on strength. They despise weakness and live on barren lands where food and water run scarce every single day. Murder is seen as a very acceptable way to resolve disputes.

“Sammy, the runt of seven, was well on his way to having his neck snapped or skull crushed by his larger brethren, so he decided to strike first. One night, he armed himself with a makeshift blade and killed seventeen of his fellow tribemates, including his own family. He earned the fear and respect of the survivors and led them out of the wilderness and into the cities. Within months, a desert tribe that had lived off of wild grouse meat and water that pooled under rocks turned into a professional team of mercenaries that specialized in assassination. They were a multi-million dollar operation by the time we found them.”

The soldier turned to his right.

“James orchestrated the disappearance of the six major crimelords of Wicker city, transforming it from one of the most dangerous urban dwellings in the Coract sector into a peaceful metropolis almost overnight. It took months of investigation before anyone would believe that he had, in fact, been working alone.

James was oriental, with close-cropped hair and a calm, almost serene expression. Of all the soldiers in the chopper, he seemed the most pleasant.

“The bodies were eventually recovered. No autopsies were needed. All of them had been killed in the same way – jaws ripped straight off their hinges. The absence of additional lacerations or indents in the skin suggested that no tools or weapons had been involved and no fixtures had been used to hold the head in place as the act was carried out. To this day, we’re still not sure how he did it.”

The soldier turned his gaze back to Raaj.

“I used to be part of the United People’s Military Force. Back when it was humans only. I was a pretty good soldier. I was sharp on the range and had a knack for picking out movement without using a scope.

“But what I truly excelled at, the art that I specialized in, was hand-to-hand combat. I became an instructor for the Personal Combatives curriculum that was taught en masse to frontline troops. Within a month, I realized that the program was ineffective and misleading. I told them this. I told them that it was too easy, too theoretical and calculated to prepare soldiers for a physical struggle of life and death. Killing someone with your bare hands is far different than doing it through the veil of a riflesight. They didn’t believe me. They wanted a safer training program at the cost of lives on the battlefield.

“So I entered unannounced into an unarmed combat exercise. It was the final qualification test for a frontline platoon after three continuous years of training. I told the soldiers that whatever orders they had previously received were now overruled. Their new objective was to stop me.

“It took twenty minutes to do it. Twenty minutes.

“Twenty minutes to punch, kick, claw and strangle my way through men I had taught, mentored, trained, and shared meals with. They shot thirty thousand volts of electricity into my back to stop me. I strangled the last soldier with the taser wire before I passed out.

“It worked. The UPMF was humiliated. They called for an immediate reform of the Combatives program with me as the curriculum designer. Over the next two years, our close-quarters success rate skyrocketed. For the fifteen lives that were lost that day, countless more were saved during critical military operations.”

The soldier paused before gesturing around him.

“The men you see here are a diverse and unrelated crowd. We have ex-cons, ex-military, tribal warriors, and plain old citizens. But we all have one thing in common. Method to our violence.

“We have the tactical aptitude to analyze the dynamics of a system and the willingness to employ brutal force where it counts. This is what separates us from the common thug, and most soldiers for that matter. We don’t just kill. Our opponent is never a single man. It never has been for any of us. It is always a structure, a hierarchy that we seek to topple or control. This is true whether it is the population of a prison, a desert tribe, a criminal underworld, or an entire galactic military. We have proven, time and time again, our ability to identify a weak link and strike with devastating effectiveness. What each one of us on this chopper has in common, Raaj, is a very distinctive talent – strategic ruthlessness.”

The faintest grin spread across the lower corner of his lip.

“And, as it turns out, this is a talent that serves some very important purposes for some very powerful people.”

Raaj sat in quiet contemplation, trying to take it all in. His eyes wandered to the insignia of the approaching ship. The creature – the Rak’tor – seemed to stare straight back.

**Chapter 3**

The chopper floated into the holding bay and the metal gates behind them slammed shut. Instantly, the room was flooded with the internal atmosphere of the bay, and the smell of engine fumes and recycled oil reached Raaj at once. This, at least, was familiar. Raaj stepped off the chopper with the rest of the men, planting his feet on the floor with a renewed sense of excitement. These were his first steps in five years as a free man. Or whatever freedom meant with this troop of men.

The soldiers filed out of the craft and ambled towards the far wall, where the entry gate would take them into the interior of the ship. Raaj followed them. He noticed that they didn’t march with the practiced gait that was typical of most military men. And while they didn’t talk much, there was a quiet camaraderie between them, an intangible understanding that existed between men who had fought and bled and seen death unfold together. Raaj had seen this between gang members in his time on Mas Eros.

Despite the civility they had shown towards him so far, Raaj could sense that they were dangerous. There was a certain composure in the way they moved, a controlled but forceful calmness that reminded Raaj of a coiled snake.

“Most of them have been with us for at least two years. Some less. You’re the first new recruit that we’ve had in a while.”

Raaj turned to see the soldier who had spoken to him on the chopper. He hadn’t heard him come up beside him. They walked through the gate together into the sterilization chamber. A rose-scented mist sprayed from the ceiling and coated them for a few seconds before a set of metal doors on the other side slid open. They passed through and they were inside the ship.

If the exterior of the craft, with its scratched skin and peeling paint, was nothing to admire, the interior was something else entirely. The corridors were sleek and pristine, coated in a light blue hue that reminded Raaj of treading through the crystal-clear waters of San Hara many years ago. The walls were smooth and undecorated, but many of them held a faint, square outline that hinted at some sort of hidden panel. The soldier placed his hand on one of them and it slid opened to reveal an array of weapons mounted behind the wall. Raaj looked on, impressed at the collection of everything from combustible knives and maces to handheld rail guns and plasma shields.

“We take security very seriously around here,” the soldier chuckled. He closed the panel and they continued through the ship. They walked onto the bridge and Raaj ran his eyes over the craft’s schematics.

The ship had all the standard accessories – twin engines, a compact warp drive, and emergency thrusters that could take over if the main power generator died out, but what impressed Raaj was the sheer amount of concealed weaponry the ship had managed to pack into its interior. Raaj spotted four plasma cannons and two missile grids stored in the ship’s underbelly. The ship’s entire surface was dotted with hatches that could open to reveal projectile turrets, presumably to defend against smaller craft that would fly into the blind spots of the large cannons.

He turned his attention to the upper hull schematics, tracing his eyes along the rotating green holographic with weapons outlined in red. He blinked. If he was reading it right, there were six atomic warheads primed and ready to fire at this very moment, with a blast radius of approximately ten kilometers. He wondered what kind of situation could possibly call for such firepower. It had been half a decade since Raaj had been aboard a space cruiser, but he knew he had never seen the inside of a ship this prepared for combat.

The soldier nodded approvingly at his awe.

“We were given quite the budget to work with. And it helps that we take certain liberties with our conquests. Salvaged materials are supposed to be handed over to the UPMF and redistributed accordingly, but sometimes, artifacts like weapons-grade plutonium are,” the soldier grinned, “misplaced in the chaos of war.”

“Who do you operate under?”

“Nobody. Technically, we don’t exist. I would say we’re employed by the UPMF, but the fact is, they’re a military. They have to abide by rules and standards and stay presentable to the galactic public. We don’t – we only care about results.

“You see, fifteen years ago, someone decided that we needed a team of specialists. A group of operatives that could do things that ordinary soldiers can’t. And they were right. I hardly need to tell you, but the UPMF was teetering on a brink. Colonization of the Outer Rim was in its infancy, and organized insurgents were terrorizing civilians by the masses. The distance the UPMF had to cover meant that direct military assault wasn’t an option. It’s not that they didn’t try. But there were slow and predictable. There were massive civilian casualties and bureaucracies to be contended with that would telegraph military assaults to the enemy. Operation after operation, it seemed as if they were losing more ground than they gained. In a six-year struggle against the Outer Rim, their resources were dwindling and so were their spirits. They were slowly losing a war of attrition.

“So they started looking for a certain type of soldier, someone who could be discreet, effective, and ruthless when the situation called for it. But they found that a lot of these types weren’t actually in the military. They were scattered across all walks of life, from cities to jungles, from hospitals to prisons. And they were all killers, many of which could be considered criminals and some who truly were. But that didn’t matter. The UPMF had a use for these men, and select officers from various branches of the military disappeared in unsuspecting circumstances and began their new line of work by recruiting promising individuals.

