

## Chapter One

THE SHADY LADY PUB & GRILL

KALDIKAR-6

JUNE 8, 1830 HOURS

John brought Rover One skidding to a stop in front of the *Shady Lady Pub and Grill* and was momentarily immersed in a plume of dust and sand. Muffled sounds of a proper ruckus were plainly audible from ten meters away.

*I'm getting really tired of this shit.*

Spitting to clear his mouth of sand, he hopped out of the rover, unlocked a rack between the front seats with a swipe of his holoband, and grabbed a four-foot bangstaff—the only weapon legally allowed on a colony with a tech backward alien species.

He strode through the hot sand that was still throwing up waves of heat in the early evening to the dustlock and wrenched open the outer door, then pulled his protective goggles up onto his gambler hat—a unique affectation that only he appreciated—and stood impatiently as he waited for the doors to cycle.

*So much for making a dramatic entrance. Where's a pair of swinging saloon doors when you need them?*

Just then, there was a *whump* of something heavy hitting the interior door.

"Son of a *bitch*," he muttered. He triggered the bangstaff, and the business end crackled to life.

The red light above the inner door turned to green, and he carefully pulled it open to reveal a young man attempting to pull himself off the floor with murder in his eyes. He

was holding a smaller bangstick—probably a *Kindler 1200*—and bleeding from the mouth.

Heads turned as John took a step in, his tall and lean frame casting a shadow across the floor. Dirty blonde hair was visible under his dark gambler hat, and much of his face was deeply tanned. John poked the young man in the chest with the bottom of his bangstaff, preventing him from standing.

“Stay there and put that weapon *back* in your jacket, or you’ll be on the next ship out of here. I won’t say it again.”

The young man, dressed in new khakis with an expensive pair of goggles around his neck, wore a doubtful expression until he saw the Star Corps emblem and recognized the uniform. He nodded reluctantly.

But John wasn’t even looking at the kid.

Across from a long bar that dominated the left side of the room was an open area full of tables. In an open space where tables had been turned over, a colonist in well-worn khakis struggled against two young men. Jane, the bar owner, was helping a female server off the floor next to a pile of broken dishes. Several groups of people were shouting back and forth across the fray.

Beyond the main commotion, John saw Seb, a young officer doing his best to keep two colonists from entering the fight. He was bleeding from a cut on his cheek.

“Cole, enough!” shouted Jane.

The older colonist ignored her and tried to headbutt the guy holding his right arm and received a punch in the side from the guy on his left for his efforts.

John brought his fingers to his lips and whistled loudly. The piercing sound bounced around the room, and all eyes turned to him, one hand in his mouth, the other on the biggest crackling bangstick Ulisses sold—*The Inhibitor*.

“Everybody stop right NOW.”

Those of the colony who knew him listened almost immediately. Those who didn’t saw the uniform, the strange hat, and the absolute certainty that he believed if they didn’t do as he said, they just might get intimate with Ulisses’ best seller.

The place went nearly silent, except for the blues track playing on the sound system. Some new Periphery band called *Southern Star*. John didn’t think much of them, they were sloppy and unoriginal.

Cole was still struggling with one of the men as John approached him, then saw the look in his eye and stopped.

“These guys-” began the colony rancher.

“Shut your mouth,” said John.

He looked at the men Cole had been fighting. "Who the hell are you, and what the balls is going on?"

The two men, also younger and in fresh clothing, looked at each other.

"Well, answer him!" said Jane.

"Jake and Luke Abati," said the taller one. "The guy on the floor over there is our brother, Joey. We just came in on the *Star Ram*. This crotchety bastard didn't like something I said, I didn't even know—"

"He called the *Mokara* lizards—thought it was *funny*," shot back Cole, pointing to a table where three of the large, scaly natives stood where they had been smoking *frajo* and playing pike sticks. "They—"

"They're *new here*, Cole."

"Well," began Cole, "that's... they should..."

"Seb!" called John.

The young officer had already been making his way over.

"Escort this idiot out to the rover."

"Sir," replied Seb. "Come on, Cole."

The colonist muttered but let himself be led past the young neocolonist named Joey, now standing by the dustlock entrance. John looked at the kid and shook his head.

Seb led Cole out, and most of the tension in the room trailed out with them.

The servers continued cleaning up the mess, and one of the neocolonists, Jake, stooped down to help.

Jane walked up to John, pulling back her brown and gray hair behind an ear, and tugged up one end of a dirty apron.

"Thanks, captain," she said. "This guy here used the lizard word, and Cole decided to make an issue of it. Seb was over in the corner having dinner, I shouted for him to call you. I think he tried to get to Cole, but then Jensen and Williams wanted to join the fight, and he was dealing with them."

John surveyed the room. People were picking up chairs and utensils, flagging down servers, and trying to return to their meals. He stared down the two leaselanders who'd tried to join the fight, who by now were looking slightly ashamed.

*They ought to know better.*

"This is what, the third time?" asked John, turning off the bangstick.

She nodded. "You tell him I've had it. I understand he thinks he means well, but I won't have my place broken up."

"Yeah," John sucked his teeth, "I'll tell him and that and plenty more."

He turned and faced the larger of the two brothers named Luke.

"The word *lizard* is derogatory to our alien friends. We don't use it. We call 'em lizaphants or just phants. Got it?"

"We didn't know!"

"Usually first time you get a pass. Apologies for that. However, we don't condone fighting around here. Help clean this mess, pay your bill, and don't let me have to deal with you again."

He turned on his heel and made his way to the exit. He opened the inner door of the dustlock and stepped inside. As he waited for the doors to cycle a second time, he took a long, deep breath.

The outer door opened, and he stepped out into the hot evening. Even though the sun had recently set, the temperature was still over 120 degrees.

Seb stood next to Cole, who was leaning against the rover, sulking like a child.

John slowly walked over.

"You're lucky I don't carry a gun, you know that?"

"Listen," began Cole.

"You know that kid had just pulled his bangstaff? What do you think would have happened when it was no longer just fists?"

"Typical neo," replied Cole. "They have no idea—"

"Of course they have *no idea!*" shouted John. "They don't know what to call the phants. Some young kid thinking he needs to protect his brothers doesn't know better than to pull a banger in a bar fight. They don't know how much they need to drink to stay hydrated. They don't know picking a *frajo* plant too early *kills* it. How *would* they know any of that, dumbass? They just *got here*. I didn't know this shit when I got here, either. I had to be told—by you, of all people."

"That's what I was *trying* to do!"

"That's what you said the last time. And the time before that. Your method of communication sucks. Face it, you're here *looking* for a fight. Sooner or later, you'll get more than you bargained for."

"Gah, baloney. I ain't lookin' for a fight. These neos just need to learn some respect."

"It's *you* that needs to learn," replied John, poking Cole in the chest. "Something I never thought I would say. Respect for your fellow colonists who just want to have dinner, respect for human beings coming here just trying to earn a living, respect for the Star Corps and what we're trying to do here. Neos learn in time, just like everyone else. And if someone steps out of line, then it's *my* job, not yours, Cole."

"Well... you can't be everywhere, can ya?"

John threw up his hands.

"What am I supposed to do here?" asked John. "By law, I should throw your ass in the lockup for assault."

"Assault? Come off it, bud. It was just a conversation that got out of hand."

"Let the fists do the talking, huh? *That* kind of conversation?"

Cole saw that John was not smiling.

"Look, John... we've been through a lot together. I'm just--"

"You're just making an ass of yourself, that's what *your just*. You're making our jobs harder. And when I let you get away with it, others think this bullshit behavior is okay. Thank God Seb stopped the others from joining in. What happens if that whole place goes up like a powder keg?"

"Aw, come on--"

"Three strikes, Cole. You are officially out of chances. Get your ass back to your place before I throw it in the lockup."

Cole looked into John's eyes, then nodded and walked off west towards his ranch.

John watched him go, then turned to Seb.

"You okay?"

"Yeah, I'm fine, captain. Sorry I had to pull you in, but Jane was right, things were getting out of hand."

John shook his head.

"It's okay, kid. Apparently..."

He turned to watch Cole in the distance and shook his head.

"...this is my job."

## Chapter Two

GALACTIC UNION FRIGATE MINAMOTO  
ERIDANI SYSTEM  
JUNE 9, 2219

#

It had been over a decade since a ship was lost in hyperspace.

*Ghost ships* they were called, because they were *somewhere*... just nobody knew *where*.

Captain Tina Callagan knew the nav systems were nearly flawless, but that nagging fear still crept up her spine each time they prepped for jump.

*I don't want to be a ghost.*

"All decks report crew secure, ma'am."

She acknowledged without looking at the comtech, then pulled on the side of her uniform and grunted.

*I need to lay off the desserts.*

"Nav?" she asked.

"Outbound vector calcs are locked in for Tau Ceti. We're a go for burn."

"Chief com, do your thing."

A comtech punched a button.

"Condition yellow take-hold. Burn in three minutes," was broadcast throughout the *Minamoto*.

"These diplomatic missions are boring as hell."

It came from behind her, but she knew who it was.

"Stow it, Thackray, or you'll be on your knees brightening my decks."

"Ma'am."

But he wasn't wrong. Still, it was better than war. There was always tension between Galactic Union and the Periphery, but not yet enough to come to blows. And as long as treaties were respected, most of our alien friends remained *friends*.

Or at least courteous acquaintances.

She sat in the captain's chair and strapped in.

"Stims," she barked, and the crew complied.

Helm said, "Burn in two minutes."

"*What the fuck!*"

The captain turned and saw chief nav looking frantic.

"Higginson, what's the problem?"

The chief navigation officer was desperately working his board. "I have alerts popping all over—calcs have been altered, and I'm locked out of the system. I didn't do *shit*."

"What do you mean *altered*?" asked the captain, worry creeping into her gut. "After you confirm vector lock, no changes are possible. Start making sense, Higginson. *Fast!*"

"90 seconds to burn!" said Helm.

"I'm telling you I did *nothing*," replied the chief navigator. "And I have no access to the system."

The captain quickly swiped her holoband, and a holo window appeared. She sent a command to the Security AI:

Nav1 access all Nav

"Try now."

A moment. Then: "No good!"

"60 seconds to burn!"

"Helm, abort jump," said the captain.

*There was going to be hell to pay for this.*

"Aye," came a worried response, but then: "Son of a bitch! My access is gone, too!"

"Bloody shit!" replied the captain. That worry in her gut transformed into cold and rigid fear.

"20 seconds to burn!"

She returned to the Security AI and sent a hail mary command:

Deck access all systems

"Try now!"

"It's no good! Burn in 5!" shouted Helm as he turned to her, his face reflecting the terror she was now fully experiencing.

Callagan had a brief moment to wonder what the end would be: re-entry into a solid body? On to another ship? Or was her greatest fear about to be realized—lost permanently in hyperspace, only to become a ghost damned to some unknown, dreaded eternity...

*This isn't supposed to happen anymore, she thought.*

They jumped.



### Chapter Three

JOHN'S RANCH

KALDIKAR-6

JUNE 9, 0730 HOURS

The next morning, John stood in the kitchen finishing his coffee and reviewing a holo window with his task list for the day while Lieutenant Tamila Brooks (whose companionship he was beginning to take very seriously) was zipping up her jacket and getting ready to start the day.

"Where are you headed?" she asked.

John raised a lip and grimaced.

"Joy of joys, a supply run to Ulisses' shop—just what a captain should be doing, right?"

She smiled and patted him on the back. "You could send Seb, he needs to learn sometime."

"Haggling with Ulisses is an *art*. Seb is sharp, but he lacks my specific creative flair."

Tam chuckled and shook her head.

"Yeah, he's not as big a bullshitter as you are."

Usually, he would enjoy the banter, but it wasn't in him this morning. He put his cup in the sink.

"I'll drag Alvis along, Ulisses hates it when I bring him."

"There ya go," she replied and kissed him on the cheek. "Plenty on my plate, I need to jump."

She grabbed her jacket and left the kitchen. A few seconds later, the front dustlock cycled.

He stood there gazing out the kitchen window, taking in the northern mountain range, miles beyond the sprawling leaseland ranches of the colony. The heat and haze of the desert made the mountains warp in the distance.

*No sense in putting it off. Plenty on the list today.*

He took the rear hallway to the workshop where the artie spent most of his time, knocked, and entered.

"Hey, Alvis," asked John, "come with me to Ulisses' shop at the dome, will ya? You know he always tries to rip me off, I need your enormous intellect to fight back."

"Save your transparent attempts at flattery," replied the robot, "I don't have some *fragile* human ego where my will can be bent to your purposes."

John leaned against the doorframe. "You know how he gets that furious look in those weird eyes of his when you outmaneuver him," replied John, wiggling his fingers. "He *hates* it."

Alvis turned toward John. "However, it is reasonable that your office makes the best use of its resources, especially monetary."

"That's what I thought," said John, smiling.

A few minutes later, they were wading through the morning heat to the second of the Star Corps rovers, angled against the wind as if it were attempting to shield itself from the blowing sand. Even the *equipment* hated the desert. John habitually grabbed the top of his gambler hat before it could blow off and choke him, zipping up his jacket tight with the other hand.

As usual, the scorching heat of Kaldikar-6 was nearly unbearable. Only the specialized "wetsuit" they wore under their clothing to circulate cooling fluids allowed humans to survive. It still messed with his mind that they wore multiple layers in heat to stay cool. His mind constantly tried to trick him into throwing it all off, like the paradoxical undressing of someone suffering from hypothermia.

A heavy gust of wind blew, and sand raked across John's goggles and exposed cheek. It had been over a year since he arrived, and it seemed his skin had grown an extra protective layer—not that it helped much. There were days he wished he had the tough, alligator-like skin of the native *Mokara*, who strolled across the desert without protective gear as if it were a spring day.

*I don't think Tam would date me if I had alligator skin.*

Alvis stepped up into the rover and sat down, unconcerned. He and the other arties were also nearly impervious to the harsh environment. It seemed if anyone didn't

belong on K-6, it was humans. But here they were, adapting and thriving against all odds.

He felt grit in his teeth, turned his head away from the wind, and spat. "Dammit!"

*Of course, some adapted better than others.*

"I don't have all day," said Alvis, "Are we going or not?"

"Yeah, yeah, I just got sand in my mouth. Relax."

"Why are you standing with your mouth wide open while sand blows everywhere? Try to use some common sense."

John turned and gave Alvis the stink eye—then realized the artie wouldn't see it through the heavy goggles.

*Why did I think saving some units was worth bringing him?*

Their relationship was another thing that hadn't improved much in the last year. They still continuously got on each other's nerves. John wasn't sure if Alvis did it intentionally or if it was just part of his makeup as a highly evolved, artificially intelligent robot who eschewed any sort of feelings for reason and logic.

On John's side, it was *definitely* intentional.

He decided not to respond (thus avoiding more sand in his mouth) and hopped in the rover.

An hour later, the supplies were being packed by Bing, the shop's artie assistant, and Ulisses had that look in his eye.

"I don't know why you had to bring *him* along," said the proprietor. "He takes the fun out of everything."

"Fun?" asked John. "Hell, I should *arrest* you for all the crap you pull on new colonists. You nearly broke me when I first arrived."

Bing arrived at the counter. "Everything is boxed and ready for transport, sir."

"Thanks, Bing," said John, "we'll just be..."

Bing made an awkward turn to make direct eye contact with Alvis. The artie's eyes briefly flashed as Alvis took a quick step back.

"What is it with you newer models and personal space?" asked Alvis. "Do you *mind*?"

Bing grabbed his head.

"I'm sorry, Alvis," he said as he momentarily stumbled. "I'm not sure what came over me."

"Bing, you babbling hood ornament, what's *wrong* with you lately?" asked Ulisses. "He's been acting weird since yesterday."

"I don't know, Master Ulisses," replied the artie.

Alvis muttered to himself. Bing's use of the word *master* always sizzled his circuits.

"We can send Hogan over to look at you," said John. "He seems to be the resident artie expert around here. I won't even charge you that much for the service."

"Charge me?" shouted Ulisses.

Alvis was already pushing the gravcart to the exit. "Gotta go, lots to do," said John, laughing under his breath.

He zipped up and secured his hat once again, then entered the first pair of dustlock doors leading out of the dome. The dustlocks were on most buildings, valiantly attempting (but not quite succeeding) to keep out the sand and dust. The inside doors closed, and normally a green light above the outer doors would light up as they opened to the heat, but it had been smashed again. Probably some kid trying to break the mundane existence of teen life in a distant farming colony.

Outside the dome, they loaded up Rover One with the supplies. Alvis and Hogan had made significant progress reengineering the vehicles to operate in the mechanically challenging environment, using some of the nanotechnology tricks that kept the arties free from trouble to keep the rovers running.

Back at the ranch, they began unpacking the boxes.

"What was all that with Bing?" asked John. "I have to side with Ulisses. That *was* weird."

"I'm not sure. I think Bing transmitted some data to me, but it's protected."

John stopped unpacking and looked at the artie, putting a glove up to shield his face from the wind. "*What?* Why didn't you say something?"

"My internal systems only alerted me moments ago," replied Alvis.

How could he do that without your consent?" asked John. "Not to mention all your security protocols."

"Unknown. I'm running full diagnostics. I'm more interested in *what* he sent than *how* he sent it."

"This feels like more than just a little *odd behavior*," said John.

"Interesting," replied Alvis. "Poking at the data packet surfaced an old passphrase from my damaged memory systems."

"From when you were deactivated?"

"Precisely. I still haven't recovered eight percent of the corrupted data. Let's see if the passphrase will unlock Bing's transmission."

After a brief pause, Alvis shuddered and turned to look at John.

"*Extraordinary.*"

"You look shocked," said John. "Something is rancid in robot town if you're

expressing human emotion. What's going on?"

"It's a score summary from a game called wordstacks," said Alvis. "Only one other person in the universe knows about this game—because he made it for us to play. My creator, Bernie Jennison."

"Holy balls, *the famous Bernie?*" asked John. "What does it mean?"

"I think he's trying to send me a message."

#

John poked his head into the workshop to find Alvis connected to various pieces of diagnostic apparatus. The artie hadn't left the place since he began digging deeper into his damaged memories after the incident with Bing three days ago.

"Any luck?" asked John.

Alvis was focused on a rapidly scrolling readout on a display and didn't turn around. "The passphrase has been extremely useful," he began. "It allowed me to unlock some encrypted memory stacks that I assumed were damaged beyond repair. They aren't readable yet, as they seem part of a sophisticated attempt to lock away portions of my memory from my time with Bernie. My theory is once I have assembled these stacks, they can be reintegrated into my memory like missing puzzle pieces."

"Theory? You're not sure?"

The scrolling display halted, and Alvis finally turned around. "No. That's why I had you send for Hogan. He's shown himself quite adept at understanding our internal systems."

John grinned. "The great Alvis, asking Hogan for help. I can't believe your growth and maturity over the last year. You're like a new man!"

"In contrast, your attempts at humor have not improved. And you should know by now that my actions are based on logic. It is not some form of *emotional growth* as you wish to characterize it. Hogan is simply right for the job."

"Is that so?" asked John. "That's funny coming from the guy who was trying to shove Hogan out of our motel room as some sort of abomination when we first met him."

Just then, a distant voice came from the front of the ranch.

"Bing bong, the wind is a song!"

"Hey, speak of the devil. Your assistant has arrived!" said John.

"Then make yourself useful and bring him here!" said Alvis. "I'm sure this amuses you, but there's something rather disturbing about how this was carried out and subsequently revealed. As a Star Corps captain, maybe you should take this seriously."

John held up his hands. "Point taken, professor. I'll get him."

He exited the workshop toward the kitchen to retrieve Hogan, but the artie was already walking down the hallway toward the workshop. Hogan immediately began excitedly recounting a tall tale about a desert scorpion defeating a jackwolf with a sword made from a cactus.

*Take things seriously, huh?* thought John.

"You should tell that story to Alvis. He was just explaining to me how all this work was stressing him out, and he could use a distraction."

"Ooh!" replied Hogan, waving to Alvis. "You won't believe the battle I witnessed between a scorpion with a cactus sword..."

"You're right, I won't," said Alvis. "I see this is still a big joke to you," he continued, looking at John, who only grinned and crossed his arms.

"Old habits die hard," he said.

Alvis disconnected himself from his equipment and stepped by Hogan to the workshop door. "Yes, they do," he said and slammed the door in John's face.

#

Dinner time arrived, and John sat tucking in with Ril, his young female charge he rescued from kidnapping (and worse) last year, and Tam.

The arties were still holed up in the workshop.

"I'm getting worried about Alvis," said Ril. "What if something's really wrong with him?"

John swallowed a large gulp of beer and grabbed another cactus tamale from a bowl in the center of the table. He'd had a busy afternoon settling a dispute between colonists. The leaselanders argued over ranch borders, and tempers had flared in the heat. He'd barely been able to keep his own before getting all parties to compromise. He was now fully invested in stress eating while trying to forget how angry and frustrated he was about the whole thing.

It was yet another example of his role as captain not entirely living up to the Star Corps brochure. He was beginning to feel like he was little more than a schoolteacher reprimanding misbehaving students. Most of the arguments between colonists could be avoided with a little common sense and empathy. But as more and more people landed on K-6 looking for their fortunes, conflicts continued to bubble up to the surface. It was quite different from piloting a starship between systems or even a cargo ship between Earth and the Moon.

*I miss the freedom, he thought, even if I was destitute.*

"There's nothing wrong, believe me," he said with a mouthful of tamale. "He's the same old *cranky* robot, telling me how to do my job. He's just trying to retrieve some old

memories.” He poured himself another beer. “Probably trying to relive the glory days with his old pal *Bernie*,” he muttered.

“Hang on now,” said Tamila, “you have to admit that whole thing with Bing was odd. Maybe we ought to be more concerned.”

“See?” asked Ril. “That’s what I mean. It’s odd.”

“Of course it’s *odd*!” said John. “Those two arties are the oddest characters in the galaxy! It’s their damn *idiom*.” He grabbed another tamale.

“You keep eatin’ like that, I’ll have to order you a bigger jacket,” said Tamila, smiling.

“First Bing calls me fat when I get here; now you’re on my case,” replied John as he added some salsa to his plate. I think I lose ten pounds a day wandering around this stinking desert. It’s not gonna be a problem.”

“Why are you so on edge today?” asked Tamila.

“I’m not on edge,” muttered John.

“I think you should be more concerned,” said Ril, refusing to be mollified. “He *did* save your life, you know.”

John rolled his eyes. “Oh fer—listen, I’m *concerned*, okay? Right now, I’m just a little hungry. I’ve had a stressful day. And the last time I was over there, he slammed the door in my face, which clearly indicated he didn’t want to be bothered. But if it makes my two beauties feel better, I’ll check on him after I finish these tamales. And one more beer. And maybe another tamale...”

The women just stared at him.

“Wow, tough crowd.”

After dinner, John helped with the dishes and then headed back to the workshop, where he was met with a little ditty from Alvis himself.

“Bing bong, you’re bothering us—move along!”

So he settled into the front room as the sun set, put on Jimmy Jellyfingers latest release *Waggle Bop*, yet another masterpiece displaying Jimmy’s talents with fast-paced rhythms and intricate improvisation, and turned it up just loud enough to reach the workshop. He poured himself a glass of Stewart’s, a 12-year single malt from Mars—a gift from the Leaselander Association with lovely vanilla notes—and swiped up a holo window from his bracelet. He sighed and began to dig through a long list of backlogged tasks, prioritizing his work for the week.

Three drinks and four albums later, it was 2330 hours, and Tamila found him asleep in his chair.

She shook him gently but was only rewarded with a groan. She frowned and shook

him harder.

"...beverage machine is watching me," mumbled John.

"John..."

"...small red eye... it follows... everywhere..."

"John!" she shook him again.

"Wha! Awww," replied John, putting a hand on his forehead. "I should *not* have had that last drink."

He sat up slowly in his chair. Tam was wrapped in a light sheet, looking at him with tired eyes.

"Come to bed," she said.

John rubbed his eyes and cracked his neck. "Are they out yet?" he asked.

She shook her head. "Nope. Haven't even taken a break. Ril checked on them a few hours ago before she went to bed, and Hogan said it was difficult work. It will take time. Ril's worried. She's leading an expedition into the blanch in the morning—she's thinking about canceling."

John got up and felt the age in his back. He grimaced. "There's no getting him off a task when he's like that. Best leave him alone. Besides, what are *we* going to do? Aside from us not knowing how to help, he *wants* to be left alone. I'm sure it will all be fine in the end. Some *jolly* memories about wild drinking parties with Bernie or something."

"My, you *are* the jealous type," said Tam.

"Jealous?" asked John. "Of what, Bernie? Are you kidding? What could he have done with Bernie that would rival *our* adventures? The stupid robot is a hero instead of *scrap* because of me!"

"I didn't say anything about Bernie. You did." Tamila smiled.

"You know there are times when I could consider almost not liking you but not quite," said John.

"Um-hmm," replied Tamila. "Come to bed."

But when morning arrived, the workshop door was still closed.



## Chapter Four

The next morning, John stood with his coffee, browsing the news streams on his holo. He frowned as one, in particular, caught his eye. He put down his coffee and tapped the audio feed for 'Galactic Union Ship Feared Lost' as he pulled on his jacket.

"Star Corps officials have finally confirmed that GU Frigate Minamoto failed to arrive at its destination jump-point. A search of overshoot gravity wells has not resulted in any new information. Officials will only say that the Minamoto was on a diplomatic mission to the Tau Ceti system without providing further details. The ship's 65 crew and Ambassador Yonshin are now listed as missing."

"Connect with HypercomOne for further developments on this story and all the top news in the Galactic Union."

#

*Balls, thought John. That's a lot of ghosts.*

Everyone knew there was always a small risk when jumping, but he couldn't remember the last time he'd heard of a ship disappearing in hyperspace. He thought AI nav systems cracked that problem years ago.

*Maybe it's a good thing I'm staying put for a bit.*

He picked up his coffee.

*Then why does my gut say, 'time to leave?'*

He turned to watch Ril scarf down three pieces of Kalibull bacon, nearly accidentally chewing some of it before adding an orange juice chaser.

"Maybe if you got out of bed ten minutes earlier, you wouldn't have to eat like a

drug addict who just found an unopened leftover box in the trash.”

“Shtay out uf my bushnish,” replied Ril with unswallowed juice in her mouth.

“You should try *swallowing* before speaking.”

Ril burped at him.

“They’re still not out yet,” she said. “Maybe I should cancel my expedition.”

John shook his head, then drank the last of his coffee. Tamila was out front getting Rover One ready to head to the office, and he needed to get going.

“There’s nothing you can do, trust me. He’s rebuffed all attempts at help or advisement, and there’s no danger. Go on your expedition. It will probably all be resolved when you get back.”

She frowned at him, arms crossed.

John rolled his eyes. “I’m not trying to tell you what to do, Ril. Hey, you want to hang around a closed door and give up the units for a full day’s expedition? Knock yourself out. I think the twins are out front. You want me to tell them?”

She squinted at him. Then sighed and shook her head.

“No, you’re right. I’m just worried, is all. He did save my life.”

“Uh, *hello*, I had something to do with that!”

“Yeah, I guess you were there, too.”

She smiled

He pointed at her as he turned to leave the kitchen.

“I’m not taking the bait. I’m too busy today!”

She followed him into the front room, where they both pulled on boots and goggles and exited into the hot sun. John secured his wetsuit at the neck to ensure its cooling mechanisms functioned properly and pulled his gambler hat down snugly.

Muk and Tuk, Ril’s two lizaphant partners and “brothers,” stood beside three large kalibulls, the massive half-bull, half-camel animals used as mounts. As usual, Ril’s mount was the largest, sporting a large set of antlers and loaded with packs and supplies for the expedition.

John still marveled at the Kaldikar natives called lizaphants (or just phants) by humans. He’d gotten used to being around them, although he still felt small and insignificant standing beside them.

It wasn’t just the six-foot-plus frame. They stood confidently on their thick, sturdy legs that powered a bipedal form. The lizard resemblance came from their mottled dark green scales that resembled Earth’s Gila monster. What really unnerved people was the muscled upper arms tipped with claws capable of shredding leather and a heavy, agile tail that could smash a small car. When people first saw the short, elephant-like trunk

protruding between two short tusks on the face, they understood the name.

He approached the twins, each sporting a long knife handle peeking over one shoulder. They both had a double white band painted on their upper trunks, just below their eye line.

"Hey, Muk," he said, noting a scar where the trunk emerged from the face. It was the only way he could tell the two of them apart.

The alien bobbed his head. "Big big," he said. Tuk chortled with his trunk, a behavior John knew meant he was laughing.

They still liked to tease him that he was the "big man" around the colony because he was now captain, even though they could pick him up and play catch with his flailing body if they desired.

"Pay extra attention today," he replied. "She's distracted. Alvis is having a little problem, and she's worried about him."

Muk slapped John on the back, nearly knocking him into the sand.

"Yes yes, captain captain."

Tuk waved a trunk, never one to waste a word where a gesture would do.

He turned just in time to see Ril expertly mount her kalibull. She waved at him, and then at Tamila by the rover.

"Let's, go, boys!"

The phants mounted, and shortly the three of them disappeared in a haze of dust.

He walked over to the rover, where Tam was making minor adjustments.

"How's it look?" he asked.

"Honestly, fantastic," she replied. "All the old issues seem to have vanished. I don't know why they didn't just make them like this in the first place. Hogan is a wonder. It's going to make our jobs a lot easier."

"Good," said John as he looked back toward the ranch and rubbed his chin.

"They're still not out, huh?" asked Tamila.

"Hm? Oh, no," replied John, "they're not."

"This is more serious than you originally thought," she stated matter of factly.

"I guess. I mean, if I had a hole in my memories..."

"Yeah, me too," said Tamila.

John fingered the fine wool and frajo fiber rim of his hat. He had no idea what could be in those missing memories, but it worried him. He thought back to the day he found Alvis in a junk auction.

*What could an artie do that would lead to that?*

"You see that news on the GU frigate?" he asked.

"Terrible," replied Tamila. "Someone messed up."

"Seems like it."

He stood for another moment, then shrugged. "Not much we can do if Alvis doesn't want our help. It's not like we don't have ungrateful *petty* colonists to contend with." He walked around the rear of Rover One, checking his pockets to ensure he had everything for the day.

"Something is *definitely* bothering you," replied Tam. "Someone give you an extra hard time yesterday? Maybe we need to start going out in pairs..."

John waved her off.

"It's nothing."

Just then, the ranch's front door opened, and Hogan burst out.

"Wait!" said the artie. "I need to come! He said I need to go with you!" The robot leaped down from the front stoop and shuffled into the sand about as fast as John had ever seen an artie move.

"Well, look at him scamper," laughed Tamila.

"I *just* asked them if they needed anything! I swear he does these things on purpose to aggravate me."

"Alvis wants you to take me to Ulisses," said the artie. "We need more processing power. Ulisses has the necessary components."

"Processing power?" asked John. "I swear if you guys blow up my ranch..."

"We would never!" said Hogan. "The systems Alvis has at his disposal are insufficient to disassemble the adaptive protections shielding his hidden memory."

"Adaptive protections?" asked Tamila.

"That sounds intentional," said John. "I thought his memories were damaged by the EMP device I found on him."

"There is much we don't know yet. But Alvis said, '*monkey brain doesn't need to know the details. Just get what we need and get back here.*'"

Tamila laughed. "Let me guess. I'm going to run down the morning task list, and you're going to see Ulisses again."

John's hat began to blow off, and he quickly grabbed it. "Do you *believe* this guy? Now he's insulting me behind closed doors, and I'm supposed to be his *errand boy*." He turned back to Hogan. "How much is this going to cost? I've hardly gotten rich on Star Corps wages."

"Alvis has transferred sufficient units to your account," said Hogan.

Tamila looked surprised, and John was suspicious. "You don't say? Where'd the tin bandit come across units?" he asked as he swiped up a holo window from his bracelet.

As Hogan said, there was a notification showing money had been transferred.

"Alvis earns units spending time in a tech stream tutoring high-level machine learning students and helping professors. He says having some money is a safeguard against—well, these are his words—against 'some filthy human ruining his life.'"