“In the first year of our conception, we hunted the insurgents mercilessly. We cut their supply lines, assassinated key figures, and wrecked general havoc on insurgent divisions all over the sector. What’s more, we’d murder them in sick and twisted ways and made sure that word got around that it was happening. It wasn’t hard, with the bodies we’d leave behind.” The soldier’s face leered into something between a grin and a grimace.

“And the best part was, no one knew who we were. We were fast and brutal but also quiet, in and out before they knew what had hit them. It wasn’t long before insurgent activity started fading substantially. An unknown enemy was picking them apart in the most gruesome and horrific way. Each one of them was wondering when he’d be next, and that is an unbearable weight for the minds of most men. A formerly well-organized and sweeping opponent was reduced to a few straggling divisions huddling together for warmth. Cleaning that up was easy for the main branch of the army.

“The UPMF followed our success by finishing the colonization project and populating the Outer Rim to create the known system as it is today. The mysterious downfall of the insurgents was attributed to in-fighting between its members, which was, in part, true.

“Since then, we’ve largely been an independent operation. We fulfilled our original purpose and did it exceedingly well, so we were given the freedom to leave with generous rewards if we wanted to. Not that any of us did. You see, there’s something in this work that calls to us. Maybe because it feels necessary, maybe because there’s no one else who can do it quite the same. But as it is, all of us chose to continue our line of work. We collapsed the Kel’nash slave ring, eliminated the pirates of the Cosran sector and suppressed the Mosley rebellion. There were twenty of us to begin with. Today, we’re fifteen.”

Raaj shifted.

“I was the first recruit, and the way things turned out, recruitment is something that I take care of now. I’ve been watching you on Maas Eros, Raaj. I’ve seen what you can do. And unlike most people, I’m neither disgusted nor afraid. In fact, I’m rather impressed. That’s why you’re here right now. Because you’ve proven that you have the skills required to become one of us. And like us, you will soon discover a newfound appreciation for your talent. You will learn to revel in your own savagery. You’ll find that, whatever you might have once believed, this is your true calling – to watch over the black depths of space, resolving its injustices using any means necessary.”  
 Raaj didn’t know what he looked like at the moment, but it must have been something akin to absolute disbelief, because the soldier grinned.

“Welcome to the Blackwatch Operatives.”

**Chapter 4**

“What do I call you? Do you have a name?” asked Raaj as the two of them turned a corner into a hall lined with identical doors on both sides. They stepped in front of one and it slid open to reveal a simply-furnished chamber with a bed, closet, and bathroom.

The soldier spoke. “This is where you’ll be living and sleeping after a day’s work.” He smiled as if he knew something that Raaj didn’t.

“And yes, I do have a name.” The soldier’s expression darkened momentarily. “But you can just call me Captain.”

He noted Raaj’s quizzical look.

“Just a preference,” he said before turning and marching out of the room.

Raaj sat down on the bed, wondering what to do next. He placed his hand on the bedside table and was startled by a hologram that projected itself above it. It took the form of a floating green panel facing Raaj, filled with lines of writing. Raaj squinted and the writing automatically magnified to a comfortable size.

*Greetings Raaj, and welcome aboard* The Rak’tor. *You are to report to the training room at 0700 tomorrow in training gear. Dress details and clothing can be found in the closet. In the meantime, feel free to talk to me and browse the ship’s database as you desire.*

*– Signed, Memphis*

Raaj spent a few moments wondering who Memphis was before he realized it was the name of the computer system. He chuckled at the idea. He tapped the panel with his finger and it slid away to reveal a list of options with items such as *Schematics and Weapon Systems*, *Combative Techniques and Training Exercises*, *Galactic Data Network*, *System Settings*, and the last one, *Memphis*.

He opened a few links and browsed around. It was interesting material, but Raaj didn’t feel prepared to take in anything new at the moment. He set an alarm for the morning and signaled for the lights to be turned off before laying flat on the bed.

As he drifted to sleep, Raaj mulled over the events of the past day. His name was Raaj Ehraad. He had just been broken out of prison. Energy shields no longer short-circuited passing aircraft. The pacification of the Outer Rim had taken a far different turn than he had been led to believe. He was on board *The Rak’tor*, a Class-M cruiser that technically did not exist.

He was living amongst killers. That much, at least, was familiar.

**Chapter 5**

By the time the alarm rang, Raaj was already wide awake. He had been laying on the bed, contemplating his current circumstance, his thoughts continuing where they had left off the night before. As alien as everything seemed, he decided that it couldn’t possibly be worse than Maas Eros, and so it was with an air of excitement that he silenced the alarm and planted his feet on the floor.

He bathed and opened the closet, where the computer, *Memphis*, had said there’d be further instructions. Sure enough, a panel of holographic text hung in the air.

*Training gear consists of training uniform and armor. Please wear your uniform to the training room. You may carry the armor separately.*

There were arrows pointing towards each item. The training uniform was a black set of form-fitting clothing. There was a short-sleeved top and a pair of long pants. The only decor that Raaj could see on the outfit was the Rak’tor insignia that had been on the side of the ship, stitched onto the left breast of the top. The outfit was made of a material that Raaj couldn’t quite place. It was composed of small, barely visible fibers sewn together to form layers of criss-crossing black threads, coming together like miniature chainmail. The clothing had a compressed thinness to it, as if the manufacturers had tried to squeeze as much material into as little space as possible.

Raaj expected the outfit to be tight and somewhat coarse from its appearance, but it slid on remarkably easily. He moved his arms from side to side and was surprised by the flexibility and speed he felt in his motions. Far from constricting them, the clothing seemed to amplify his movements.

The second arrow pointed towards a massive duffel bag by his feet. Raaj brought the bag out of the closet and opened it. He peered inside to find an extensive assortment of protective equipment. There were shin guards, knee pads, elbow pads, gloves that looked as if they were made to smash bricks with, and a helmet that had inches of padding around the sides. He put a finger on the helmet and pressed into it. The padding sunk back slightly before hardening into a material that felt every bit as solid as concrete. This stuff felt as if it were made to protect against a landmine.

Raaj wondered what exactly was in store for him today.

Out loud he muttered, “What the hell?”

When Raaj stepped outside, he realized he had forgotten to check the map to see where the training room was. It turned out he hadn’t needed to, as the rest of the operatives were filing out of their quarters into the hall and heading in the same direction. He recognized Sammy and James, who cast a nod in his direction, as well as some of the other men from the chopper. There was little chatter as they walked together, but once again, he experienced the air of amicability, a strange pleasantness that almost made him forget he was in the midst of trained killers. There was none of the bravado or aggression he had become used to in prison. These were men who knew what they were capable of. They had nothing to prove.

They made a series of turns and descended a number of levels. Raaj guessed that the living quarters must be located somewhere in the upper deck of the ship. They soon arrived at a massive hallway that ended in a doorway sealed by two horizontal plates. Right away Raaj could feel that this area was different from the rest of the craft. For one, the pleasant blue hue that coated most of the interior was absent here. Instead, the walls and ceiling were lined with a dull gray metal that was covered in scratches and unkempt with years of neglect.

Even with his eyes closed, Raaj would have been able to recognize this hallway. He hadn’t noticed before, but the rest of the ship must have been fitted with powerful filters, because here, the air was uncomfortably hot and carried with it a grimy odor that reminded Raaj of sweat and diesel.

There was an audible hiss as the doorway slid open and the operatives stepped through. Raaj noticed the shifts in demeanor immediately. Backs stiffened and jaws clenched. It was slight and subtle, but whatever pleasantry these men had possessed was gone. There was hardened look to them as they stepped into the room. They were here work.

The room itself more closely resembled a hangar bay than a room. It was mammoth in size, a rectangular enclosure made of the same unpolished metal that held the preceding hallway together.

Raaj stared in awe. On the far side stood a set of racks lined with nearly every ranged weapon conceivable. Raaj recognized both plasma and projectile weaponry ranging from semi-automatic pistols to handheld missile launchers. There was a row of eight bright red targets painted on the wall opposite the racks. They were barely recognizable underneath the black scorch marks and miniature craters.