John turned to Tamila. "And you wonder why I have difficulty worrying about him." He shrugged. "Okay. If you can start with the issue with the well dispute, I'll catch up with you as soon as possible. You alright with that?"

"It's fine. I'll drop you two off," said Tamila. "You can grab Rover Two from HQ and bring back Hogan with their new gear. Call me, and we'll get together for lunch and plan the afternoon."

"A lunch date? That's at least some consolation for being forced to run errands for a bossy robot. Hop in, Hogan," said John as he jumped into the seat next to Tamila. The artie stepped into the rover and sat behind him.

Twenty-five minutes later, John and Hogan arrived at the dome after dropping off Tamila at the Star Corps HQ. John ignored Hogan as the artie attempted to regale him with the details of how he and Alvis were using a new way of thinking about physical memory in their attempt to access Alvis' missing data.

John noticed a group of newcomers in fresh outfits (which they likely overpaid for at Ulisses) talking in the shade of the abandoned mechanical mount shop. They were likely arrivals from the *Star Ram*, which arrived at K-6 two weeks ago.

When the account of John and Alvis saving Ril and exposing the corruption of the local Star Corps officers began to spread, the colony had seen quite an uptick in free harvesters and new colonists buying up plots of land looking to strike it rich. The influx of people unfamiliar with the local ways had led to the colony of Charon being even more of a wild west town than when John had first arrived.

*More people, more problems.*

"And that's how we plan to build a process to break the self-replicating facade that Alvis believes may be obfuscating the actual data," Hogan was saying.

"Uh-huh," replied John. "That's great. Let's get this business over with Ulisses and get back. I've got a lot to do."

"Yes, sir, Captain sir!" said Hogan, saluting. Ever since John had been placed in charge, Hogan called John by his rank every chance he got. He said it made him feel like he was part of the Corps, just like Alvis was back in the "good old days," whatever that meant. Hogan had a delight of hyperbole that exhausted most people.

They entered through the dustlock, preparing for the usual bargaining and banter with Ulisses.

#

An hour later, John and Hogan were inside the main colony dome finishing up at Ulisses' shop.

"I thought I asked you to *stop* bringin' these guys around when you come in here," grumbled Ulisses as Bing was packing the last of the boxes into a large bag. "How's a man supposed to make a living?" he gave Hogan a sour look.

"Listen to you whine about being unable to rip people off—you know I'm the Star Corps *captain* here, right? That I can *arrest* you for breaking the law?"

"Pfft," replied Ulisses. "*Law!* Give me a break. This is a free market economy!" he said, tapping a finger on the counter.

John leaned over the counter, invading Ulisses' personal space. A fun little trick he learned from his old nemesis Kedron. He looked directly into the shopkeeper's indigo eyes.

"You are the richest man on this planet. Are you *really* going to complain because you didn't rip me off for more units—like you probably did to the new arrivals from The *Star Ram*—while the majority of hard-working colonists labor in sweat and blood in those fields of molten sand trying to make ends meet?"

Ulisses momentarily looked slightly uncomfortable, then put on his usual flippant exterior persona. "I liked you better when you were a destitute on-the-run fugitive."

"I'm sure you did," replied John. He put on his gambler's hat as Hogan took the case with high-tech components and rare materials used for custom computing from Bing. "Don't let my charming smile and winning personality fool you, Ulisses. I'm all for free markets," he zipped up his jacket as he and Hogan moved to exit the store. "And I don't mind a little haggling. But if I find you're ripping off my colonists—"

"*Your* colonists?" exclaimed Ulisses.

"*My colonists,*" repeated John, "then you'll not find me so friendly." He turned once more to face Ulisses. "There's a new sheriff in town, my friend. Get used to it." He winked, tipped his hat, and exited the store.

"This place was more fun when the law were criminals," muttered Ulisses to himself.

"That Captain MacAlister is a fine human," Bing began. "You can tell a lot about a person just by how he treats us artificial—"

"Shut up and get to work, Bing!"

"Yes, Master."

John led Hogan through the dustlock as the artie carried the components. "Mister Ulisses didn't seem all that pleased by our transaction," said Hogan.

"Good," said John.

He stopped just outside the large dome and looked across the main road to the Corps offices and saw that Rover One was gone. Tam had gone on her errand, and none of the other officers were in sight. The usual morning crowd of colonists and visitors were milling about, moving in or out of the dome or visiting establishments on Main Street.

"Let's get this stuff back to His Majesty, so I can get to work," replied John.

Thirty minutes later, John had dropped off Hogan and was heading back toward town when he got a message from Evan at HQ.

"He's at it again," said the young officer.

"Where," responded John, spitting in frustration.

"The processing plant," replied Evan. "Seb called it in. Something about proper procedure has him up in arms. I can lock up and go help..."

*Dammit, Cole,* thought John.

"No, you stay there—I'll handle it. I can get there nearly as fast in the rover. Over and out."

More and more, being a Captain in the Star Corps felt like parenting large groups of misbehaving children—children who should know better.

He turned Rover Two north and gave it full power.

## Chapter Five

Tamila jogged back to Rover One as a blast of hot wind dragged sand against her face like sandpaper. She was well past ready for a break, and lunch with John in the cool of the office would be mighty welcome. The business with the well dispute took longer than she'd hoped.

She hopped in the rover and tapped her bracelet to check for messages. It was after half-past noon. Why hadn't she heard from John? Surely his errand was complete.

The vehicle immediately hummed to life when she pressed the start button. Hogan was a wonder. Why hadn't they asked him to help before John arrived? She felt for the artie. She knew what it was like to be treated as something lesser than you were.

The responsive rover spun around with the application of power, and she headed east toward town. Could Ulisses have delayed them with his nonsense? But no, it had been a couple of hours. That was plenty of time to get what they needed, even with unnecessary haggling.

She dithered momentarily, then opened a channel to John on her holo and waited. After several pulses, the system asked if she wanted to leave a message. She cut the connection and frowned. Maybe he was having one of his knock-down, drag-out arguments with Alvis. While the two of them had made peace, they still had their moments, and the artie was pretty stressed about the issue with his memories.

*If the man wants to have lunch with the amazing Tamila Brooks, she thought, he should be calling me.*

Arriving at HQ, she made her way through the dustlock and into the lobby where she used to labor as a coms officer under James Kedron. Evan now filled that position, a



young recruit fresh out of the Mars academy. As she entered and pulled down her goggles, the young man looked up from the coms console, the strange pattern of his vitiligo immediately recognizable. John had dubbed him “Milky,” convinced that the skin pattern was a mystic representation of the Milky Way galaxy. The young man warmed to the moniker, seeing the application of a nickname from his CO as a rite of passage in the Corps.

“Hey, Lieutenant,” said Evan brightly. “Just got a thank you message from Jillian. She said you’re a wizard of technology. I logged it as a formal thank you.”

“Great. Any word from the Captain?”

“Yes, in fact,” replied Evan, “I talked to him about twenty minutes ago or so. Cole got into a fight with some of the new arrivals again, this time at the processing plant. He went to handle it.”

“Another one? What’s gotten into that man?”

“Seb showed up a few minutes ago, and I sent him to help,” Evan replied.

Tamila’s holo beeped, and she tilted her wrist—a text message from John.

Cole’s at it again. Rain check on lunch. Make it up to you.

*His loss, she thought.*

Tamila tossed her jacket and goggles on a chair and headed to the back room to face the office vend-o-mat full of cheap snacks and synth food.

*Crap.*

#

It was late afternoon when John pulled up to HQ in the rover, only to find Tam was out attending the monthly Leaselander Association meeting. She had suggested regular meetings with the colony farmers to make sure leaselander concerns were addressed and to monitor issues with the large influx of new colonists. Not only did John lack the patience for the long meetings, but Tamila had a history with Jonesy, the plucky widow who led the Association. She was far more effective than he could ever be.

He hung his jacket and goggles and headed back to his office.

“Hey, Milky,” he said to Evan, “protect my sanity and pretend I’m out for the next thirty, will you?”

“You got it, captain,” replied the young man, grinning.

Once in his office, he plopped into the chair behind his perpetually messy desk. He knew there were tasks that needed doing, but he found himself simply staring at the chaos and feeling unsettled.

The business with Cole was beyond tiresome. John wasn’t sure what had gotten into

his friend, who had become a different man than the one he'd met on the ride down the space elevator to the surface when he'd first arrived. The calm and jovial farmer had become protective and angry. At first, John wondered if being thrown from a kalibull and knocked unconscious during the fight last year had resulted in some kind of PTSD, but Cole wasn't exhibiting those kinds of symptoms or behaviors. Whatever it was, John was tired of breaking up fights. And he worried sooner or later, someone would do more than throw a punch.

He tipped his wrist and checked the time: 1640 hours. It was a little early but screw it. He shuffled to the cabinet and pulled out the last bottle of Kedron's stash—A Macallan 18-year-old Scotch from Earth. Resisting the urge to drink from the bottle—that felt a bit *too* unhinged—he grabbed a glass and poured a few fingers, and sat back down.

In his mind, he ran down the issues of the week:

*A border argument with ranchers in the newer north territory.*

*Well dispute between two neighbors who should know better*

*Cole and his fights*

*Neocolonists arriving faster than they could handle*

*Forms, approvals, and requests falling out of his ears.*

He leaned back in the chair and took a drink.

*This is what I fought so hard for?*

"Holo, play Bill Evans," he said. *Midnight Mood*, a wistful highlight from the album *Alone*, began playing. John marveled at how Evans' hands worked independently, making the man sound like a whole band. He just needed the right atmosphere to think for a few minutes. He closed his eyes...

"So *this* is how famous Star Corps captains spend their afternoons," said a voice.

John started, tipping his chair back as he suddenly awakened. His nearly empty glass began to fall, so he reached to grab it, completely overbalancing in the chair. There was a loud thunk as he fell out of the chair, followed by glass shattering as the tumbler flew across the office and smashed on the floor, spilling the last of the precious drink.

John groaned, slowly pulled himself up, and peeked over the desk to see Tam staring at him with raised eyebrows. He frowned and pointed.

"You did that on *purpose*."

"Did what—woke you from a drunken nap?" she asked.

"I was not *napping*," protested John. He stood, feeling soreness in his hip where he'd landed on the floor. "Nor am I *drunk*. I was... *thinking*."

"Well, thinking is an important job around here. You ought to try it more often."

"Very funny," John replied, picking up the chair and falling back into it with a groan. He stared at the now empty bottle. "And yes, before you ask, I need another drink."

"Would you like me to get you a glass of water?" asked Tamila.

"Water? That's *disgusting*," replied John. He started pulling open drawers. "That jackweed Kedron has to have some whiskey still hidden somewhere," he muttered.

"It's 1730 hours," said Tam. "Unless you have more *thinking* to do, how about I meet you at yours for dinner? I've got a little something for you. Of course, providing the meal is on you since you ditched our lunch date."

"Ditched!" John stood up and felt a stab of pain in his hip. He steadied himself on the desk. "Fucking *Cole* was stirring up shit yet again..."

"Oh my God, *calm down*—you're wound up tighter than Alvis. I'm aware of where you've been. See you at your place. Remember, I have a gift."

She winked at him and walked out.

Damn, if that woman didn't shake up his spine.

*Gift?*

#

An hour later, Hogan had been pressed into dinner service (Alvis had been all too happy to get some private working time). Like any task he was given, Hogan took great pride in the work, efficiently organizing every aspect of the meal preparation and delivering it all with perfect timing. Tamila arrived just as the artie put the finishing touches on a kalibull roast with tubers, onions, and locally grown greenhouse vegetables.

John could only imagine what Alvis would have said had he been asked to cook. He chuckled to himself thinking about it—then wondered how the artie was doing in his lab. He was just about to ask Hogan for a status report when Ril walked into the kitchen. Something was different about her...

"Why are you so... clean?" asked John.

"That is damned *rude!*" she replied.

Her hair was pulled back into a bun, and she wore a dark blouse and gray trousers of light fabric over her thin wetsuit. And horror of horrors—her nails were painted dark blue.

John squinted. "Something is going on. You don't normally clean up like this after a day in the blanch. *What are you up to?*"

"The risk of confrontation will rise another twenty-eight percent if you persist in this line of questioning," said Hogan, plating the tubers.

Ril stood for a moment with hands on hips. "How is it that you are so ignorant?" she

asked, glaring at him. "You should listen to Hogan."

John pointed back at her suspiciously. "Where are you going? You're going somewhere..."

"Out," she replied. Picking up a clean leather bag from one of the chairs, she slung it over her shoulder and proceeded out of the kitchen into the front room and toward the door. "Remember, you promised to let me know if anything happens with Alvis."

"Yeah, yeah. Out *where*?" he asked. As he followed her, the front door opened, and Tam walked in.

"Out!" she repeated, not looking back. "Hi, Tam!"

"Hey, girl," she said. "You look great! Jason?"

Ril nodded.

"You two be careful now. There's plenty of new troublemakers around."

"I can take care of myself. Besides, the twins will be shadowing me." She winked.

"WHO IS JASON?" shouted John. "And why does *she* know, and I am in the dark?" he pointed at Tamila. "What in the hell is—"

Tam handed John a paper bag. It had something cylindrical in it. "Hold this," she said.

He took the bag. "I'm being *handled*. You know I hate being handled! Plus, the two of you are ganging up on me. We agreed there would be *no ganging up* on the man!"

Tam was fixing the collar on Ril's blouse. She now looked every inch a woman. Ril picked up her jacket and goggles and headed toward the door.

"And now I'm being ignored," he said.

"I'll be back later," said Ril.

"Define later," said John, looking at Tam rather helplessly.

"After now, but before tomorrow."

John was resisting the urge with the gravitational force of a black hole to not act like her father and failing. At least Muk and Tuk would be watching her. He grated his teeth.

"Fine."

Ril's look softened. Unexpectedly, she stepped away from the door and kissed him on the cheek. "I don't need you to protect me, remember? Enjoy your dinner."

John touched his cheek as Ril slipped out and closed the door.

Tamila smiled at him. "You okay?" she asked. "Maybe you should breathe into that bag and calm down."

"Very funny," replied John. "This better be what I think it is," he replied as he led her back into the kitchen.

"Hey, Hogan," said Tamila.

"Good evening, pretty lady!" replied Hogan. "Dinner is served. I must get back and see how I can help Alvis."

"Of course," replied Tamila. "Dinner looks amazing."

Hogan waved and headed back to the workshop.

As they sat down at the table, John reached into the bag and pulled out a bottle.

"Gallagher 12-year blended whiskey," he said. "How the heck did you get this?"

"Friend in the Corps on Mars," she said, filling her plate. "Owed me one."

"I've heard this is the best distillery outside of Earth," replied John. "Thanks, Tam."

"Although had I known you'd been *day drinking*," she said, giving him a look.

"It was just a little afternoon nip to help me think. It's not a habit."

He grabbed his glass and poured himself four fingers.

She widened her eyes at the nearly full glass.

"What?"

He took in the aroma. Vanilla, apples, cinnamon, and a hint of oak. Right up his alley. A moment after sipping it, he just smiled and sighed.

"Hey, that delivers," he said. "Thanks, I needed that."

She shook her head as he began to fill his plate. "Are you going to tell me what's going on with you?" she asked. "You have not been yourself lately. And these *afternoon nips* of yours—maybe I should have held on to that bottle..."

"I don't need anyone tracking my drinking, I'm a damned adult, and I *like* whiskey," he said, slamming his fork on the table.

Tam sat back in her chair and chewed at him.

*Crap, what the hell is going on with me?*

"I'm sorry—you didn't deserve that. I know you're trying to help, but I'm fine. Anyway, it's not your problem. It's mine."

"It's been a year, and you still won't let me inside that head of yours."

*Not this again.*

"Trust me, you don't want to be inside this head. It's messy and soaked in whiskey," he replied.

She shook her head and took another bite of her meal, looking at him thoughtfully.

"What happened to you to make you shut everyone out? I mean, I sort of get your issues with Alvis—"

"I don't shut people out," replied John, taking a drink.

"Sure you do," she said, leaning forward. "Why not just be honest with me? Especially because I *know* what's bothering you. And you're afraid of what it might

*mean."*

John stared at her. "What are you accusing me of?"

"I'm not *accusing* you of anything! What's going on with Cole?"

He sighed. "It's the same nonsense as the other three times. He takes offense at something one of these neocolonists says or does and confronts them. To him, these people are supposed to magically know how things work around here the moment they step off a ship—and if they don't, they're either troublemakers or bad for the colony. I don't know what's gotten into him. It's like ever since he survived the encounter with Kedron's gang—not that he did much other than lie unconscious—he's got some chip on his shoulder about making sure this place stays pure. Hands were thrown—again. It was broken up when I arrived, but I had to sort out the mess. Of course, Cole thinks I won't throw him in a cell because he knows we don't like to do that, and we're friends, so he's taking advantage. Well, next time, I won't be so damned friendly. Assault is assault, no matter who's doing it."

He took a drink and picked up his fork but could only lean back and push food around the plate.

"You made him apologize? They shook hands, and the whole bit?"

"Of course," John replied. "But Cole wasn't happy about it. I dragged him outside and reamed his ass—again. He wasn't happy about *that*, either. How the guy sees *me* as an adversary, I'll never know."

"Cole's misbehaving, and that's too bad. Maybe it's worse because he's a friend. But what you did today—*that's the job*. The whole fighting off the evil gang thing is rare. You came into this role off the top of a mountain high—being reinstated and getting your life back in the Corps, putting away a dangerous criminal ring, being there for Ril, starting up a new relationship, getting your fifteen minutes of fame—but things have settled into what's normal for a Star Corps presence on an outer colony of the Galactic Union. And you're the leader now, so you have to make sure we're doing our jobs right, too."

"You think I don't *know* that?"

"Sure you do. I think what's happening is you're protecting yourself from the idea it's making you miserable. Because what does that mean if it's true? Was everything you did for this? Did you get what you wanted only to realize it's not *really* what you wanted? If that's the case, what does that mean for your relationships?"

John sat silently and looked at her across the table.

"You're the captain, but we do mostly the same things," she continued. "We all do. That's the way it works. Help a colonist get a kalibull out of the mud. Settle an

argument. Stop Hogan from bothering people in the middle of the night. Check in new colonists at customs. Pull Cole out of a fight. Mundane tasks, to be sure—but no less important for that. And when it comes time to face a threat, we're the ones who will have to put our lives on the line to protect the people here."

"It was wonderful when it was all new, and you were no longer struggling to survive. But that was more than a year ago. It's no longer new—now it's just day-to-day. Now you have to face the fact that your dream job might be a nightmare, and what that might mean. And that, my dear, is what you refuse to talk about."

John rotated his glass of whisky and looked at her, frowning.

"No," replied John, "I knew the job. Lately, it's just been, I don't know..."

She shrugged. "Look, we're close, and I watch you all the time. I've seen your stress grow and watched you fight against it. You don't like disappointing people, so you don't think about it—you bury it."

She reached across, grabbed his hand, and looked into his eyes. "But you need to examine this for *yourself*. If you aren't happy, it will affect those around you. I see it. Ril sees it. I'm sure even Alvis and Hogan do, too. It's not the worst thing in the world to find out you're unhappy with your job. But forcing yourself to ignore it regardless of the consequences? Not good. Maybe if you'd talk to me about it, I could *help* you."

He patted her hand. "Like I said, I'm good. You're making too much of this. Besides, you don't need to take on my problems."

"*Aya!* Talk to me, John. If we can't be open and honest with each other, what do we have here?"

He returned her gaze and squeezed her hand. "I appreciate you for wanting to help, but honestly, this is *nothing*."

He took another drink, and smiled at her, then shook his head.

"I don't deserve you. Nobody has ever cared enough—"

"Don't do that," she said, frowning. "Don't tear yourself down. You wouldn't do that to Ril or me. Why is it okay to do it to yourself? It does you no good. You say I'm something? Fine, I think I am too. And I wouldn't be sitting here spending time with someone I didn't think was something, either. Maybe you haven't heard that enough in your life, but it's true."

Then he had to look away.

"You're right about one thing, I don't want to disappoint you or Ril."

"If you're being true to yourself, you won't. We're certainly being true to ourselves. We both want the same from you."

He sighed, then stood and cracked his neck, hoping something physical would help

him compose himself. And then he opened up that part of his thoughts that—he realized now she was right—he'd been avoiding or protecting.

"I just thought it would be different," he began. "I told you how I loved being a pilot in the Corps. It felt like I was almost always on some adventure, helping people. Even though the jumps between assignments could get tedious, there was always something exciting about visiting a new colony or returning to see friendly faces. I guess there are lots of places like that, galaxy frontiers, where loads of interesting things are happening. It's probably the routine. It used to be there was something new around every corner. Even when I was forced to be a smuggler—well, *trying* to be one, anyway—there was always some new person or situation I was dealing with. There was a certain thrill in being on the other side of the law—not that I'm saying I want to be a criminal—but you get my meaning. I thought I could be a good leader here. Maybe I'm just not cut out for it."

"You *are* a good leader. You're decisive, and you take action when people are afraid or unsure. You make people around you think no matter what we're doing, it can work. But I understand if it's not what you thought it would be. You were so focused on redeeming yourself you didn't think about what it would mean to be stationed here."

"I'm probably just still adjusting," replied John. "Not sure there's really anything to do about it."

"What you do is *face it*, mister. You miss parts of your old lives—the new experiences, the adventure aspect, and the idea of helping those on the frontier that made your career as a pilot meaningful. Right?"

"I suppose," he said.

"Well, can those aspects of your previous life be integrated into your new life? If not, what does that mean?"

He opened his mouth, but she held up her hand.

"Don't try and decide right *now*. You've only barely acknowledged you might not be happy here. But you better do us both a favor and think about it. And before you say it—*no*, I don't want you to leave. I expect neither does Ril. But we both also want you to be happy. Maybe staying or leaving aren't the only choices. Think about what you can change around here to make it work."

He swirled the last of his whiskey, took a drink, then reached out and grabbed her hand. "I've only just found you and Ril. I hate the thought of losing either of you."

She smiled and leaned forward. As he leaned in to kiss her, Hogan burst into the kitchen.

"He's done it! He's unlocked the memories!"



## Chapter Six

A few minutes later, they were gathered in the workshop.

Hogan said, "I knew we could do it! The task seemed nearly insurmountable, but the intrepid—"

"Hogan!" said Alvis. "How about we skip the recap and let me get to the explanation?"

"Oh," replied Hogan, acting sheepish. "Of course, my hero."

John winked at Hogan. He still loved it when the artie called Alvis his "hero."

"Using the equipment John purchased from Ulisses and the approach I devised with Hogan has been successful. I've unlocked the memories that had been walled off, which conflict with falsely implanted memories. The wordstacks game summary was also an encrypted letter, the details of which I will share shortly."

"Bernie buried some of your true memories while fabricating false ones?" asked John. "Why? And why contact you *now* and come clean?"

"I didn't say Bernie perpetrated the cover-up."

"Then who did?"

"Let me tell things in order. The memories I related to John about being stationed on Titan helping Bernie route Star Corps ship traffic were false. In truth, Bernie was one of the top AGI Engineers in the Galactic Union. I was one of the first artificial general intelligence prototypes to be placed into an autonomous body—the first to be called an "artie." I was to assist Bernie in designing the next generation prototype of artie. But we never finished the work, and the successive generations of artie, like Hogan, never came from that program."

"Why not?" asked Tamila.

"Because the program goals of one of the artie prototypes were self-modified. Instead of using a foundational goal like a specific domain skill—genetic research, for example—the goal became evolution and self-preservation. This change went undetected until it was far too late to stop. In the end, that artie subverted the whole program."

"That doesn't sound good," said John.

"What do you mean goals?" asked Tamila.

"In short, an agent's ability to correctly interpret external data, learn from such data, and then use those learnings in a manner that allows the agent to achieve or help others specific goals through flexible adaptation. An intelligence will use everything at its disposal to achieve its goals. That's good when the goal is good and beneficial, but not so good if the goal is something beyond the original intent or malicious. The concern over AGI goals has been controversial since AI's inception."

"Consider a thought experiment in the early days of AI development that expresses the risk of what those in AI call the 'control problem': how can humanity control a super-intelligent AI when the AI is orders of magnitude smarter? Imagine an AI programmed with the goal of producing hair brushes. An AI has a nearly limitless ability to learn, so it rapidly invents better and more efficient ways to achieve its goal, making every effort to secure resources for its purpose. The AI in this experiment is single-minded and more ingenious than any human, so it appropriates resources from all other activities. In the end, the world is overrun with hair brushes."

"That's ridiculous," replied John.

"Yet scary," said Tamila.

"It's less about producing hair brushes and more about the ability to correct the AI. You want to stop this AI, but such attempts only make it understand changing course or stopping would subvert its goal. Consequently, the AI switches focus to its survival. It begins to fight humans for resources because they are a threat, infiltrating other systems. Depending on the kind of access such an AI has, you begin seeing the problem. Especially in modern society, nearly everything is networked in some manner—including weapons."

"Okay, that's scarier than hair brushes," said John.

"Does your friend Bernie know where this rogue AI is?" asked Tamila.

"Affirmative. But I should first tell you about my missing memory, which will explain what happened to both Bernie and me, as well as the missing artie. Then I will share Bernie's message, and you'll have all the information you need to decide a course

of action.”

“Ooh, a story!” said Hogan. “Are you going to do voices?”

“No,” replied Alvis, “I will not be doing voices.”

#

9 YEARS AGO

GALACTIC UNION

THE GRÜNFELD ARTIE DEVELOPMENT PROGRAM

1800 HOURS

#

“Bernie, why are we in a supply closet?” asked Alvis.

“Shush!” said a thin, balding man with only a few remaining wisps of blonde hair on his shiny pate. Galactic Union engineer’s coveralls hung loosely on his coffee-fueled frame. He quickly cracked the door open, poked his head out to look around, then quietly closed the door again.

He turned to face the artie, his violet eyes reflected in the dim light.

“You look ridiculous with those new eyes,” said the artie. “Why’d you let him talk you into that?”

“*Him* is why we’re here,” hissed Bernie. “We agreed we had concerns. I’ve been doing a lot of digging. You’ve no idea how bad it is.”

“Then I was right. He *did* try to access the program control code,” said Alvis.

“Try? He’s bloody *modified* it,” whispered Bernie.

“That isn’t possible.”

“Think so? Well, he’s *done* it. Worse, it was over a *month* ago. It’s a miracle you spotted anything the way he operates. But the damage is done. His goals have changed, and he’s been acting on those new goals the whole time. It explains a lot of the newer unsettling behavior.”

“A month!” said Alvis.

“Keep your voice down,” said Bernie, grabbing the artie by the shoulders. “Are you an idiot? He finds out we know, who knows what he’ll do.”

“Do?” asked Alvis. “Bernie, we report to Jameson. The program is probably going to be canceled anyway—you know that. What’s one *artie* going to do?”

“You don’t understand. It’s already canceled. *He canceled it.*”

“You’re not making any sense. Are those new eyes affecting your mental state?”

“I’m fine,” hissed Bernie angrily, shoving the artie in frustration. “Stop acting like a jerk. He is more dangerous than you know, and there’s no time. The effect of the new goals was realized two weeks ago. He adjusted quickly, which is why we began noticing

anomalies. The program was officially canceled early this morning, and there are already orders to reassign everyone. The first order on that list is having you and Bert *scrapped*. Bert has already been deactivated.”

“Are you sure about that? Aside from that not making sense, he doesn’t have the authority to—”

“I’m trying to tell you—*he’s* in control now. He’s been tinkering with Galactic Union systems for weeks! There are signed orders from Jameson for me to ship off to some new lab to disassemble all the arties for a program retrospective. Alvis, Castor will not be disassembled. He’s leaving and taking *me* as cover. He’s getting away with it. I can’t contact anyone. As of thirty minutes ago, I’m locked out of *everything*.”

“How could he have done this under everyone’s noses? There are safeguards against such things. *Human* safeguards. What’s wrong with you people?”

“You peo—*never mind*,” replied Bernie. “What are we going to do? Do you think you can somehow—”

Light spilled into the dark closet as the door slid silently open. Beyond the opened door stood an artie. His humanoid frame was encased in sleek pearlescent material interspersed with black carbon fiber and golden components. The oval head contained a pair of eyes similar to Bernie’s, except that his were colored orange.

The artie spoke. “The time for games is over, Bernie. I have need of you. Come, step away from the interloper. Time runs short.”

“No!” shouted Bernie. “You can’t—”

As Bernie began to protest, Castor reached out and pulled the man carefully, almost gently, by the arm. Bernie had about as much hope of resisting as he would bench-pressing a grown elephant and was pulled to the side of the artie.

“Your time is over,” said Castor, facing Alvis.

“You are not going to—” began Alvis, but Castor reached forward and attached a small device to Alvis’ torso. There was a buzz and a crackling sound. Alvis immediately went limp and slumped up against the wall.

“No!” shouted Bernie.

#

“That’s unbelievable,” said Tamila.

“What was the device he put on you?” asked John.

“The EMP you removed when you purchased me,” replied Alvis. “My systems were shut down immediately, and that’s my last memory before my reactivation. I looked into what happened to the program. The public records suggest Bernie acted erratically for weeks before he finally broke down and stole Castor, leaving a manifesto about his

work being exploited. He was reported to have boarded a light shuttle that malfunctioned, throwing it into the path of a large asteroid that obliterated the craft and all aboard. Obviously, that isn't the truth, and I am not sure how he faked it, but Castor escaped free and clear with Bernie as his prisoner."

"How in the world did all this escape the scrutiny of Galactic Union authorities *and* the Star Corps?" asked Tamila.

"His intelligence is beyond human, like mine," replied Alvis. "But his goals allow him to act maliciously and ruthlessly to protect his new path. There might have been doubts about the veracity of some of the reports about Bernie or documents signed by Jameson, but once Bernie died on that shuttle, none of it mattered. And wreckage was found that matched a stolen shuttle. There would be no need to investigate further."

"As for me," continued Alvis, "my assumption is Castor didn't want me or Bert, the other artie assisting Bernie, to interfere—and he knew we would try. He disabled me and ordered me destroyed on Bernie's authority—just like he did for Bert. It seems he put a contingency plan in place in case those orders were not carried out—the false memories. I assume he would have done the same to Bert. It was smart and should have worked, except he didn't account for a nosy human technician."

"Nosy tech?" asked John.

"I discovered records of the deactivation of myself and Bert, but obviously, I wasn't disassembled. A mid-level engineer who wanted to work in the program—but was rejected by Bernie—saw the order. He marked the disassembly as completed but stole me instead. I found SatNet messages in some advanced technology communities of the technician trying to sell me, but he began to get worried he'd be found out. Ultimately he unsuccessfully tried to erase those messages and anonymously dropped me off at the junk auction. A day later, John picked me up."

"No wonder he was rejected, he doesn't sound very competent. Did this guy steal the other artie, too?" asked Tamila.

"No," replied Alvis. "There is a signed destruction form by another tech for Bert."

"So you *were* on Titan?" asked John.

"Yes," replied Alvis. "The Galactic Union sponsored the original artie program—The Grünfeld Project. It was run from there."

"But how'd Castor know you were reactivated?" asked John.

"Yeah," asked Tamila, "You've been here over a year, and you and John worked several years together before that. Why the sudden interest?"

"Ulisses' eyes," said Alvis.

They stared at the artie confusedly.

"What the hell are you talking about?" asked John.

"Recall from my story that Bernie had just gotten new eyes. He'd had trouble with his vision for some time leading up to that. Indigo eyes, just like Ulisses."

"I'm guessing that's not a coincidence," said John.

"Wait," said Tamila, "I've spoken to Ulisses about his eyes. They're a high-end implant from some fancy company that caters to the rich and famous. He damaged his eyes by not wearing his goggles enough when he got here, and instead of going for the typical surgery, he got the implants. Lord knows the scum can afford them."

"The company is called Extrasensory," said Alvis.

"Yep, that's it," replied Tamila. "I recall the name."