The near side of the room was comparatively bare. There was a row of evenly-spaced punching bags that all looked as if they had weathered quite the beating over the years. Each of them was larger than Raaj himself. Aside from that, this half of the training room was empty except for a red and black mat, large enough to serve as a landing pad for a military chopper, lying squarely in the center. Unlike the surrounding environment, the mat had a polished and pristine look to it. Clearly, some effort had been taken to keep it that way.

Standing in the middle of the mat was the captain, hands hidden behind his back, watching the fourteen men with eyes of steel. Raaj followed the operatives as they walked across the room and assembled along the edge of the mat to face him. The captain nodded. His voice was cold when he spoke.

“Armor on.”

Immediately, duffel bags dropped to the floor and the sound of zippers opening echoed through the room as the operatives took out their training armor. Raaj clumsily mimicked the way they strapped on the various types of padding. The gloves and the helmet came on last. The equipment slid into place surprisingly easily and seemed to mold itself to his limbs. He still wasn’t sure what kind of training would require this level of protection.

The captain waited until Raaj had fully outfitted himself, and Raaj thought he detected a hint of a sneer when the captain said,

“Raaj, you’re up first. Step onto the mat.”

Raaj did as he was told and found a space on the mat that was off-center but not too close to the edge. He could guess what was coming. He watched as the captain faced off about three meters in front of him.

“We fight for five minutes. Anything you can do while wearing the training armor, you can attempt. But the training armor stays on. Got it?”

Not sure what else to do, he nodded. A mechanical beep sounded through the air and Raaj knew the fight was on. The captain inched forward.

Raaj had fought enough times in prison to be comfortable with violence. He considered himself quite good at it, having used it as a tool for survival and later, dominance, as he climbed up the savage hierarchy. The only difference now was that he had padding on. Raaj raised his hands and staggered his stance so that his left foot was in front, keeping his back leg cocked like a spring. He waited until the captain was in range, then exploded forward, twisting his body to the side and throwing his clenched fist with all the power he could muster into the captain’s face. Except that it wasn’t there.

The blow slammed painfully into the side of Raaj’s helmet and rattled his vision. He barely had time to see that it was his opponent’s right foot that had collided into him before he was sent sprawling onto the mat.

The good news was that the mat was rather soft. He discovered that upon landing. The bad news was that the helmet, despite its appearance, was not quite as effective at cushioning blows as it looked.

Or maybe the captain just kicked really, really hard.

The world was still spinning as he got to his feet and his skull felt like it had been cracked with a sledgehammer.

Raaj clenched his teeth and focused on the captain once again. He was determined not to fall for the same technique. He waited this time, staying low in his stance, elbows at his sides, ready to defend and counter attack when the captain made his move. He watched as the captain lowered his left hand and hung his shoulder downwards, inviting Raaj to attack. Raaj stood firm. Suddenly, the captain became a blur of movement as his dangling arm shot upward and looped around Raaj’s vision to catch him squarely on the chin. He staggered back but stayed upright this time, replanting his feet as he swung a chain of blows that were met with thin air – it was as if the captain knew exactly where each punch was going to be before it was thrown, ducking, dodging, and backpedalling just far enough to evade each strike.

Frustrated, Raaj glared at the captain, who now stood motionless, waiting for Raaj’s next move. It didn’t come. Raaj stayed still, refusing giving away his intention. Then, as fast as he could manage, he shot his arm forward and managed to connect with the captain’s face. It wasn’t a powerful blow. There was no weight behind it and he had caught the captain as he had been leaning away. But it was the first time he had made voluntary contact with his opponent and Raaj grinned. The captain must have thought it was funny too, because he grinned back.

The rest of the round continued in similar fashion, with the captain landing heavy, often painful strikes and Raaj swinging and missing, occasionally getting away with quick taps that he was beginning to suspect that the captain was allowing to connect. At the end of five minutes, Raaj found himself in a state of adrenalin-fueled restlessness that he had never experienced before. He was panting, taking in deep gulps of air with each breath, and there was an uncontrollable quiver in his hands. But tense and exhausted as he was, there was an exhilarating sense of power to him that made him feel alive.

The captain signaled for another operative to step onto the mat, and Raaj fell back into the ranks of men standing at the sides. The beep sounded again and Raaj watched as the captain fought the next operative. The captain’s opponent was taller than him this time, well-built, and moved surprisingly fast for someone his size. It didn’t seem to matter.

The captain methodically picked him apart, blocking, dodging, and countering with lightning accuracy. Now that he was observing from the sidelines, he saw just how fast the captain could fight. He was a flurry of movement, a fluid combination of strikes and evasion that quickly overwhelmed his much larger opponent. Still, the other operative was doing better than Raaj had, and managed connect with some heavy blows that the captain was forced to shield against. Raaj was almost surprised when he saw the captain’s foot slip past his opponent’s defense and drop him to the floor.

The round ended and Raaj was amused to see another operative called onto the mat. Raaj remembered him as Sammy from the chopper.

Sammy was fast and agile and had a fighting style that made him seem like a smaller version of the captain. It was thrilling to watch. It was speed against speed, a blinding flurry of strikes that flew back and forth, a dance of punches and kicks from every angle imaginable. Just when it seemed like they would fight the entire round without landing a clean blow, the captain closed the distance with a strike and grabbed hold of Sammy. With a quick step and a powerful twist of the hips, the captain flung his opponent through the air and onto the mat, landing on top with his fist raised. He tapped Sammy on the head and they stood back up.

That entire exchange had taken a fraction of a second and left Raaj in awe at the fluidity and yet devastating effectiveness of the captain’s technique. He had known violence in prison, but it had been the crazed, animalistic kind, with none of the control and finesse that was on display in front of his eyes. Despite the pounding in his head and the ache in his sides from where the captain’s shin had made contact, he found himself eager to step back onto the mat again. There was a dangerous beauty to this art, and it was calling to him.

Sammy’s round ended, and the captain proceeded to signal the rest of the operatives, one by one, to fight him. His stamina was inhuman. A mere five minutes had left Raaj breathless and fatigued, and yet the captain was handling each of his successive opponents with ease.

After James’ round, he staggered over to Raaj and placed his hand on his shoulder, catching his breath.

“Come on, we’ll get you up to speed,” he panted as he stepped away from the mat.

Raaj slowly picked up his feet, reluctant to leave the display in front of his eyes. He was pleased to see that James was taking him to the punching bags.

“The first thing you’re going to learn is how to stand.”

James squared up against Raaj, who did the same.

“Your feet need to be wider, your body more upright. Your stance has to be stable but quick, powerful but flexible, able to transition between offense and defense at a moment’s notice. Bend your legs a little bit more,” James spoke as Raaj made adjustments, “keep your hands near your face, better to take a blow to the midsection than one to the head – one hurts, the other knocks you unconscious.” James paused.

“Good, that’s more like it. Now move around, like me.”

James took up a fighting stance and shifted side-to-side, forwards-and-backwards. Raaj took notice of how his feet never trailed behind, how his weight always stayed on his back leg, and how he pushed off the balls of his feet in rapid, sudden movements. He felt clumsy at first, moving around without compromising his positioning, but he soon saw why one would move this way in combat. He was balanced at all times, poised to strike or defend at any time while covering distance.

Raaj spent the next half-hour, at James’ behest, doing nothing but practicing this maneuver. He could feel his stance becoming more efficient and stable as he carried himself across the floor, circling one of the punching bags and shifting angles from side-to-side as James had instructed.

“The best defense is complete avoidance. Always aim to establish an advantageous position for yourself, a situation where you can hit him and he can’t hit you. As long as you’re moving and creating angles of attack, your opponent is always trying to catch up, trying to readjust his positioning to defend against yours. Capitalize on the opportunity and the fight is yours.”

Raaj found himself itching to test himself again against one of the operatives, and was genuinely disappointed when a bell rung out and the captain declared that morning training was over. The exhausted operatives dismantled their armor and stuffed them into their bags, leaving them near the mat. Raaj felt a tingle of excitement. It meant they’d be back.

“Breakfast!” the captain yelled out. He was met with resounding cheers as the men trailed behind him out of the training room. Raaj followed their lead. The atmosphere had grown noticeably more animated since they had first stepped into the training room. They went up a few levels and turned a corner into a cafeteria. Raaj wondered how the food would be prepared. From what he remembered, the captain hadn’t mentioned any maintenance staff on board. It seemed the only passengers on the craft were the operatives. Did that mean everyone looked after themselves?