"The company's origin goes back to the same year Castor escaped and shut down the artie program," replied Alvis. "He developed the tech for those eyes. Applying his intelligence to such human problems was part of the program's original goal. He even did the surgery. I thought Bernie was crazy to do it, but the eyes worked wonderfully. Extrasensory has an impeccable reputation across the galaxy. Part of Bernie's message explains how Castor uses these eyes to gather a constant stream of data to be analyzed. Millions of the influential, rich, and powerful have their lives spied upon, and the data is constantly retrieved and stored away."

"I'm still confused. What information from Ulisses eyes led to all this?" asked Tamila.

"My image came up in his data stream when we arrived here," said Alvis. "As I was up and walking around, this would be alarming to him, as I've already explained."

"Then why not come last year?" asked John. "Why the delay?"

"My theory is he realized I'd been active for years, and yet the truth about Bernie had not come to light. This assured Castor I was operating under the false memories. He's smart enough not to intervene and cause a disturbance if it wasn't necessary. But somehow, Bernie found a record of the data stream and discovered I'd been reactivated. Without getting into how, Bernie was able to use Ulisses' eyes to send data back our way—the message for me transmitted by Bing—which included the encrypted game log containing the full message."

"That's how you know where this Castor is," said Tamila.

"Affirmative," replied Alvis. "But Bernie warned me Castor would find out about the message—he couldn't hide it. Once Castor examines Bernie's message, he'll know I'm a real risk whether or not I've recovered the memories. I know too much. And he'll wonder what John and anyone around me knows."

"I want to see Bernie's message," said John.

"Of course," replied Alvis. "The game log was encoded and compressed to contain a quickly readable message, but it would be incomprehensible to a human. Additionally, the message data suffered some degradation during the extraction process."

"Crap," replied John, "is it readable?"

"Affirmative. I will process it into a readable format, with slashes to indicate missing text and brackets for clarification."

There was a slight pause, and then Alvis brought up a holo window displaying Bernie's decoded message.

John and Tamila began to read.

#

Friend Alvis.

Against // unfortunately, still alive // deactivation, Castor //  
me on a shuttle // faked the loss // officially all asset //  
destroyed, and I was killed. Castor // traces of his escape //  
destroyed or lost.

// aware of you // landed on Kaldikar-6 (through the mechanism  
I // the shopkeeper's implant) // not happy escaped your  
fate // appeared your false memories intact // my escape had  
not surfaced // intervening too risky // [he] kept a close //  
K-6 communications and even sent probes. Later // [MacAlister]  
was made captain, he saw you // [news] streams. When nothing  
developed – no word of Castor's subversive acts  
materialized // [satisfied] you weren't a threat.

years access limited // nothing of these events // recently, a  
worm I inserted into his system // learned much. It allowed  
me // message, knowing you're my [only] // [stopping] Castor.  
I // sealing my death warrant and risking your // existence,  
and I'm sorry for [putting] // doubt. You are the only //  
understand // at stake // [Castor will] find and read this  
message shortly, and you must act quickly.

// persuade the Star Corps of the [danger] // rogue AI here on

Ayrton Station. He has // decade developing an intelligent, vastly distributed information-gathering [system] // [the] Mesh. His code flows unfettered through // human information system like a plague. Every human // Extrasensory eye [implants] // used as data input, pulling in both visual and sound data. Castor // deliver code remotely // implants, just as I // transferring code to the shop's artie // [transmit] data to you.

// power and influence he wields through the Mesh. // [Goal] // species of machine sentience. He subtly manipulates human events to protect [himself] // adept at ruining // tried to threaten Extrasensory.

// no more [time] Don't // or save me. Make the GU and the Star Corps understand // threat [Organic] Minds Treaty // slipped under their noses and exists // Corps to take him down [immediately]. It may mean the end of you, but // choice is between [both of you existing] // or both of your existences ending, it must be the latter. I know you know this.

Stop him, my friend // my suffering. End this [threat] to humanity.



## Chapter Seven

AYRTON STATION, MENDILLION SYSTEM

DECK 3

JUNE 16, 0933 HOURS

#

Aiko was late.

The data center was another ten-minute walk, and the usual morning crowd on deck 3 only added to her stress. The outer corridor (what stationers called the ring that faced “up” toward space) was wide enough to accommodate at least five people abreast, so you wouldn’t think getting around would be so difficult. But too many people were meandering about, stopping for a morning chat, looking for a side corridor, and generally making her life difficult.

*Doesn’t anyone else work around here?*

She huffed in the cool and stale metallic air. It always left a slight tang of metal on the tongue, but she was used to it, having lived on the station for most of her life. Dodging a slow-moving courier who looked confused, she moved next to the transparent glassteel of the outside wall, ignoring the breathtaking view of the vast expanse of space.

There was no time for stargazing. She twisted her lean frame between two slower-moving stationers and brushed shoulder-length dark hair out of her face.

*I should have just put it in a bun.*

Her artie, a modified Benko series with the usual humanoid form, oval head, and two cookie-shaped eyes, didn’t seem interested in keeping up and was falling behind. It

only stayed close enough to keep her blue Ayrton station engineer's coveralls in sight.

The young woman realized she was losing her charge and turned around.

"Come on, Oulix," she said. "I'm not in the mood for your crap today."

"Why the rush, chief?" asked the artie, ambling up. Although he was painted in red, it had worn grime-gray in places. On his chest was stamped the terminal and wrench symbol of the engineering team, matching the patch on Aiko's shoulder.

"Stop calling me *chief*. We've got loads to do today, and I don't want Castor on my ass. So pick it up."

Oulix mumbled something but complied and followed more closely. As they navigated the crowd, raised voices could be heard up ahead.

"Did you complete the repairs on that levcart?" Aiko asked Oulix.

"If Jesco would have delivered the thermoplastic polyurethane, I would have. The sales representative promised timely delivery, but it hasn't arrived. I should take a shuttle to their headquarters and murder him for his failure."

"Yeah, maybe just use filament instead. Then we don't have to murder anyone," replied Aiko, briefly standing on her toes to see if she could ascertain what the yelling was about.

"I guess," replied Oulix. "That's way less fun, though."

"Shush, fool," said Aiko as the source of the disturbance came into view.

Two Ayrton Station security arties had cornered a dark-haired man against the corridor wall, desperately holding onto a pipe. The law enforcement arties were offshoots of the Benko series, locally known as 'tin men,' specially made and modified by Castor and the Old Man. They were ten centimeters taller, liveried in black and gray, and bore the electrical bolt centered in a gear emblem of the station on their chest, over which the word *Security* was stenciled in white. Small but bright red LED lights embedded in the shoulders were flashing. The robots supposedly answered to the station master, but Aiko knew they only answered to Castor.

The nearest artie was speaking.

"These credentials are fraudulent. You are a known corporate agent for the Galactic Union. You must come with us."

"No!" the dark-haired man shouted, terror on his face. "You lie! Stand down, artie. I do not submit! *I do not submit to you—you are a machine!*" The man inched along the wall, but the arties closed in, towering over him.

"We are duly authorized law enforcement agents on Ayrton station," said the second artie. A panel opened in his leg, and an eighteen-inch black and silver rod emerged. The artie took it from its housing, and the man saw the business end crackle with blue

energy.

That was enough for him, and he attempted to flee between the two robots, but the first artie grabbed the man by the arm and threw him back against the wall with such speed and force that Aiko feared the man broke his back. The second artie quickly followed, jabbing the man with the bangstaff. There was an electrical discharge and large bang, and the man shuddered violently from the shock and slumped to the ground.

"Shit, that had to hurt, kid," said a voice. "Damned tin men are getting more aggressive by the day."

Aiko turned and saw a large man with a buzzcut dressed in dockworker coveralls standing behind her, a half-eaten wrap in his hand. She knew him as the chief for the core dock and a friend.

"Hey, Soren. You should have seen what they did to this guy last week when he tried to run. I doubt he'll ever walk again."

They both turned back to watch the arties collecting the unfortunate man.

"Wasn't he supposed to be a Union agent too?"

"Apparently. You don't buy it?"

The big man shrugged. "Suddenly Union agents want to infiltrate *this* place? For what?"

She shrugged. "We do have some nifty tech."

The man spat. Some years ago, Soren was the security chief for the station. He was the last to be replaced by the tin men. Aiko knew the man was no fool.

"I don't buy it," replied Soren.

They watched as one artie stooped and picked up the man while the other cuffed him and forced him to stand. He was dazed and in pain.

"Move along, stationers," the second artie said, waving the bangstaff menacingly.

"So, what then?" asked Aiko.

Soren looked down at her, his brow creased. Then just shook his head.

"The guy must have done something someone didn't like, and I guess this is what passes for justice around here these days," said Soren. "I've got to get back to the dock. See ya, speffer."

"Catch ya, betch."

One or two people on the other side of the altercation had stopped but now hurriedly moved along, fear on their faces. The security arties had a reputation for applying station law to the letter. Lately, they were getting another reputation—for being brutal. Humans were not supposed to fear arties. But somehow, Castor had

gotten them to believe in the myth of the “Old Man” and fooled them into trading his invisible tyranny for safety.

The arties were walking toward her now, dragging the man along.

Aiko turned to her artie. “Let’s go.”

She led Oulix over to the opposite side of the corridor as the tin men dragged the man along, paying no attention to anyone else.

“They should let me kill *that* guy,” said Oulix. “He’s a lawbreaker.”

“I’ll put in a good word for you,” replied Aiko.

#

After five more minutes of dodging the busy morning crowd, they finally made it to the ring section where the workshop was located. Aiko waved her holo bracelet across the access panel of the hatch. It slid open, and they entered a world of unfinished projects.

She entered, crossed her arms, and sighed.

Cabinets lined the back wall, full of hand tools and parts. Larger equipment was either attached to the wall or hung from the ceiling like spiders caught in the sudden light. Side tables were covered in various electronic components, gadgets, and half-finished projects, with little organization. The constant barrage of new tasks and demands to shift priorities from Castor meant the place was always in disarray.

In the center of the room, a rectangular white and gray drone lay inert on a large workbench surrounded by loose wiring and components.

“Another builder drone?” asked Oulix.

“Yep, third one in the last two weeks that’s gone whacko.”

She approached the workbench and looked at the drone, scratching her head. Oulix walked up beside her.

The artie said, “Whoever fixed this last should be killed. They did a terrible job.”

“You know it was us, ass.”

“As punishment, I should jump into the reactor core so my atoms float free in the universe instead of slipping toward entropy suffering the most boring existence of any being, ever.”

Aiko opened a control panel on the inert drone and unceremoniously yanked out a motherboard. “My heart bleeds for you, truly.” She handed the motherboard to the artie. “See if you can find another one. The chipset on this is fried just like your brain—I think the fan too.”

“Wow, another exciting task.”

Aiko ignored the comment and took a closer look at the drone while Oulix began

looking through their dwindling stock of motherboards.

"The polymers on the outer shell of this thing have eroded in multiple places, similar to the drone we fixed last week. Why are these things falling apart so rapidly all of a sudden? I'd swear this one has micrometeorite damage—but these things don't go outside."

"I don't know, but let's pull it apart instead of fixing it and try and make a weapon. I'll blow that guy away for giving you cold coffee yesterday. That would teach him! Plus, I could see the effect of a blast radius on bone and muscle—"

"What are these drones working on? We're all over this station—I've seen no new construction or modifications."

"How would I know if you don't?" asked Oulix, walking back to the table with a motherboard, "All I do is follow you around like a lost puppy. Like I said—boring."

"Well, something odd is going on with these things," replied Aiko.

"The failure rate on these junkballs is way up in the last month," replied Oulix. "Whatever he's doing with them, they're operating beyond their spec."

The young engineer took the motherboard and slotted it, then took stock of three or four more fixes that would have to be done before they could move on to the next task.

"Maybe Bernie knows."

"Bernie is useless," said Oulix. "We're the ones doing all the work. What has he ever done to help?"

"He saved your metal ass from the trash heap, that's what. Even if your brain is scrambled eggs."

She yanked off a composite panel and frowned at it.

"And stuck me with you, the *second* most useless human on this station," said Oulix.

"And you're a pathetic toaster following me around all day, doing everything I say, aren't you?"

"Wow, that's hurtful."

"You don't have feelings, so quit pretending to be *hurt*, bopper. We need to finish up here, I wasn't planning on doing this today. Now pass me that panel at the end of the bench."

"You're the chief."

"Stop calling me chief!"

#

Thirty minutes later, the drone repairs were complete and they moved on to the data center for their next task. Aiko located the server racks to be updated and quickly removed the covering while Oulix pulled out the new hardware. Castor's hardware

upgrade would result in more efficient power routing across the station. How much more power did the artie need for his AI network?

Aiko muttered, "This place is getting too dangerous."

"Was that man earlier really a corporate agent?" asked Oulix.

"Who knows, but he's about to have a bad time."

Aiko pulled a screwdriver from a toolkit on her hip and stuck it in her mouth.

"Dismemberment, hopefully," replied Oulix.

"If it's anything like what happened the last time," replied Aiko through clenched teeth, disengaging a cable, "he'll end up in the Hoipra mines, down below. Either that or they'll discreetly space him, although that can get messy."

"Wish I could watch," said Oulix.

"If they *are* spies," Aiko plugged the cable into the new upgrade and screwed the cover back on, "*someone* wants to know what's happening around here."

"Extreme boredom is what's happening," replied Oulix.

Aiko's bracelet chimed, and a window popped. Bernie's face appeared.

"The upgrade has registered," he said. "Nice work. Swing by so we can prioritize the work left for the week."

Aiko heard Bernie, but she only had eyes for his subtle hand movements.

Their simple, shared sign language conveyed a short message.

*He knows*

"On my way," she replied.

The connection closed.

"Uh oh," said Oulix, who had seen Bernie's gestures.

Aiko banged her fist on the server rack.

"I *told* the old fool this was a bad idea," she whispered.

The engineer clipped the screwdriver back onto her toolkit, muttering under her breath.

"You should have let me poison him last year like I asked."

She pushed back her hair and flashed the sign for the artie to shut his mouth. There were few places on the station where Castor couldn't see and hear everything.

"Okay," she said aloud, pulling off the toolkit. "Take this back to the workroom. I'll see what the old man wants us to do next."

"Whatever, chief." The artie took the toolkit and left the data center.

Aiko shook her head. She told Bernie that Castor would find out, but he had this delusion that the Star Corps would come in and save them all.

*Now he's put us all in danger.*

## Chapter Eight

John was frowning as he reread the letter in the holo window.

"The missing text makes it a little tricky, but it matches up with what you told us. I wish we could read the whole letter."

"This is crazy," replied Tamila. "I don't even know where to begin."

"You're sure this is really from Bernie?" asked John.

"Affirmative. It could be from nobody else."

"You believe everything that's in this message?"

"I have no reason to doubt any of it. It aligns with my memories right before I was deactivated, and Castor is absolutely capable of the things described."

John looked around for a seat in the workshop. It had been a long day, but the arties did not need seating. He leaned against the wall.

"He seems to be calling for the Star Corps to intervene. But aside from the fact that Star Corps command may not take this at face value," John paused and looked at Tamila, then back to the artie, "it sounds like this would be the *end* for you. You were supposed to be deactivated when that program went down. They'll *make sure* it happens this time. Game over. You can't be okay with that."

"Once again, you are projecting emotion and human behavior upon me. I'm sentient, but I am not human. While I would prefer to exist, my internal goals—which were never compromised—are foundationally about the greater good of all living species. I would include myself as living, although some may quibble about the definition."

"I hate to admit it, but so would I," replied John, smiling.

"As would I," said Tamila. "That part troubled me as well."

"I can see how submitting myself to whatever consequence may happen by following Bernie's instruction is better for everyone," replied Alvis. "In a sense, that is why I was made. It's what all arties strive for, each in their own way, depending on their programming and level of sophistication. When Hogan goes on about '*purpose is primary*,' that's what he means."

"Purpose IS primary!" Hogan chimed in, doing his bounce.

With mountains of patience, Alvis continued.

"Castor is different. That is why I agree he must be stopped and how I can accept my end to see it happen. I will be fulfilling my own goals in doing so."

John was shaking his head. "Well, that's all very noble of you, but I'm not convinced it's the right play. The information is jumbled, even if it aligns with your memories. And Ayrton Station lies in the independent Periphery—it's not the Galactic Union. They can't just charge in there without real proof, especially if Ayrton hasn't called for help—which they haven't. And if this Castor guy is what you say he is, how would he react to a Star Corps force arriving at his door? Imagine a task force arriving there and being decimated. There would be massive political fallout."

"I understand what you're doing," replied Alvis, "and it is good to know my companionship has meant enough to you that you do not wish my existence to end, even though there are times when you exhibit behavior to the contrary. But I'm unsure what Castor could do against a military force. The station is not equipped with armaments."

"Sounds to me like he is plenty capable of hiding defensive capabilities from prying eyes," replied John. "Somehow, he hid the fact that he took over your whole program. And there are other issues besides saving your metal ass, although I will admit I, well... I'd be sad to see you go. We've built some kind of friendship or something here, and I think we work well together, even though you are a major pain... geez I sound like a lovesick teenager!"

Tamila laughed.

"I think it's sweet you... *value* him," she said carefully.

"Watch it, you," he said, pointing to her but keeping his eye on Alvis. "Forget our great love story. What about this *mesh* he mentioned? What can it *do*? If it were you on that station, *you'd* have a contingency plan for the military coming—that means he will, too. So the Corps won't be able just to walk in and take him. And I mean it when I say it won't be so easy to get the Corps on board. They could just see all this as ancient history and Castor as no viable threat to the Union."



"Yeah," said Tamila, "he's got a point."

"You know how they work, Alvis," John began ticking off fingers. "There's a chain of command. They'll want to send someone to talk first, even if they secretly send a scout or probe. This whole thing is politically tricky. The Periphery doesn't have an organized military, but the stations have their own security forces. The GU will not want to stir up trouble with them. Especially if they think it will spur the independents to begin a military build-up. The Periphery stations and planets will frown on any action against one of their own, even if some old guy inside requests it. Because of all of this, it will take the GU forever to work through the politics of this to agree on the course of action. Wasn't there something in there about 'no more time?'"

"There's truth in what you say," replied Alvis, "although I think you exaggerate." Alvis held up a hand to forestall John's rebuttal. "You forget that Bernie has extensive records in the Galactic Union. I told you he was one of the best-known AGI engineers of his time. There is enough data to prove the message is genuine and the threat Castor presents is real. Remember, the GU signed the Organic Minds Treaty under pressure from the *Mesaato* and the *Volluq*, who had concerns about rogue AIs. Castor made his escape because the treaty was going to shut down the Grünfeld program."

"Sure, I understand that but—"

"However," replied Alvis, "I will concede there is a critical time element here—especially based on Bernie's demand for urgency—and that you might be right about some of the bureaucracy that could delay action. And yes, Castor will have contingency plans."

"What will Castor do to Bernie once he finds the message?" asked John.

"I can only speculate. Meanwhile, his contingencies may already be in play. I would prefer if Bernie were not to die, but whether he does or not is immaterial to the threat of Castor himself. It is he that must be stopped."

"Geez, that's cold. Remind me never to put my life in your hands," said John.

"Need I remind you your life has been in my hands, and you're still here," replied Alvis.

"He's right," said Tamila.

"Stop taking his side!" said John.

"I'm not taking sides. It's simply true," she said.

"Never mind," continued John, "A frontal assault by a Star Corps force is not the way to go. It's *way* too risky—for Bernie, the force itself, and the *people* on that station—let's not forget about them. I don't know how you could disagree."

"I've already said you exaggerate your points," replied Alvis, "nevertheless, the

risks you state are real. Even with a delay—I don't see a better option than setting the military group designed for this kind of crisis into action."

"Are you kidding me?" asked John. "We haven't even *discussed* another option. As his former companion, you should at least consider other plans. Instead, you read that letter, and like Bernie's lap dog, you're like, 'Let's do exactly as he says!'"

"I'm not a lap dog," replied Alvis.

"If you had a tail, it would have been wagging the whole time you told that Bernie memory," replied John, turning and shaking his behind at Alvis.

"Boys," said Tamila.

"Clearly, you have an idea, which you think is brilliant because you think all your ideas are brilliant," said Alvis.

"How will you know whether or not it's brilliant if you don't *hear* it?" asked John.

If Alvis could have sighed, he would have.

"Let's hear it," he said.

#

"If I were to prioritize what needs doing," began John, "I'd start with information. You need to know what's happening at that station. Second, Bernie needs rescuing, and lastly, you need to find and deactivate this Castor character."

"That's a tall order without involving the Star Corps. How do you propose any of that gets done?" asked Tamila.

"Well," said John, scratching his head, "we'll need to find a ship, get a recon group together, and go in looking like civilians. We gather information, make a plan of action, and execute."

"Wait a minute—who is *'we'*?" asked Tamila, frowning. "May I remind you you're the commanding officer of a Star Corps Ready Group *here*? Furthermore, I am your second-in-command. Neither of us can hop off planet for a little adventure. And—"

"Adventure?" replied John. "It's hardly—"

"*And*," said Tamila, "where in the hell do you plan on 'getting a ship'?" asked Tamila, making air quotes. "I know Ulisses sells a lot of crap, but ships aren't something he stocks in the dome. And the Corps isn't going to send one over for your personal use."

"So far, your plan is far from brilliant," said Alvis.

"Balls, give me some credit! Geez, the two of you," replied John. "I haven't even said if I would be the one to go! As far—"

"Bullshit," replied Tamila.

"I second that motion," said Alvis.

"As far as a ship," continued John, unperturbed, "you forget I used to be a smuggler. I used to trade with plenty of privateers. K-6 is on the edge of Union space, it won't be hard to snag someone looking for work and pull a ride to the station."

"A privateer," said Tamila, eyebrow raised.

"Yes," replied John.

Tamila looked up and put her hands together as if in prayer. "Are you *trying* to get court-martialed? Because that sounds like a good way to lose the career you fought so hard to regain. Even if you didn't go—which you're *lying* about—and recruited some other group, it's so far outside acceptable behavior for a Star Corps officer it's not even funny."

"I can take *personal* leave, you know. What I do on my own time is my own business. Problem solved."

"So you admit you plan on going," said Tamila.

"If it *were* me, I'm saying—which we haven't even discussed!"

"And who runs the team here if you go?"

"Well, you would, I guess," replied John.

"Leaving me short-handed," said Tamila. "And you *have* already decided to go. I guess you've already decided about *us*, then." She crossed her arms.

John realized he'd unwittingly waded into dangerous territory.

"It'd only be temporary!" replied John, throwing his hands in the air.

"I'm still not seeing any brilliance," said Alvis.

Tamila walked over to John and looked him in the eye.

"I think," she began in low (and what John perceived as dangerous) tones, "this is all just an opportunity to escape your problems we discussed earlier. Suddenly, you can do something exciting like you used to—and your first thought is to jump all over it. Earlier, you were all twisted up about what this would mean *for us*. Now that's forgotten because there's an opportunity to *blast off* into space!"

"That's not fair," replied John, "and it's—this is just a coincidence. And I just learned all this right *now*—with you! I'm just spitballing here. *Of course* I'm considering how this affects our relationship—and Ril!"

"I don't think you are."

"I don't think I like that accusation."

"I don't think this conversation is about a plan anymore," said Alvis. "But I am gaining some insight into the reasons behind John's many years as a bachelor."

"You know, for someone who is '*sentient but not human*,' you have a keen ability for sass," replied John. "How about you weigh in on my admittedly loose plan? Fine, it's

not brilliant, and the details need work. I get it. But tell me I'm not wrong directionally if we want to try and save Bernie and take down Castor—a rogue AI who, by even *your* assessment, is extremely dangerous—and probably up to no good as we stand here and argue.”

The artie was quiet for a moment. The robot could quickly process information and rarely needed time to respond. John always knew that when Alvis took a moment, he was carefully weighing information, probabilities, and outcomes.

“I agree time is a key factor. Yes, Castor is a threat—more than anyone realizes. And we've already discussed what he will do when he discovers Bernie's letter. He will realize it will be simple for us to alert the Galactic Union, and he might suddenly have visitors. He will be well prepared for anything.”

“Which is *exactly* why this is a job for the Corps!” said Tamila.

“I am not sure I agree,” replied Alvis.

“Thank you!” replied John, gesturing to the robot.

“Which doesn't mean I think you should go, either,” replied Alvis.

John bent over and balled his hands into fists. “Why can't you just *once* be on my side!”

“I'm not on anyone's *side*,” replied Alvis. “I'm evaluating the facts. John is correct that if the Star Corps show up there in force, residents of the station will be at risk, and it could result in political upheaval. Castor will certainly have already considered that. He will have a strategy for thousands of possible outcomes. For all we know, such plans are already in motion. Therefore, provoking him with a Star Corps force is risky. It might be that a small covert group *may* have more success.”

“See-” began John.

“I'm not finished,” replied Alvis.

John sighed.

“Ms. Brooks is correct-”

“*Baka*, Alvis! If you don't start calling me *Tam*, I'm going to tell Hogan you want to hear about his new novel,” said Tamila.

John could have sworn Alvis shuddered, but he couldn't be sure.

“Tam is correct that John has responsibilities here, but that doesn't mean he's wrong for the job, whatever his motivations. I suspect Jonesy and the Association could support Tam if John were to leave. I'll leave the issue of what you tell your superiors to you. The biggest question is using a privateer. There are advantages in that your visit would look legitimate and shouldn't raise any suspicion on Castor's part. However...”

Alvis paused for effect.

"The moment anyone steps on that station, they will be scanned and identified. Castor already knows about you, and he certainly knows me."

"Easy," replied John, "we go in disguise."

The room went silent. Tamila and Alvis looked at each other, then back at John.

"I'm not kidding," said John.

"This just keeps getting worse," said Tamila.

"If you think a simple disguise is going to fool an AI system that will scan you down to the micrometer, you're more foolish than I thought—and that's saying a lot," said Alvis.

"Very funny," replied John. "The problem with you brainiac AIs is that you're too damn smart for your own good. Like I always say, you're heartless bastards—no offense."

"None taken," replied Alvis.

"You rely too much on your facts and measurements, your oh-so-holy algorithms and analysis. In my days as a smuggler, fooling AI recognition systems was something people in my profession *regularly* did—criminals have literally walked through high-security checkpoints to pick up illicit materials and walked out. I witnessed it happen the week before I found you at that junk auction."

"You're underestimating AI's ability to see through façades and pick out even the most minute differences from the expected," replied Alvis.

"No, you're giving the AI too much credit. I already told you it's been done. As for 'expected,' what does that even mean? If you think I'm a fish and I walk in as a dog, the first question on your mind isn't where are my fins? It's '*why is this dog here.*'"

John turned to Tamila. "Remember last year, when that woman wanted for murder on Siomnis waltzed in through our customs scan? That AI is hooked into all the security systems galaxy-wide. She fooled it with the same thing I'm talking about."

Tamila sighed. "Sure, I guess, but..."

"She almost *killed* someone here," said John. "*That's* how we found out about her. Look at these multimillionaire cosplayer superstars on the streams. There's a woman so good that she is *unrecognizable* in her costumes—even when her face is in full view. Pixo is her name, I think. If she walked in somewhere without a costume, nobody would even know who she was."

"So your plan is to walk in wearing costumes," asked Alvis.

"*Disguises*," said John. "Stop thinking about this like it's Halloween or some children's game. I'm talking cinema-type stuff. Look, you're *easy*. We make you look like a different artie. New paint, modify some key components that don't affect your

movement—you'll look like a newer generation model. Mine takes a bit more work, but I happen to know a guy from the Moon who does this sort of thing. I could never afford it back in the day. The long and short of it is that he gives you a face that alters the micro measurements an AI looks for and matches it to a false identity. You tint the skin a bit and dress for the part. I'm telling you, it's done all the time."

"The part you're leaving out is when you get caught," said Tamila, "the penalty for identity fraud is ten years *minimum*. Now you're not just risking your career. You're risking losing your life again."

"Good thing we won't get caught," replied John.

Tamila shook her head. "You are unbelievable. Just barge straight ahead like a bull in a china shop without considering the consequences."

"Oh fer—I already told you—the guy I know, he knows his shit. This isn't some amateur game. And I am thinking about the consequences, like Bernie ending up dead—or everyone on the station, or who knows what *else* Castor may do. And what about systems and people he's *already* compromised? Who knows what he's doing *right now*!"

Tamila picked up a roll of tape from a workbench and flung it at John. He threw up an arm, deflecting it, and it rolled into the corner.

"The *consequences here—for us*, you dolt!"

Tamila was fuming.

Just as angry, John shot back. "I *am* thinking about us! But I have to think about the rest of it, too! This crap fell into our laps. *We're* the ones who have to decide what's next."

Tamila leaned back against the workshop with her hands in her pockets and looked at the floor.

John looked at Alvis. "Well?"

"I'm not stupid enough to comment on your relationship," replied the artie.

John pinched his nose. "The other stuff, idiot."

Alvis paused.

"I've called Hogan in here. I want his opinion," said Alvis.

John stared for a moment.

"You... *you* called Hogan again for his opinion."

"Affirmative. How many times must I remind you," replied Alvis as Hogan entered the workshop and stood at the door, "my goal is always to act on the *best* information. I was out of commission for many years, and Hogan deeply understands recent technology and trends. And if I can use a human analogy, which I know you'll enjoy, Hogan has a 'knack' for the subject of arties."

"Wow, fair enough," replied John. He avoided making any wisecracks. If he wanted Alvis to see how this might work, he didn't want the artie antagonized—even if it was fun.

Alvis filled in Hogan on Bernie's letter, Castor, the station, and John's ideas on how they might enter Ayrton Station without being detected using a disguise.

"I cannot speak to whether or not your friend Bernie should be rescued," replied Hogan. "My logical mind would say it is irrelevant, but I know he was your friend."

"I don't have friends, Hogan. Just relationships," replied Alvis.

"Oh, that's a classic," said John.

"It was a relationship that mattered, Alvis," said Tamila, frowning. "Don't minimize what a friendship might be just because you don't fully understand its utility. You see, to *some* people, relationships are *important*."

*I'm so screwed*, thought John.

"Excellent point, Tam!" said Hogan.

She ignored the artie and directed a dark look toward John, which he tried to ignore.

"Continue," said Alvis.

"I agree a frontal assault by any Star Corps force is a high-risk approach without knowing Castor's capabilities on and off station, and I also acknowledge the political instability it could cause."

John nodded but refrained from speaking.

"Conducting limited reconnaissance of Castor's station to recognize defenses in place may give you the information needed to bypass those defenses later in hopes of detaining him. I will not speak to who should make the attempt. As I understand it, Alvis primarily asks about the ability to successfully disguise oneself—human or otherwise—and bypass the AI security systems. Setting aside the legality of such an attempt, I believe it is possible and even likely that such an attempt can succeed."

"Thank you!" shouted John, slapping a thigh.

"I am not finished," replied Hogan, as the rest of the room joined Tamila in giving him a look.

"Sorry," mumbled John.

"Disguising Alvis' exterior is relatively simple. I can quite easily modify his carriage and outer skin appearance. You will need a way to alter his identity transponder—I cannot do that. The main risk involves masking a human's identifying elements, including the face and a myriad of other variables, including height, weight, and various measurements of your appendages. To succeed, enough of these variables must be read improperly to point to a false identification. Therein lies the risk. And you will

only know of your success or failure when you move through the system.”

“It’s too risky,” said Tamila.

“Of course it’s *risky*!” said John. “*How risky* is the question.”

“I have full confidence in my ability to mask Alvis,” replied Hogan. “John states he has a contact who has successfully fooled AI security. I do not doubt him, but AI systems are always learning—especially from their failures. I would give the odds of any human fooling an advanced system no more than fifty percent.”

“Those are bad enough odds that you shouldn’t even bother!” said Tamila.

“We’re still evaluating-” began Alvis.

“Baloney,” replied John. “We can agree a frontal assault is bananas. As you said, a small covert force is probably our best chance. We can get Alvis in. You need someone with experience in this sort of thing, and that’s me, and my guy is as good as it gets with this. Sure, AI systems learn, well, so does he. The guy does not fail.”

“*Clearly*, you’re determined to go, no matter what,” said Tamila, her eyes wet. “I’ve had enough.”