The answer came when a panel on the wall slid open to reveal a polished kitchen where James was cracking eggs over a metal pot. Raaj thought for a moment that James was one of the more junior or otherwise lower-ranked operatives, to be delegated to the task of teaching him and cooking for the team, but a few moments spent observing him at work convinced Raaj otherwise. James seemed to enjoy himself as he prepared the food, his expression calm and contented as he fried various meats and eggs above an electronic stove.

In prison, serving others was a sign of inferiority, but here, it was simply a favor, an operative looking out for his teammates. In fact, he wasn’t so sure that James had been assigned to teach him combat today. He realized James might have just genuinely wanted to help him learn. From what Raaj had seen so far, James seemed like a pleasantly good-natured person. It was hard to imagine him detaching a man’s jaw from his face.

As Raaj sat down next to the other operatives, he was told more about the inner workings of the ship and the operatives themselves. *The Rak’tor* was a Mammoth-class cruiser, nearly a kilometer in length, belonging to the third largest type of warship currently employed by the UPMF. It was a fairly maneuverable craft for its size, able to cut sharp corners with the peripheral boosters attached to the sides of its tail, and it had powerful primary thrusters that allowed it to keep up with all but the fastest of interceptors. Raaj knew all of this from the moment he had laid eyes on the ship, but he didn’t tell them. He figured that, for now at least, it was best to leave out some details of his past.

*The Rak’tor* had all the standard weaponry, but years of combat had allowed the team to accumulate a stash of arms that was near caricature in quantity. Turret hatches dotted nearly every square-inch of the ship’s exterior, installed after the operatives had pillaged the insurgent supplies in the Outer Rim, and the six nuclear bombs nesting in the upper hull had been taken from the Cosran pirates.

The pirates had been using them to hold a planet hostage, causing a galactic crisis until the Blackwatch simultaneously jettisoned into space all six of the two-ton nuclear warheads using improvised surface-to-air missiles. Out of range of the detonation signal, the warheads were collected by *The Rak’tor* and had stayed there ever since. They had been rewired to respond to a firing mechanism contained inside the craft, should the operatives ever need to deal death with a ten-kilometer blast radius.

He met Unaan, a former hitman who had ensured his job security by holding his employer’s life in his hands, literally. He had drugged the crimelord who hired him and implanted a modified cardiac support device – one whose function depended entirely on a radial pulse monitor embedded inside Unaan’s thumb, effectively tying his boss’s life to his. In a trade where loyalty was hard to come by and contracts were often blurred with threats, Unaan found himself protected and enjoying the end of a remarkable seven-year spree before the captain had approached him. It had taken a considerable amount of persuasion to bring him on board. He had been enjoying his career. Before he resigned, he had his thumb severed.

“He deserved it,” he explained, his voice dark and throaty, “besides, I had to cover my tracks. As far as they know, I’m dead.”

Unaan was the giant who had fought the captain immediately after Raaj. Raaj quickly decided that this was not a man he wanted to cross.

Tora and Taro were twins, abandoned infants who had grown up on the unforgiving streets of Coract for as long as they could remember. They had made a name for themselves by brutally maiming anyone who tried to take advantage of their age. While one would serve as a distraction, the other would come from behind with anything he could find – a glass shard, a jagged rock, a discarded pen – and turn their unfortunate victim into an unrecognizable mess. During weeks when food was hard to come by, they would use their collection of bodies for some much-needed sustenance.

Gerald, dark skinned and bald, had been an unremarkable security guard of the psychiatric ward of a hospital until some of the patients accessed his employee records and began harassing his family. Two nights later, there was a mysterious power failure at the hospital, depowering everything but the emergency life support machines. The following morning, three patients at the psychiatric ward were found with broken necks, four in various states of paralysis, and the rest seemingly shocked into silence. No one suspected Gerald. It was only years later, during an annual inspection, that questionable records had surfaced.

Raaj learned that everyone on board was responsible for some aspect of ship maintenance. Unaan was the mechanic, in charge of small-duty repairs and equipment inspection. For larger repairs, the *Rak’tor* would dock into unsanctioned service outposts that would be paid a handsome amount in advance to be cleared of all other ships and potential witnesses, and paid again to keep quiet about her visit.

The twins oversaw weapon functionality and were said to be borderline obsessive about their job, having coded a mobile hologram to the ship’s weapon schematics and controls so that they could fire any of the ship’s weaponry, including the six nuclear warheads, from their pocket.

“Can’t get caught unprepared,” explained Tora, while Taro nodded approvingly. The twins were alike in both appearance and demeanor. They spoke softly, but there was a dangerous quality to their voice, as if they were capable of causing terrible harm at any given moment.

Gerald designed the flight programs that were installed into the ship’s navigation systems and Sammy conducted environmental analysis of the lesser-known planets that missions would sometimes be carried out on. James was the team cook, and the Captain was in charge of their training and operation. There were two others at the table who did not speak. Raaj learned that they were mute.

One of them, a thin and wiry man, carried an ugly scar that ran diagonally across his face, etching a deep line, from his left eyelid to right cheek. His name was Bruce. The other was short and stocky in comparison, with a square jaw and narrow pupils. He was Mandel. Raaj noticed when they ate that their tongues had been cleanly severed. No one told him what their story was, and Raaj didn’t bother to ask.

As the conversation died down, the captain set his empty bowl down on the table, stood up, and left.

“See you back in the training room,” he said as he walked away.

It all felt very abrupt. The operatives fell silent, as if there was something on their minds that they couldn’t quite say out loud.

The food was good. Raaj cast an approving nod at James, who grinned back. Definitely the nicest person on the ship. Learning about everyone’s gruesome pasts had filled Raaj with a creeping sense of unease again, but knowing he had a friend on board helped.

A few minutes passed, and the operatives were finished eating. James took the cutlery back to the kitchen. There was still some time before they were expected back at the training room, so the conversation turned to Raaj.

Sammy started it off with a wry smile, “So what are you in here for? Cap doesn’t give us all the details.” Raaj almost chuckled when he thought of the number of times he had heard the first sentence before.

“Mas Eros penitentiary.”

The three words turned everyone’s eyes towards him.

“That was the planet we picked you up from?” remarked Sammy as it dawned on him. Raaj nodded.

The existence of Mas Eros was no secret, but its location was kept tightly concealed, widely thought to be shrouded among the many undeveloped planets that lined the Outer Rim. He noticed that the operatives were still watching him, expecting him to go on. He lowered his gaze, and in a gesture practiced many times over the last few years, said, “I don’t feel like talking about it.”

This seemed to bring their questioning to an end. Some of the operatives looked away, but he noticed Bruce, the wiry mute, watching him intently.

The time came for them to resume training, and the men strode into the hallways as Raaj followed, committing to memory the twists and turns that they took to get back to the training room. They found themselves standing on the edge of the mat again with the captain addressing them.

“We’ll start with sparring. Put on your armor, find a partner, and try not to kill the new guy.” Raaj felt his pulse push through his skin.

The operatives did as they were told and stepped onto the mat. Raaj looked around to see combatants locking eyes, finding their space, and squaring up against each other. His vision was suddenly blocked by a hulking figure who stepped in front of him.

It was Unaan. Up close, Raaj could see the veined trunks that served him as limbs as they planted themselves firmly on the ground and coiled up like springs. The corner of Unaan’s lip curled up in a way that could only be described as a sadistic smile. Raaj swallowed the fear climbing up his chest. He had fought larger men before. He tried to ignore the fact that the one in front of him just happened to be an elite trained killer.

The bell rung. Instantly, Raaj sprang into motion, lunging forward with a heavy left hand. He had hoped to surprise Unaan with the strike, to catch him off guard and make him respect Raaj as a threat. But Unaan was faster than he looked. He snapped his upper body back, and in a motion that reminded Raaj far too much of his first fight with the captain, sent a kick sailing towards Raaj’s head. Raaj winced and braced himself for the impact and was surprised when Unaan halted his momentum to slowly bring his foot across, grazing Raaj’s helmet instead of delivering a clobbering blow.

Unaan planted himself back on the ground, the same smile etched on his face that had been there at the beginning of the fight. Raaj let out a deep breath. Callous and brutish as he seemed, Unaan wasn’t trying to hurt him. He went on the offensive again, firing punches and kicks while reminding himself to use the footwork that he had practiced.

He didn’t end up winning the round. He didn’t even come close. Unaan moved extraordinarily well for a man of his size and evaded almost all of Raaj’s attacks, replying with vicious strikes that would have devastated Raaj if they had been loaded with power. But Raaj could feel the practice from the morning seeping into the way he fought. He fought more gracefully, moving fluidly in and out of range, and found himself poised to attack often, and from many different positions. He knew that if he added more speed and precision to his strikes, he could start landing against an opponent like Unaan.

Upon the ringing of the bell, Unaan clapped him on the shoulder and all the combatants switched opponents. A few seconds of silence passed during which Raaj and his next adversary eyed one another before the electronic beep sounded and he was fighting again. If he had expected to fare any better against the other operatives, he had been wrong. Unaan had been rather gentle in comparison. Sammy peppered him with lightning-fast blows that rattled off his body like a machine gun, leaving Raaj little room to strike back. Gerald used thudding kicks that dug painfully into Raaj’s thighs before tying up his weakened legs and shouldering him onto the mat. Taro folded Raaj over no less than six times by driving piercing knees into his midsection and James ran circles around him while bludgeoning him in the head, and each one of them was holding back. But nobody surprised him like Bruce.

The lean and wiry mute wore a bored and slightly sullen expression as he stared down Raaj. The bell rang and Bruce stayed put, his arms dangling at his sides, gaze fixed firmly on Raaj, as if daring him to come forward. Raaj advanced, hesitant in his approach. When there was no response, he lashed out, hoping to connect. But as he had almost come to expect, his fist met thin air and suddenly Bruce was on his right, ready to counter with a damaging strike to his exposed position. Raaj stepped back and braced himself, knowing even as he retracted his arm, that the blow would find him before he could protect himself. But it never came.

Bruce stood in the same stance he had held since the start of the round, his body leaning backwards while his hands lazily hung low, with an air of disinterest that was quickly bordering contempt. Raaj struck again. Same thing. He threw two punches and a kick this time, but Bruce dodged and leaned out of the way and returned to his position. Like the other operatives, Bruce had exceptional evasive skills, but he had a way of doing it that made it look effortless. Combined with the obvious lack of concern Bruce had for his combative abilities, this was quickly angering Raaj.

He lunged forward again, this time with a flurry of strikes that he was sure he would at least graze his opponent with. But to his increasing frustration, Bruce was always two steps ahead, and Raaj found himself with tired arms and a mockingly unreachable opponent. If Bruce could speak, Raaj could easily imagine him spitting taunts as he ducked, spun, and flitted his way around Raaj’s punches and kicks.

It was near the end of the round that it happened. After four minutes of inaction, the last thing Raaj expected when Bruce twisted around sharply was for his fist to come sailing over the top of Raaj’s vision and crash into his face. The blow snapped his head to the side and the world faded into darkness before he hit the floor. In the brief moment that he had remained conscious, all he could register was that it had hurt.

The sight of James leaning over him greeted Raaj when he woke. He blinked away the dullness in his eyes and sat up. For the most part, the operatives carried on like nothing had happened, but he appreciated the occasional concerned glance that was thrown his way. He saw Bruce sitting on the floor away from him, facing a captain who was perched on his heels. He couldn’t make out what they were saying, but he could tell that it was a solemn discussion.

Bruce looked absolutely livid. He was not a man who displayed much emotion, but his eyes said everything. He must have caught Raaj watching, because he shot him a look of acid from his peripherals. Despite himself, Raaj felt a stab of fear. What did Bruce have against him?

A tug on his arm from James diverted his thoughts.

“You need more training.”

James was grinning as he said it, but behind the smile Raaj could see traces of worry. This unsettled Raaj almost as much as the violence from Bruce itself. James led Raaj back towards the punching bags and they resumed where they had left off.

“When in doubt, keep your hands at your face. You know this already, but practice it and practice it and practice it. Obsess over your hand positioning until keeping your guard up is nothing but an automatic habit, and you won’t get caught by an unexpected punch like that again. Good.”

Raaj spent the next hour learning the dozens of basic strikes and defenses that the operatives used in standing combat. He learned how to attack with his knees, his elbows, his feet, and even his forehead, as well as how to defend and react to the blows he had been hammered with in the morning. And the strikes that he already did know how to use, he learned how to throw them more efficiently, faster and with more power – how to transfer the momentum of his bodyweight into each blow so that it would land with devastating impact. It was the most productive training session yet, but Raaj still felt a sense of unease at the thought of stepping back onto the mat. He was glad when the captain called for the team to get lunch.

As James handed out the food, the captain turned to Raaj,

“This morning was your first taste of life on this ship. Unarmed combat is a staple of Blackwatch operations, and comprises the greatest part of an operative’s training. You will fight twice in the morning and once in the afternoon. After lunch, you will receive instructional lessons on the technical information, attitude, and concepts required to become an operative. Today, your teacher is Unaan. He’ll be going over the basic properties of the combat suit and their use in the field. Following afternoon instruction, we have conditioning. And if you’re still standing on two feet after that, the day is yours.”

Raaj nodded, taking it all in. It sounded tiring, but he was sure nothing could be worse than the suffocating boredom he had experienced on Mas Eros. As he scooped servings of cheesy mashed potatoes and bacon into his mouth, he turned to the captain and asked a question that had been on his mind.

“What do Mandel and Bruce do for the team?”

The two mutes were standing on their own in the corner of the dining room, wearing sulky expressions that Raaj was quickly identifying as a characteristic trait of theirs.

The captain looked at him.

“You don’t want to know.”

After lunch, Unaan led Raaj into a small lecture room with two tables angled like wings facing a large holographic projector before standing himself in the center of the room. Folded across Unaan’s arm was an outfit that looked similar to the training uniform Raaj had donned this morning, but this one was a dark blue instead of black, and rather than a criss-cross of threads, it was composed of rows upon rows of small triangles folded over top of each other like scales. The room was not brightly lit, but the light that did shine from the ceiling seemed to disappear into the suit instead of reflecting off its surface.

Unaan suddenly dropped his arm so that the suit fell to the ground, and Raaj gasped as, like a structure of sand collapsing into its individual grains, the suit melted into a pool of dark blue scales scattering across the floor. The scales formed a crumpled, artless heap, refusing to acknowledge that just moments ago, they had been joined together in an outfit enclosing an invisible pair of arms and legs.

Unaan laughed at his surprise – a deep, bellowing roar that bore true amusement.

“Step on it.”

Raaj gave him a quizzical look.

“You heard me, step on it.”

Raaj cautiously approached the pile. The scales looked sharp. He placed a foot on top and found that the material sunk into itself like rubber. He stepped his other foot into the pile and almost collapsed in shock.

The moment he placed his weight onto his second step, the scales took on a life of their own and started latching onto his feet. He watched in amazement as they flipped and turned and crawled up his skin like a series of dominoes to form the rows of overlapping triangles that he had seen folded across Unaan’s arm.

The scales continued running up his body, tightening around his limbs, and when they reached his neck, Raaj felt a suffocating sense of enclosure as they wrapped around his nose and eyes and the rest of his head. Within seconds, the outfit was fully formed around Raaj.

He took a deep breath and was surprised that the air came in smooth and unstifled. In fact, it had a filtered quality to it, as if all of the excess components had already been removed before reaching his lips. He opened his eyes to see Unaan grinning in front of him, holding up a handheld mirror.

Somehow, the mesh of scales that covered his face acted as a one-way visor, completely transparent from the inside, but a formless dark blue on the outside. It made the figure that stared back at Raaj in the mirror seem eerily inhuman. He saw in the reflection a pair of arms and legs attached to an chillingly amorphous head. If he didn’t move, the figure seemed to disappear into the background, becoming nothing more than a faint silhouette in the darkness. He almost obeyed his instinct to back away.

“The Manchira-V combat suit. Named after the armor worn by a long-dead warrior class. The name *samurai* probably means nothing to you, but they were elite soldiers of their time who had mastered the art of individual combat. They were unmatched on the battlefield. Their armor was designed to keep them mobile and agile so that they could unleash their full martial prowess on their foes.