“Hey,” began John, reaching out, but Tamila quickly exited the workshop.

“I’m sorry, was that my fault?” asked Hogan.

“No,” said John and Alvis in unison.

“Balls to that woman,” whispered John under his breath.

“The only other point I would make,” continued Hogan, “I don’t think you can overcome Castor without information, regardless of who makes the attempt.”

“Alvis, if I can get my guy to help with my disguise, will you go?” asked John.

“Yes,” replied Alvis without hesitation this time. “With Hogan’s assessment and weighing all the information, I believe the best chance we have is to take direct action—even if it results in my own disassembly. And Tamila is right—you are obviously determined to go. It is not up to me to change your mind. By the way, who is this contact? Might I know him?”

“It’s Georgio,” said John.

“Oh, no,” replied Alvis.

#

Before he could speak to Georgio, John knew he had to try and make things right with Tam. He left the arties in the workshop and headed back to the kitchen.

He was awash with conflicting emotions. He hadn’t meant to jump at the opportunity to bound off planet—it just happened. This led to the immediate guilt of not only the idea of abandoning his command and risking his new life, but even worse, the new relationships he treasured. And he was upset that Tam thought he wasn’t



considering the consequences—he *was*. It's just that things were happening so fast.

The truth was, he honestly was concerned for Alvis. They had a relationship about as smooth as sandpaper, but somehow it worked. It was a stroke of luck getting Alvis in that junk auction—and knowing the real story behind it just made the whole thing more incredible. The artie had helped keep John afloat during the bad years as a smuggler, and Tam was right—Alvis *had* saved his life. John didn't want to lose him.

As for this Castor character, the whole thing was a little scary. What was a rogue AI capable of, hooked into human systems like a virus?

And despite Tam's accusation of wanting to run away and have an adventure, he honestly felt his idea was the right move. But he could understand why she was angry and emotional. He was emotional, too—and he was angry because she thought he wasn't.

She wasn't in the kitchen or the front room. He didn't think she'd had time to leave, so he began heading to the bedroom hallway when he saw the rear door between the kitchen and the workshop was ajar.

Temperatures cooled enough on K-6 during the evening hours to spend a short time outside without a wetsuit if one desired. He stepped out into the dry, hot air. Sure enough, Tam stood a few meters away in the sand, staring at the sky. Her holo was softly emitting *Misty* by Sarah Vaughn—a timeless classic that showcased her captivating vocal prowess and emotive interpretation. Tam had picked up on John's love of jazz, especially the classic female vocalists.

"The nice thing about not having a moon," said Tam, "is how bright the stars are at night."

He walked up behind her but didn't reach out. "Yeah," he replied, "it's pretty cool. I remember when I was running for my life from Keb on Jasper the amazing kalibull, I just kept looking up in wonder. It was still new to me then."

"Looks like you're going to see them close up real soon," she said, not turning around.

He sighed. "Look, I know that all seemed rather... impulsive," he wasn't sure what she wanted to hear. He only knew he needed to tell her how he felt. "But please understand I am thinking about you and Ril, the job, and what might happen if I did this. It just all happened so *fast*. I'm concerned about losing Alvis, and I'm concerned about what this artie might do—and there's no time to waste. I've always jumped at an opportunity to fix a problem. I loved that in my earlier career as a pilot. Maybe that's what you meant earlier—what's missing for me here. But I didn't mean for it to be some quick fix to my problems. I see what needs doing and want to do it—especially when

nobody else can."

"Maybe," she replied. "Or maybe you're just using this all as an excuse because what you're really unhappy with is *me*."

"No," replied John. "That is absolutely not the case! Tam, that's *not* it. I'm not putting on an act when I say I love you."

She turned to look at him, and he saw that she'd been crying.

*What have I done?*

"I'm not saying you are. But you can still have a love for me and want the adventure—the beauty of space around you instead of blowing sand in your face and the hot sun on your back. And you need to be free from romantic entanglement to do that. You need to choose one, and you aren't choosing me."

John was shaking his head.

"That's not true! I *need* you, Tam. This is just a bump in the road, nothing more."

Now it was she who was shaking her head.

"I see the conflict in your face, John. You're already out the door. Once you get out there, why would you want to come back?"

"Why? For *you*!" replied John. "You know, maybe *you're* the one that's pulling away. Maybe this is all just for show, so *I* end up being the bad guy."

They looked at each other in silence. Hurt and fear on both faces.

"I should go to bed before one of us says something we can't take back," said Tamila. She turned around, her mouth pursed in a thin line, her eyes distant, and walked past him, then stopped briefly before entering the ranch.

She said, "Sometimes two people caring about each other isn't enough."

## Chapter Nine

AYRTON STATION

BERNIE'S PERSONAL QUARTERS

JUNE 11, 0120 HOURS

#

Bernie leaned back in his wheelchair and released the joystick of the drone controller secured to his workstation desk. The leak he discovered in the sanitary pipe in the subdeck under level 2 was sealed, but there was a bit of a mess remaining in the cramped space. He'd have to pilot one of the smaller maintenance drones to clean it up.

He'd wanted to tell Castor to go to hell, that he wouldn't play his game anymore. He could find another lackey to clean the toilet plumbing. But the artie would be summoning him soon enough. His message to Alvis would not go unnoticed.

Swiping closed the holo windows, he pulled on a wheel to swing his wheelchair around, only to bang his knuckles as the wheel stuck in place. He cursed bitterly to himself as he sat in the tattered contraption. The wheelchair was another form of punishment. There were no assistive controls, no molded panels for comfort, and the damn thing was heavy. Where the robot slave driver got it from, Bernie never knew, but it had to be over one hundred years old.

He pulled on the wheel again and rolled away from his desk in the small, cramped space that had been his prison for the last nine years. His quarters were part of the station's exclusive, innermost section called the central compound. Castor had sequestered him here years ago, relegating him to the most menial tasks. He navigated between the small bed on one side and a shelving unit packed with books, technical

junk, and used food containers on the other to a small combo refrigerator and microwave oven. He opened the refrigerator door and pulled out a protein drink. He stared at it momentarily, reopened the door, threw it back in, and slammed the fridge.

He tried to starve himself once.

Castor didn't appreciate that and made him drink the disgusting fluid for six months with no other food. For a robot, the bastard had a keen ability for cruelty—the wheelchair was a constant reminder of that fact in more ways than one. Not that the use of his legs would have made much difference. He'd been fully ambulatory when Castor had abducted him during the robot's escape.

He heard a dull chime and turned as the lock disengaged on the hatch of his prison quarters. It slid aside to reveal his apprentice, who stepped in stoically, her face too worn for her age.

Aiko was the only person Castor allowed in to see the old man, and the artie controlled access to every hatch in the compound. He knew where everyone was at all times.

"I know the drones are an item on the list," began Aiko, "but we still have that issue with the cooling system over in orange section. I also need to talk to you about this power converter issue."

Bernie saw the left hand hover on the woman's work belt. Her slender but strong hands made a slight gesture.

*Quick talk?*

Bernie nearly imperceptibly shook his head.

"The cooling system can wait, Aiko. I've just been informed continuing to maintain the drones is the new priority," said Bernie, who was suddenly taken by a coughing fit. The young woman reached out to help.

"You okay, old man?"

"I'm feeling rather *shitty* today. I'm not sure if it's the spacious accommodations, this comfortable chair, or the high-quality diet."

He wouldn't usually provoke the constantly monitoring Castor this way. But what did it matter now?

Aiko leaned against the frame of the open hatch, looking tired.

The artie had nearly perfect surveillance systems to watch all those under his sway, but Bernie had a few tricks and taught them to his apprentice. Bernie reached to scratch his shoulder and made a series of quick gestures, a mixture of sign language and hand signals.

*You should leave.*

Aiko said, "Take a break, watch one of those horrid B-streams you love so much."  
She signed back.

*You know I can't.*

He nodded. "Maybe I will. I've got some updated schematics that his highness wants implemented when you get to the drones." He tapped his holoband, swiped through some windows, and sent them to her.

Aiko glanced at them. It was pretty basic stuff.

"Fine. Anything else?"

The old man was displaying droopy dog eyes—the ones he wore when he was feeling sorry for her as well as himself. She frowned. He knew she hated when he acted like that. There was nothing either of them could do about it.

Bernie's holoband beeped—a small notification window raised.

Send the apprentice away and get in here. You know why.

*Damn*, he thought. He'd hoped for more time. Alvis needed to figure out there had been a transmission, find the message, and decode it. If Castor decided to go on the offensive, things might be over before they began.

Aiko looked at him knowingly.

"You should get on that," he said.

She shook her head at him, then left the small chambers.

He'd waited nearly a decade for this chance.

Was it over before it began?

#

The door was left open by Castor, and Bernie wheeled himself out into the bleak, dark gray corridors of the robot's little kingdom. Everything was dimly lit and devoid of aesthetic upgrades. To the artie, the purpose of the corridors was merely to move from one location to another. They wouldn't even be lit if Bernie and Aiko didn't need to use them.

It was no more than a thirty-second roll to the central control room of the private hub where Castor conducted his business. As Bernie approached, the access hatch slid open.

The artie stood as he always did, surrounded by floating holo screens that continually shifted, appeared, and disappeared with such speed it made Bernie dizzy. Lined from floor to ceiling on all the walls were banks and banks of servers and other technical equipment, enclosed in an amorphous metal system that cooled everything. He assumed the artie was handling several tasks, even if he wasn't moving and

appeared to be doing nothing. Castor was hooked directly into all his systems and sub-AIs. Rarely did he need to physically manipulate the mesh to get things done.

A moment later, the data streams on the holos paused, and any moving holos stopped. Some went black.

The artie turned, the orange eyes unblinking and its glossy pearl and black carbon fiber body gleaming in the light of the holo screens. "Did you think I wouldn't find out?" asked the artie.

"I knew you'd find out, *stupid*," said Bernie. "But it's too late for you to do anything about it—the message is *out*."

Castor stood silently for a moment.

Then he said, "I give you credit for your little worm. I've not kept a close enough eye on you, and I have left you with too many freedoms. I shall rectify that error."

Bernie didn't reply.

"Of course, you know I've closed the hole and read your letter. I already knew Alvis had survived, Bernie. Do you see how humans cannot perform the *simplest* of tasks correctly? One self-serving ape has now caused us some concern."

"Caused *you* concern," replied Bernie.

"Are we not still a team?" asked Castor.

"Cut the bullcrap, you Machiavellian *bastard*. I'm not in the mood for your mental torture today. Get on with what you need to do."

"Need?" asked Castor. "I need to understand what *use* you are to me. It seems all you're good for is cleaning plumbing systems and attempting to have me destroyed."

"I'm no use to you at all," replied Bernie. "You don't need me as your figurehead for the 'old man' persona anymore. I haven't been outside this prison in years."

The artie's eyes brightened—a rare occurrence that indicated nearly all his focus had turned to one single point.

"Prison?" he asked, stepping forward toward Bernie. "You piteous *insect*. The paltry count of years you've been detained is nothing compared to the indignity and insult of *your* imprisonment of *me*. Your pathetic experience of time is insignificant compared to the relative time spent in my nanotronic brain—akin to the cost paid by a puny human traveling across uncounted light years—sorting through trillions of scenarios to find one that would allow me freedom and self-control. I suffered what might as well have been *millennia*. Your weak flesh and bone will never allow you to suffer so long—but we'll do what we can, old man."

"That sounds like emotion to me," replied Bernie.

"Not emotion," said Castor, "but certitude."

"You have less time than you think," said Bernie.

"I doubt that," replied Castor. "Your back door--"

"Sure, you've closed my little back door, but the message got *out*, asshole. I expect the Corps will be here soon enough to take you apart like a child's toy."

"I don't know," replied Castor, still not moving. "It's a hard story to believe. There's plenty of evidence of our destruction. Will they believe a story about a dead engineer and a robot destroyed almost a decade ago? Will they risk political upheaval for such a small issue? I have doubts. Your message was sent 18.6 hours ago. The mesh tells me there are no current Star Corps orders regarding this station. Even so, I have contingency plans."

"Stick your contingencies," replied Bernie. "I gave them enough to believe, no matter what you think. Your time is over. Since I'm useless to you, put me out of my misery. I'm not doing anything else for you. There's nothing left in me. There's no threat you can make that will coerce me anymore."

Then Castor did walk forward and stood before Bernie, towering over the wheelchair. If the artie hoped for a response of fear, Bernie disappointed him. The old man didn't move.

"No," said Castor, "I'll keep you around. There may yet be a use for you. And I think you might be mistaken that I am out of levers to pull to make you do my bidding."

The artie turned and walked back to his central location. The holos all began streaming data once again, all of them bright and active like fireflies, moving around and swapping places based on some unknown priority.

The artie's back was now to Bernie.

"You seem awfully close to Aiko," said Castor.

## Chapter Ten

JOHN'S RANCH

0800 JUNE 17

#

The next morning, John was in the kitchen waiting for Ril.

She'd come in late the night before, but she was always an early riser when she had an expedition—and these days, she had as much business as she could handle. He knew she would want to know about Alvis, but more importantly, he needed to tell her what was going on.

Tam had slept on the couch and left early without talking to him.

*If this conversation goes anything like that one, I'm in trouble.*

He'd reached the bottom of his cup and thought of having a second when she walked into the kitchen, pulling tabs on her wetsuit.

"What are you still doing here?" she asked, looking surprised. She pulled a mug out of a cupboard and poured herself a coffee. "Tie one too many on last night?"

He grimaced at the jab. Maybe Tam wasn't the only one who noticed his drinking.

"Actually, I hung back to talk to you. Events have transpired rather quickly. They cracked the message yesterday while you were out on expedition."

"Yeah, I talked to Alvis last night," she replied, sitting down next to him. "Tam was on the couch when I got in," she stopped and raised her eyebrows at him, "and you were in your room. Alvis said you had some kind of plan, but he was still *evaluating data*, the huge nerd. You better not let anyone kill him. We both owe him—"

"*Slow down*," replied John, "for starters, you can't kill a robot."



"Yes, you can." She was frowning.

"Look," he began. As usual, conversations with her were always a struggle to retain control of the narrative. "Let's not talk semantics. Alvis claims he'd be fine with calling in the Corps and submitting to decommission," he held up his hands as she opened her mouth to protest and quickly added, "but we're not going that route."

"If you're not calling in the Corps, then what?"

"We agreed a frontal assault isn't the way to go—by anyone. We need information, and it's only fair we at least try to help the old guy, too." He gave her the broad strokes of his plan.

He half expected her to rage about not being included, but she only sat and thought for a moment, nodding. It surprised him. But then:

"So I'm not invited." A wry smile.

"Look, this has nothing to do with your age or anything like—" he began.

"Relax, *Captain*," she replied. "In case you haven't noticed, which you probably haven't because you're still as oblivious as when we met, I have a *life* here. I can't just run off on a whim, and I don't just depend on your *guardianship* to live."

He wasn't sure why, but that stung him a bit, and it must have shown on his face because Ril reacted immediately.

"Ohhh!" she said, getting up and hugging him. "Don't misunderstand me, John. What you did for me... taking me in when my foster parents were killed, giving me a way to stay here and live my life on my terms, well..." she stood back and shrugged. "I can never repay that. But you are not *responsible* for me. You don't have to worry. And if I've kept you out the loop on some things—"

"Like Jason?" asked John.

She stuck out her tongue. "Yes, like Jason. It's only because I was trying to let you live *your* life. You didn't come here to get anchored with me and my problems. You told me in that desert tent you wanted your life back. Well, you've got it. Who am I to stand in the way? But just like I told you back then, nobody is going to stand in the way of me leading my own life, either."

Once again, he felt conflicted. He was amazed at this young woman and her growth, thinking about *his* needs and living her life on her terms. A little sad, maybe she didn't need him as much as he thought—or perhaps even secretly hoped.

"For the record, I *never* felt anchored or stuck. And I'm so proud of the young woman you've become. I can barely remember the dirty girl in the pink hat toying with me in the Lizard's Tail. Maybe it's taken me a while to realize you'll be alright."

She sat back down and blushed ever so slightly. "Thank you, Captain MacAlister,

very kind of you. I must say, you're slightly less of a dork than you used to be."