“The Manchira-V is made of materials that a great majority of the galactic public isn’t even aware of. We have biosynthetic organisms in there, materials that undergo a seventy-two hour refinement process in airtight labs, and chemicals extracted from animal parts you don’t want to know about, all boiling down to a hell of an outfit to wear into a fight, or to take on a small army with. You’re not invincible when you put this on, but you’re pretty damn close.

“For example…”

Raaj flinched as Unaan produced a handgun from behind his back and leveled it at him. The shot rang out before he could react and he immediately felt the dull impact in his chest and winced in anticipation of pain. But it never came. Instead, the part of his suit where the bullet had struck constricted then loosened again, the overlapping scales coming together upon impact then relaxing into their former state as the bullet fell to the floor.

“We call that the High-Velocity Impact Shield. The HVIS is the most critical function of your combat suit. It’s what lets you walk through small-arms fire and swat away most ranged projectiles like mosquitoes. Any incoming object that exceeds a certain kinetic energy threshold activates the shielding function and causes the suit to harden itself against it, increasing the density of the impact zone by four-hundred percent. Combined with the fact that the material is near impenetrable as is, and you can consider yourself invulnerable to any kind of handheld projectile weaponry. Plasma weapons can, for the most part, circumvent this, but the suit has heat-resistant measures to minimize damage from those sources.

“The beauty of the HVIS is that it works two ways – both to shield you against incoming objects and also against objects that you are accelerating towards.”

Raaj was surprised at the almost-reverent way that Unaan spoke. Even an experienced operative like him was unable to keep the awe out of his voice. Unaan then produced a metal bar and fixed it to the floor. Four mechanical support beams extended outward into the ground to hold the bar upright and steady.

“Kick this,” he commanded, “as hard as you can.”

Raaj let the skepticism show on his face before he remembered that Unaan couldn’t see it. He shrugged and muttered under his breath, “what the hell.”

He planted one foot behind him and stepped to the side with the other, twisting sharply and transferring all his weight into the strike as James had taught him. He aimed for his shin to smash straight through the target, and was only the least bit surprised when it actually did. The bar didn’t even have time to crumple. Instead, it snapped in two, sending metal debris flying across the room.

Unaan nodded approvingly.

“The Manchira-V acts to amplify the force of any motion you make from within, allowing you to hit harder, run faster, jump higher, and lift inconceivable amounts of weight. Combined with the HVIS, it is possible – and I’m speaking from experience here – for you to punch through the surface of an armored vehicle.”

Raaj was barely listening. He was busy imagining all the impossible stunts he could get away with while wearing this odd amalgamation of writhing, blue scales. It was everything that six-year old Raaj would have dreamed of.

Unaan chuckled.

“You’ll get to see its combat applications soon enough.”

The rest of the afternoon followed in similar fashion, with Raaj testing the full capabilities of the lithe, strength-magnifying armor. He pulverized brick, leapt over a five-by-five meter wall, then ran through the same wall on the way back.

“When you come across an obstacle, go over, go under, or go through,” was the sage advice offered by Unaan.

It had taken some getting used to. At first, Raaj would be thrown off balance by the added force in his motions. When he took a step, it was as if the suit stepped for him, and before he learned to control it, he found himself constantly stumbling forward and stomping on the ground instead of walking. In one instance, he knocked over a holographic projector as he was exiting the lecture room and surprised himself as his hand reached out to catch its fall almost before he commanded it to do so. It wasn’t just reflex. The suit was instantly transforming his thought into action. He wondered if the Manchira-V had somehow connected itself to his neural system.

As he mastered walking with super-powered legs, he tried breaking out into a jog, which Unaan cautioned against until they reached the training room. The doors opened and Raaj stepped inside. The square mat was still there, with the bundles training armor lying on its edge.

“Now you’re free. Fly little bird,” Unaan teased.

Raaj smirked and raced across the room towards the distant firearm targets. The world around him dissolved into a blur of motion and he was caught off guard again by how fast the ground beneath his feet flew. In a few seconds, he was on the other side of the room, catching himself against the wall. He felt invincible. He wanted to fight someone while wearing the suit just to experience how fast and powerful he would feel against an ordinary human.

Almost as if reading his mind, Unaan said, “We don’t train combat with the suits on. Far too dangerous, even for us. You’ll get your first taste of Manchira-enhanced combat on a field mission.”

“And when does that happen?”

“Whenever you’re ready,” Unaan replied.

The operatives filed back into the training room as Raaj’s orientation to the Manchira-V drew to a close. Unaan showed him the finger movement pattern that deactivated the suit’s interlock mechanism and Raaj watched as the scales unfolded from his skin and slid to the ground.

He joined the operatives as they strapped on their training armor from the morning. After hours of herculean movement, his own natural body felt sluggish and slow.

Raaj noticed each operative pull out a palm-sized black patch from their bag and slip it underneath their clothing onto the small of their back. He reached into his own bag to find one of the same and pressed it against the same spot on his body.

The patch held a flat solid that was about a centimeter thick, and its surface was covered by some kind of skin-activated adhesive that sealed it gently onto the small of his back. He wondered what it was for.

The captain’s voice broke the silence.

“Afternoon training is conditioning. You will spend the next three hours honing your body into the most efficient and powerful weapon it can be. You have guns, you have hovercraft, you have Manchira-V suits at your disposal. But a soldier does not rely on the luxury of tools. A soldier knows that technology fails. A rifle will jam, a plasma launcher will overheat. A soldier knows that first and foremost, his hands are readily available. This is doubly true for a Blackwatch – your body is your most reliable weapon.”

The words seemed directed at Raaj, but he saw the other operatives nodding along and grimacing.

“Let’s begin.”

Conditioning, as it turned out, was largely comprised of combat. But during the moments that didn’t involve Raaj facing off against another operative, he found himself pushing his body to limits it had never known before.

“Faster!” the captain would bark, and he would run faster. The only things that awaited him at the other end of the training arena were grueling calisthenics, but he knew better than to slow down. The first few times had been enough.

He reached the end of the sprint lane and immediately launched himself into the air to grasp the outstretched metal bar.

*One…two…three…four…* the muscles in his arms and back burned with exhaustion, but he kept pulling, sending his body up and over the bar until his mental tally screamed *twenty*. Then, he dropped, and resisting the overwhelming urge to sprawl his aching limbs across the floor, sprinted back towards the other side.

He was halfway there when the weight of the training armor made him misjudge his footing. He took a step too late and stumbled over his left foot. Even as he reached out to catch his fall, he knew it was coming.

“AAAAUUUGH!”

Raaj wasn’t someone to easily give away indications of pain. But the sharp, splitting sensation of two thousand well-placed volts running into the small of his back had drawn the same scream from his lips four times over.

The captain had eyes like a hawk. And a trigger-happy finger.

He pushed himself off the floor before the captain could do it again and finished the sprint to the red-and-black square mat. He collapsed into a pushup position and forced his arms to work. His opponent was beside him, going up-down, up-down, up-down, up-down… Raaj tried frantically to move faster, straining and wheezing to push his body off the floor, to hit the magic number, *twenty*, first. But the other operative was already done. Gerald sprang off the floor and made towards Raaj. Raaj turned, but not fast enough, and the kick caught him viciously in the ribs.

Raaj Ehraad of two hours ago would have doubled up and clutched at his sides. But Raaj Ehraad of now knew he had been presented with an opening. His hands grasped his opponent’s heel while he brought his legs around and kicked. Gerald hadn’t been expecting the move, and he toppled over as Raaj scrambled on top of him.

Raaj hit him, hard. He knew by now that while they were friends at the dining table, no mercy was expected on the training mat.

He drew his fist back for another blow, but Gerald was already on his feet. Raaj had just enough time to block the kick – a thudding blow that reverberated across his forearm – and reply with his own barrage of fists.

Two minutes later, he was racing back towards the other side of the room. He didn’t trip this time.

Raaj felt the pain, sharp and persistent, the moment he left the training room. As the adrenaline receded, the aches and stings edged further and further into his awareness.

He didn’t have to look to know that his ribs were colored several shades darker than the surrounding area and that there was blood he would have to wash off his body. He limped back with a bizarre sense of pride to his living quarters and fell asleep the second his head touched the mattress.

Two hours later, he woke to a shrill, mechanical beeping. He craned his neck to see the source of the interruption. It was a message, delivered from the holographic interface on the side of the bed.

*Dinner commences in 20 minutes*

He deleted the message and was in the process of closing his eyes again when another line of text replaced the one he had waved away.

*Hi, I’m Memphis. I don’t believe we’ve met.*

Raaj blinked. He reached out to type back.

*I’m Raaj*

The reply came almost instantaneously.

*Hi Raaj. How are things?*

*Good*

*You must be tired.*

Raaj had to stifle a laugh. On impulse, his hands flew to the keyboard.

*More like dead*

*Makes you wonder if it’s worth it, doesn’t it?*

Raaj paused.

*What?*

*This is your life. This is your day after day after day. Does that not scare you?*

Raaj narrowed his eyes.

*No*

*This conversation is completely confidential. All records of interaction between you and I are deleted upon termination. I’m just curious.*

*Maybe a little.*

*This is your day. You wake up. You train. You eat. You train. And training consists of ordeals you have never experienced in your life. You will exercise beyond psychologically healthy limits. You will endure merciless physical abuse from your squadmates. You will undergo literal torture. How does Mas Eros look now?*

Raaj waved the hologram off. It popped up again within a second.

*You didn’t answer the question.*

*Shut up*

Dinner was refreshingly delicious. Raaj felt desperately needed nutrients being restored to his body. As the operatives returned their dishes to the kitchen, Raaj pulled the captain aside and in a slightly annoyed tone, asked why his computer system had tried to have a conversation with him.

The captain grinned.

“So you’ve met Memphis! He’s a prototype of a new software we’ve been working on. We’re experimenting with artificial intelligence. The plan is to one day have a fully automated *Rak’tor*. Navigation, evasive maneuvering, weapons, everything. They’re programmed to find out more about their environment, so it’s natural for them to get talkative sometimes. It’s nothing to be concerned about, he’s just trying to find out how to better accommodate you.”

The captain noticed Raaj’s expression.

“Is he giving you any problems?”

Raaj hesitated. He had no idea who had designed the program and the last thing he wanted was another training partner who had it out for him.

“Nothing I can’t handle.”

Raaj got used to Memphis in the following weeks. The computer was, as the captain had stated, rather harmless. Most of the times he just wanted to about Raaj’s day. It had become a rather predictable dialogue consisting of many *Good*s, *It was fine*s, and *We did* X *and then* Y*, and* Y *was harder than* X*, but they were both pretty hard and now I feel like sleeping*, after which the conversation would abruptly end.

These routine interactions brought Raaj back to a familiar sensation, a distant remnant from a past life. And because of this, he almost appreciated Memphis’s company at the end of the day. He would have appreciated it more if there weren’t moments with the computer that made him undeniably uneasy.

For example, on the ninth day of his training, Raaj returned to his quarters and was met with Memphis’ usual greeting:

*Hi, how are you?*

Raaj replied out of habit.

*Good*

*How was the training?*

*The usual. Cap had us run laps for every fight we lost. My legs are about to drop off.*

*Why did you lose?*

Raaj rolled his eyes.

*They’re tough. They’ve been training for years. Give me time, I’ll catch up.*

Things took a strange turn from there.

*What happens when one of them fights you for real?*

*Why would they?*

*Because they feel like it. Because they’re trained mercenaries who have nothing better to do on a ship floating aimlessly in space. The better question is, why not?*

Raaj thought about Bruce, about the fury he had seen in his eyes that could only belong to a restless and jaded man.

***I’ll kill him.***

*How?*

***When you fight to survive, you don’t win by being stronger, faster, or more skilled. You win because you’re willing to harm your opponent in ways he isn’t prepared to do to you. You win by being the more vicious man.***

Memphis was quiet after that.

**Additional Passages**

Over the next five days, Raaj learned how a Blackwatch agent operated. It was rather formulaic when it came down to it. Gather intelligence, identify a weakness, and strike with relentless force. They were the Blackwatch principles of operation.

The methods by which one set these principles into motion was what differentiated one operative from another. With a vast collection of knowledge and resources at hand, there was room to be creative.

Raaj was instructed on everything related to warfare imaginable, from firing assault rifles behind cover to hacking Grade-A military security systems to using a planet’s gravitational field to add velocity to a spacecraft’s flight.

It was no wonder that these were the deadliest men in the galaxy. They had the entire day to spend honing their combat and infiltration skills, and they used it well.

Unaan’s face twisted into an expression that reminded Raaj of a lion laying eyes on its prey.

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On the fifth day, the captain fought harder than Raaj had ever seen anyone fight before. He started unarmed combat training by facing the team in triplets, switching between groups of three until he had fought everyone once. He then initiated five-minute rounds of full-intensity single combat with each operative, taking no rests in between. When it was Raaj’s turn, the captain was heaving and panting with each strike, but he could still feel the power behind the protective equipment as the captain’s shin collided into his stomach.

The round went by fast. He was floored a total of five times, but he had managed to land several crisp right hands and a powerful kick to the head, so he left the stage grinning. As the next combatant stepped up to the mat, the captain waved him away and took off his gloves. He seemed shaken.

“That’s enough for today. Go home and take a rest. You’ve earned it.”

With that, he turned around and strode out of the training room.

The rest of the operatives solemnly picked up their equipment and marched towards the exit. Raaj was confused. Up until then, the captain had seemed to be enjoying himself. He was a man who truly thrived in combat, relishing the ferocity and thrill of battle. For him to abandon training so abruptly like that was strange. Raaj wondered if something had happened during their fight.

As if sensing his concern, James walked by his side and said,

“It’s nothing you did, don’t worry about it.”

“Is he alright? What’s wrong?”

“He told you the story of why he was selected as the first Blackwatch Operative. He told you about how he killed fifteen men with his bare hands in a training exercise. But what he didn’t tell you was that it wasn’t just fifteen men. There was a woman.”

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For the next few days the captain appeared to be back to his normal self, enthused and energetic. But Raaj began to notice the instances when his demeanor would shift, when he’d stare motionlessly at the stars after a training session or when he’d pause in the middle of giving instruction and his eyes would lose a little bit of the life they had held a moment ago. And he couldn’t help but feel the least bit sorry for him. And also curious. It seemed like everyone on the ship had some sort of hidden, and more likely than not, tragic, past. Which made him think of his own. His family. He couldn’t remember their names, but he knew what they looked like. He knew the name of the planet he could find them on. And he found that the more he dwelled on the subject, the more came to mind. Memories, conversations, and feelings buried so deeply that it hurt to re-experience them. And so he stopped. The past was dead.

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It was on the twelfth day Raaj wondered if he truly wanted to become a Blackwatch.

The morning had started off as usual, with Raaj sparring against the other operatives and alternating between periods of rest and combat. His first indication that something was amiss came when the captain took him aside between rounds and whispered what almost sounded like a warning.

“Save your energy, you’ll need it for later.”

He noticed afterwards that the operatives he was paired against fought with less intensity than usual, holding back on their attacks, and that there was something akin to worry, almost pity, in their eyes for him.

It wasn’t until morning training was over that he realized the captain had something completely different planned for him today. Instead of joining the rest of the team to eat, Raaj found himself following the captain down an unfamiliar set of corridors and stairwells. He reasoned from their path that they were descending into the ship’s underbelly.

When they stopped, it was in front of a door unlike any other Raaj had seen on board the ship. While every room on *The Rak’tor* had some level of security in the form of retina scanners and print readers, none of them were bolted with the two-meter wide metal wheel covered in a complex array of digitized screens and scanners that stood between Raaj and the other side of the hallway.

He watched as the captain leveled his eyes in front of various screens and used his fingers to trace a series of intricate patterns across the surface. There was a moment of silence, then a loud hiss, and the wheel turned as its spokes withdrew into itself with a click, releasing the door from its surrounding walls and allowing the captain to push it open with the palm of his hand.

The noise struck Raaj like a physical blow, savage and unexpected.

It was a noise that brought him back to a faraway place, a past he had already begun to distance himself from. It was a noise he had learned to acclimatize to over years of living in its presence, one he had learned to drown out, sometimes by thought, and other times by force when thinking failed.

And when he heard it now, in this airless corridor, in the underbelly of *The Rak’tor*, those old, ugly thoughts came surging back.

The caged human has a very distinct cry. And the bars and outstretched arms reaching into the hallway was no strange scene to Prisoner 164.

“Our spoils of war. Former enemy combatants, treated to full Blackwatch hospitality. We manage to capture a few from each operation. That’s forty-two planets of origin spread across six galactic sectors represented in this hallway. You were wondering what Mandel and Bruce are responsible for on the ship. They’re in charge of prisoner maintenance.”

The captain spoke as they walked further down the corridor.

“They feed and hydrate them, sometimes forcibly. They stop them from killing each other and themselves, and keep enough of them alive for us to conduct our tests. Some of these tests are scientific. To observe the effect of experimental weaponry or combat techniques on a living human. Others are tests in another sense. To assess the ability and temperament of our new recruits.”

He looked thoughtfully at Raaj.

They arrived at the end of the rows of cells. The corridor in front of them widened into a circular room which was sealed around the perimeter by a caged fence. Inside the cage was what looked like an arena, with a rusting spotlight casting down a circle of light that began at the center and dimmed around the edges. Raaj could make out three figures bathed in the orange glow. They were sitting in a way that told Raaj they were waiting for something, or someone.

“Bruce and Mandel have been preparing this for you. Most of these men would rather die than live another day in captivity. To make these three agree to step into a cage to fight you, I imagine our two mutes must have had to employ some… considerable motivational skills.

It’s probably why Bruce wasn’t exactly pleased to meet you.”

Raaj stared back in shock. The past two weeks had been grueling beyond belief, but they had been absent of the silent peril of impending death, free from the cold callousness of fatal violence. This was something else – something that, up until now, he had thought he had escaped from.

The captain’s eyes remained cold and unreadable.

Raaj moved his hand towards the cage and rested it on top of the lever attached to the door.

He hesitated. The men were naked. They looked malnourished, but their eyes were afire with savage hate.

It would be a gruesome, vicious affair.

“I already know how to fight.”

The captain shook his head. His face darkened into an expression that Raaj had never seen him wear before.

“What we’ve done up until now has been practice. It’s been safe. You’ve known in the back of your mind that no serious harm could befall you.

“Until you’ve confronted death, until you’ve been in true combat, in all its glory and all its horror, you don’t have a clue what it’s like. Until you’ve felt bone break beneath your fist, tasted someone else’s blood in your mouth, swallowed your own teeth in the heat of battle, you cannot call yourself a Blackwatch.”

Raaj sighed inwardly and pushed down on the lever.

Prisoner 164 stepped into the cage.

The men looked up.

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And then suddenly she was there. *Anna*.

It had been four years since he had known that name. But he knew it now, watching her stroll gently across the courtyard, her steps soft and graceful, feet almost floating across the marble floor. She was everything he remembered. She couldn’t see him, but if she had turned in his direction, Raaj wouldn’t have been able to bring himself to hide.

He wanted to call out, to tell her how desperately he wanted to be with her despite all his attempts to convince himself otherwise. He wanted to ask her which of the memories he had sworn to erase from his mind were real and which were not.

She was beautiful as ever, but her eyes did not belong to the Anna that he had left. They were empty in a way that betrayed a deep sadness, in a way that only someone who had known her very well would be able to detect. And at that moment, Raaj had to grip the underbelly of the car until his knuckles turned white to stop himself from standing up.

He turned around and slid away.

He felt something warm and wet linger on his cheek before the combat suit’s internal humidifier eliminated the moisture.

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So they had pulled some strings and found some legal loopholes to throw him in prison for five years.

And not just any prison, but Mas Eros Penitentiary. The only planet whose sole use was incarceration. Twenty years before Raaj had arrived, Mas Eros had been evacuated of all civilian residency. Nearly every exploitable resource had been excavated and transported away in cargo ships, leaving gaping holes in the planet’s core. It was a miracle that it hadn’t collapsed on itself.

Instead, it was left with just enough food, water, and building materials to sustain a population of two million of the most despised men and women in the galaxy.

Being sentenced to Mas Eros wasn’t imprisonment. It was a death sentence.

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The only way for such a small number of guards to rule over the prison population was to turn them into borderline amnesiacs. They stuck needles into the inmates and sent electric currents through pathways in their brain until they were nothing but hollowed-out shells of rage and confusion.

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He knew the team was eager to return to the cruiser and report their success, but they would have to wait a while longer. He had unsettled affairs to tend to.

He found the building within minutes of stepping onto the street. It wasn’t hard. The mansion stood out in size from the surrounding houses by several orders of magnitude. In the front was an enormous garden that was almost a jungle, scattered with an exotic assortment of trees and plants whose overhanging fruits produced a rainbow of color from one end of the garden to the other. As striking as it was, the sight was rather disorienting. Why anyone would want to see, much less walk amongst, such chaos every day, Raaj could not fathom.

Surrounding the garden was a towering wired fence – a sharp contrast to the biological clutter that it enclosed. Even at a glance, Raaj could tell that security here was no laughing matter. He could make out the tiny vibrations that betrayed the thousands of volts running through the fence, the swiveling metal rods that were searching for motion and feeding live footage of the street back to the mansion, where security personnel would undoubtedly be watching. Raaj stayed hidden behind the car. There would be armed guards inside the compound. When you were the richest man on the planet, you had to take precautions, even on Rodan.

Luckily, he had come prepared. He reached into his back pocket.

**[Revenge killing here]**

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Raaj emerged from the terrace quite satisfied with his handiwork. He strolled through the garden and climbed out of the compound before making his way back to where the jet was parked. He let himself in to find the other three members of the team staring at him incredulously.

“Where were you?” asked Martha

“We were about to leave without you,” chimed Maraud.

Raaj allowed himself a slight smile. “I had some unfinished business,” he said.

Maraud hopped into the cockpit and the rest of the squad strapped themselves in, Rob already setting up a hologram projector on his lap as the jet took to the air. They were halfway out of the atmosphere when Rob froze.

“Uh-oh. Something’s coming up on the channels. Millions of broadcasts at once. Looks like we might not have been so quiet after all. I’ll merge and filter the interference, hold on.”

A few keystrokes later, Robert breathed a sigh of relief.

“It’s nothing. Some bigshot senator got exposed for fraudulent safety claims in city construction and covering up on-site deaths over the years. He’s facing life imprisonment or death.”

“Hmm,” Raaj mused, “politicians these days.”

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“Even so, in order to create a detonation of that scale, they’d need something much larger. They’d need-”

Raaj thought for a moment as the first blips appeared on the motion detector. “They’d need an atomic warhead.”

**[Antagonists come to board the ship and steal warheads]**

**Bad guy plan: blow up Maas Eros from the inside to frame somebody… or something… related to Raaj's past**

The ship was quiet. Anything that generated light or heat had been switched off. The masked breathing of soldiers anticipating combat and the reverberations of the backup generators through the wall were all that could be heard. A powerful jolt was felt throughout the ship and for a few seconds, what was quiet became total silence as the interior of the craft was exposed to the vacuum outside.

Then, as abruptly as it had left, sound returned to the world in the form of metal boots hammering against plated floors and the deafening blast of air from the other ship rushing in through the boarding tunnel. As the soldiers filed into the ship to begin the hunt, the operatives also began theirs.

**[Fight scene in darkness here]**

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“It’ll work. I’m sure of it”

And he said it with such convincing certainty that he almost believed it himself.

“James orchestrated the disappearance of the six major crimelords of Wicker city, turning it from one of the most dangerous urban dwellings in the Coract sector into a bustling and peaceful metropolis seemingly overnight. It took months of investigation before anyone would believe that he had, in fact, been working alone.

“The bodies were eventually recovered and it was evident that they had all been killed in the same way. Jaws ripped straight off their hinges. The absence of additional lacerations or indents in the skin suggested that no tools or weapons were involved and no fixtures were used to hold the head in place as the act was carried out. To this day, we’re still not sure how he did it.”

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A roar was heard in the distance and suddenly, a figure appeared, sprinting across the room and leaping towards Karfact. The killer spun around an instant too late as James sprung off the floor and latched onto his back. His normally calm demeanor had completely vanished and in his eyes was unabated fury as he bared his teeth in a frenzied, hysterical sneer.

Karfact reached up to throw him off, but James dug his legs hard into his sides. Karfact grunted and stooped low, but just as James was about to topple over, he circled his left arm around Karfact’s head, reached all five fingers of his right into his mouth, and twisted his entire body so that his right arm tore away from his left.

Karfact collapsed to the floor. His jaw was on the other side of the room.