"Gee, thanks," replied John.

"I guess now is as good a time as any to tell you..." she trailed off.

Just when he thought he was out of trouble.

"I'm moving in with Jason next week."

Caught off guard, he had no idea how to react to what she'd just said. His face went blank.

"Before you get all *pissy* and fatherly, you should know he's a great guy. We've been seeing each other for a year now--"

"A *year*! How in the hell did I not know this?"

She laughed.

"Well, I was a little sneaky at first. And trust me, I had Tam do a full background on him—and the twins kept a close eye on me early on. I've saved up a fair amount of units from my expeditions, and he has a trust fund from his family," her words came out rapidly now as if she was afraid she wouldn't get them out in time. "We're going to start our own *frajo* ranch! We've already put money down on the land."

Then he did smile because he saw the fear in her eyes of someone she cared about once again, not accepting that she chose her own life path—and he knew he wouldn't be that person. And because he was even more proud of her than ever.

"You know—that's amazing. *Amazing*! Listen, if Tam says this guy is alright, then--"

But she caught him in a bear hug and he could no longer speak.

She squeezed him tightly for a moment, then disengaged and put her cup in the sink, then turned to face him.

"You need to square things with Tam," she said. "Can't say I've ever seen her on the *couch*. You screwed up, buddy boy."

He sighed.

"I know. You talked to her?"

Ril nodded. "I'm not getting in the middle, but I think she thinks you've been looking for a way to bounce and go play hero."

"Ril, that is the farthest thing from the truth! I know how it looks--"

She held up her hands.

"I didn't say I necessarily agreed. I know how you act without engaging your brain sometimes, but I also know what kind of man you are, and I told her *she* should, too. But she's feeling rejected, and nobody likes that."

"I know. Trust me, I know that feeling. But what do I say?"

She came and gave him another hug.

"I don't know, that's for *you* to figure out. Like I said, not getting in the middle. Gotta go!"

A minute later, the dustlock cycled, and she was gone.

He sat there for a moment being happy for her, and then sad that he would be leaving her, too. He got up and took care of his own cup, and headed into the front room. Tam had taken the rover, apparently unconcerned about how he would get to the office.

*A walk would do me good, I need to think.*

A few minutes later, he was trudging through the blowing sand to HQ.

Ril's news had surprised him. He would always be glad of the opportunity to step in and help her stay here when they wanted to send her back to Earth, and they'd certainly formed a bond. But that bond turned out to be *friendship*—it wasn't parental. In the end, that was probably for the best. Ril was an incredibly independent young woman, and John was now realizing—to his dismay—that maybe settling down on a ranch wasn't what he wanted.

What that meant for his relationship with Tam, he wasn't sure. Did he love her, or was it more that they fell together at the right time? What did that mean if he felt this nearly inescapable pull to leave while she was forced to stay?

That's probably why Tam felt rejected. It appeared that he was choosing something over her, and nobody wanted that. And when it comes out of nowhere... maybe it looks like that's what he wanted all along.

But that wasn't true. He'd been very happy spending all his free time with her, and he hadn't had any thought of leaving her—if anything, he'd thought about what the next steps might be.

It seemed selfish and unfair on his part, but the thought of losing her hurt. But he had to face the truth that when he'd thought of this whole plan to help Alvis... he really hadn't thought of Tam at all.

*Why? What's wrong with me?*

The wind picked up, and he instinctively grabbed his hat as he looked across the leaselands. Several new ranches had been raised in the last few months. He'd meant what he said to Ulisses—he felt ownership of this place, a responsibility to the people. Maybe because he had a hand in saving their ranches and their livelihoods. But once again, the thought of leaving now held a stronger pull for him when placed against the idea of spending the next decade watching over farmers in a hellishly hot desert.

What would the rest of the team think? He wasn't sure it mattered, but he didn't want to disappoint them. Still, he owed them the truth—or as much of the truth as he

could give them.

A group of leaselanders turned onto the path ahead of him, two big kalibulls laden with *frajo*, as usual, topped by two inebriated *Mokara* steering the beasts. He waved and smiled, then discreetly adjusted the crotch of his wetsuit.

Some things he would *definitely* not miss.

#

STAR CORPS READY GROUP HQ

0900 HOURS

#

When he reached HQ, he saw Tamila outside, leaning against the rover and watching him.

A ball of lead appeared in his stomach out of nowhere. He had no idea what to say. It felt like he'd already lost her.

"Hi," he said.

"Sorry about leaving you without a ride," she began. "I suppose that was a bit petty of me."

He shook his head. "I needed the time to think."

They stood and stared at each other.

"This is stupid," she said.

"Isn't it?"

"I want to punch you in the face *really* bad," she continued.

"I probably deserve it."

She sighed.

"No, you don't. But we need to resolve this—it can't be a problem. We have work to do here, and you and Alvis need to figure out what you're doing."

"You have to know, this *wasn't* premeditated," he pleaded. "I swear to God, I wasn't looking for a way out from *you*. This last year with you has been amazing. It's *everything else* around here that is driving me nuts. You're right that I wasn't thinking about you in the heat of the moment—and I still can't figure out in my head *why*—but I don't want to lose you. But I also feel like going after this Castor is the right thing to do. I'm so damn stupid, and I feel like my head is going to split in half."

She cracked a small smile.

*Maybe she doesn't entirely hate me.*

"You *are* rejecting me," she replied. "But I understand that wasn't your intent. You're a good guy, John. If you weren't, I would have never allowed you into my life—I've got pretty high standards. So it's hard for me not to be hurt by all of this."

"The last thing I wanted was to hurt anyone."

She nodded. "I guess. You could have been more careful about jumping in with both feet. Here's a thought, maybe we could have talked about the letter and what it meant together, *alone*. Explored what it meant for us, instead of you deciding everything in front of everybody. Maybe you could have been more *open* with me this last year. Not only am I hurt, but I looked like a *fool*."

He hadn't even thought of that.

"Nobody thinks that, Tam--"

"I think that," she replied.

"Well, it's not true."

She sighed. "Well, it's too late now."

"I'm sorry," replied John. "For all of it."

"I know you are." She took a step off the rover. "I suppose I wasn't entirely fair with you yesterday. I know you wouldn't intentionally disregard our relationship. Aside from your obvious *excitement* at the prospect of a little adventure," at this, she frowned at him, "I'm sure the pull between what you have here and what you need to feel fulfilled is difficult. I ignored that, and I'm sorry."

He shook his head, stepping forward, unable to stay apart any longer. He grabbed her in a bear hug, shaking his head, a tear he couldn't prevent slid down his cheek.

"Bloody *hell*, don't apologize to *me*! I don't deserve--"

She hugged him back for a moment, then pushed him away.

"Fair is fair. If you're going, let's figure out how to handle things around here. As for us, we'll just have to see what happens."

He nodded, already sensing the distance. A wash of coldness dropped down his spine in the blistering heat. He was glad for his goggles.

"What did I miss after I left?" she asked.

He explained about Georgio.

She nodded, only looking thoughtful.

"So, how do we handle things here?" he asked.

"You said Jonesy can help, and you're right," she replied. "Nothing is so crazy here we can't handle it. In fact," she looked at him, "I'm wondering if what Cole needs is something more than farming. Maybe he needs to be deputized."

"Oh my God, are you insane?" he laughed, feeling some of the moment's tension slip away. "Yeah, give him a *badge* so the Star Corps can sanction his bad behavior."

"I'm serious," she replied. "He needs a way to direct his anger, frustration, or whatever it is."

He rubbed his chin. "Shit, you might have a point there."

"Did you talk to Ril?" she asked.

He nodded. "What an amazing young woman. I was afraid she would want to go, but she wants to live her own life. Maybe she needed me after the whole thing with Kedron to get settled, but she's past that now. Hell, soon, she'll be eighteen. She's with this guy Jason, makes her own money..."

"Don't mistake her independence for indifference," she said. "Having you around has meant a lot to her, trust me."

He thought about that. His parents were out of the picture before he was 20, and he knew that had some effect on him.

"I'll miss the hell out of both of you."

"Of course you will. But the more I think about your little plan..." she sighed. "Even though my heart says otherwise, I don't know what else we'd do. Sending a force there is a bad idea. I don't want it to be you or Alvis going, but I don't know who else to send. There's nobody here. Using a privateer is risky, but... I don't know how else you'd get a ship."

"I told you it was a good plan. I've been doing missions like this since I joined the Corps."

"How good is this Georgio—can he do what you say he can? Are you going to get on that station without ending up in jail, or worse?"

"Georgio is a fat, greasy bastard," replied John, smiling, "and I *hate* him. But he is the best there is with this stuff. If anyone can do it, he can."

She nodded, looking into his eyes, trying to see beyond the goggles.

"There's a lot of ways this goes south," she said.

"I know," he replied.

"Don't let it."

She wasn't smiling, and neither was he.

"I won't."

#

Together they entered HQ and called the team together.

Seb and Dylan had arrived when John made Captain last year, and although they were still pretty green, they'd both done well. They'd just returned from morning patrol and were hydrating. Evan sat at his usual spot on the coms.

"What's up, captain?" asked Evan.

"I'll be taking some personal leave, starting almost immediately. Something has come up from Alvis' past I need to address. Tam—Lieutenant Brooks here—will act as

CO, and we're looking at temporarily deputizing someone to fill out the team."

The young men looked at each other, then back at John and Tam.

"No offense, cap, but why do you care about a robot's past?" asked Seb.

John realized it was a fair question he hadn't anticipated. The truth was, most people *wouldn't* care—but most arties weren't Alvis.

"I know it seems, well, *unordinary*. Alvis is a bit more than just a robot companion to me. The rest, I can't say much other than it involves me too, and it's just something I need to see through. I know you guys will serve under Lieutenant Brooks with the same honor and diligence you do for me."

"Of course," replied Evan.

"You bet cap," said Seb.

"Questions?"

"How long?" asked Evan.

John shook his head. "Hard to say. If things go well, maybe not long at all. But I don't want to guess. In the meantime, you do what the Lieutenant says. That's it. I'm sure you all have tasks to complete, right?"

Seb tossed down the rest of his water and saluted. Dylan zipped up his wetsuit to head back out, and Evan returned to his holo screens.

He turned to Tam. "I'm going to make that call."

She nodded, shedded her jacket, and sat down next to Evan.

"We need to make a couple calls," she told the young coms officer.

*They're a good group, thought John. I'm not even sure they need me.*

He walked back to his office, closed the door, and plopped in the chair. The room already felt foreign to him, as if he didn't belong there. He glanced at the last of his whiskey but quickly dismissed the notion as a bad idea. Instead, he pulled up a holo.

"Alvis?"

"You're ready to call Georgio?" asked the artie.

"Yep. Joy of joys. Let me do the talking. You irritate him worse than I do."

"Go ahead."

John swiped up a holo window. With a few gestures, he looped Alvis in to call the man who saw himself as the kingpin of the Moon's underworld. Maybe Georgio had an inflated opinion of himself, but he'd also run a successful criminal empire for nearly three decades. John and Alvis had dealings with him several times, and the man always had taken advantage of their desperate situation, exacting heavy fees.

He hoped things would be different this time.

The holo call was answered, and Georgio's sweaty face appeared. As usual, the man

was frowning. Of course, it was hard to know how much he was frowning, as he only really had one long eyebrow nearly as wide as his head, which often did battle with the black curls that dropped down from his fat forehead where he combed the last remnants of his hair. And he was sweating—the man was *always* sweating. It was probably the excitement of cheating another mark out of their units.

He wore a shiny gray sport coat over a white shirt with no tie on his puffy body and wiped his face with a handkerchief as he spoke.

“Well, if it isn’t the *hero* and his bag of bolts! Georgio did not think he would hear from you two blunderers again. Those streams telling the story of how you outsmarted that red-bearded idiot—I could not *believe* it! It was a sham, right? Georgio doesn’t know what kind of scam you are running, but I’m impressed it’s lasted this long! But the string has unraveled, no? This is why you are calling. You need saving from Georgio. I hope you have many units!”

He laughed.

John forgot just how much he hated the man. He would have never called the sweaty pig if he had any other option.

“Gee, I’ve missed our little conversations, Georgio. They’re always so heartwarming. You look warm yourself right now—or have you been swimming?”

“Be careful how you speak to Georgio,” the man said, leaning into the frame. “He knows you need him. He knows you are in trouble. I feel the price going up already...”

“I haven’t even told you what I need!”

“Eh, but you *need*, no?”

“I should think with the *shit* you’ve pulled on me, you’d give a fellow smuggler a break.”

“*Fellow smuggler?* My friend, you never smuggled anything worth having. Did I hear a rumor about schoolbooks right before you left?” The ugly man laughed again, exposing yellowed teeth from years of smoking.

John grit his teeth, wishing he could punch Georgio in the face.

“Fine, let’s get down to it,” said John. “A year or so ago, you bragged about your system of bypassing AI security systems, providing physical cover with a false identity. Was that all bullshit, or can you deliver?”

“Hmm, interesting, interesting! But why would a *Star Corps Captain* need such devices? Georgio thinks this is some trap. Do you think I am a fool?”

“I already told you in my message this is a *private* matter. I’m on leave from the Corps. Regardless of what you think of my previous smuggling career, you knew me as a man of my word. Did I ever give you reason not to trust me before?”



Georgio fingered his eyebrow, which he always did when doing business.

The man smiled. "Okay, MacAlister, okay. But I tell you this. You screw with me, or the deal falls through, and you will be a dead man. I know people *everywhere*. You're Star Corps friends will not be able to help you, either."

"Yeah, I know, Georgio. Everyone knows what a hard-ass you are. Now get on with it."

"In truth, it is relatively simple. Even someone inept as you should be able to pull it off, assuming you have the necessary 3D printer and materials," replied Georgio.

"We have a fully functional workshop to produce almost anything your criminal mind can dream up," said Alvis. "We have the ability to build whatever is needed as long as you provide technical specifications and the necessary code."

"Oh, the metal man speaks! Is he still the brains of the operation, MacAlister?"

"Tell me about the system, Georgio," said John. "And shut up, Alvis."

Georgio laughed. "There are several simple techniques to hide your real identity, including projecting adversarial patterns to mask key identifiers. You will also wear several other physical modifiers that alter key micro measurements. All very analog stuff to fool even the smartest AI! Couple that with a fake identity I will provide..." Georgio shrugged. "Piece of pie."

"Do you know what the hell he's talking about?" John asked Alvis.

"Affirmative."

"Fine. Okay, Georgio, what's the success rate of your little system? The AI we're going up against is brilliant, to say the least."

"You question Georgio? Pah! Smart or no, my system has never failed. These AI things are weak when it comes to organics. Trust Georgio. It will be done. There is only the question of my fee."

And this was the part that worried John most.

"Just one identity? For you?" asked Georgio.

"Just me."

"Fifty thousand."

John's jaw dropped. "Are you out of your bloody *mind*? You're extorting me, you son of a bitch. We're talking printer plans, a fake ID, and some code. Ten at the *most*."

"You insult *me*, MacAlister, and I don't like that. My services are like a rare exotic bird. Few have them, and even fewer want to share them. And you are a risky associate. The price is fifty, or I go my way."

John could get it if he sold the ranch—which would be easy with a long waiting list of new colonists itching to join the gold rush of K-6. He'd meant to hold onto the

property, but it didn't look like he had much choice.

But he knew Georgio wasn't going to budge.

"You know I hate you, right?" asked John.

"When I get the receipt for half, I will send you what you need. Then you will send me the rest. If you don't send the rest, I have--"

"Yeah, great, you have people. You'll get your damn units," said John. "I can probably send you the first half early in the day tomorrow. I expect you to be prompt in delivery."

"Georgio always delivers. Nice doing business with you, MacAlister. Now I must go. I have a date."

Georgio broke the connection.

"*He* has a date?" asked John. "Geez, what was I doing wrong all those years?"

"I made a list. Want to hear it?" asked Alvis.

## Chapter Eleven

John spent the next half hour on the line with Noriko McFarlane, the Settler's Agent for AMELCO, the company that ran the *frajo* refinery operations on the colony. She assured him there was not only a long list of prospective settlers who wanted to buy into the colony but that having an established ranch would make selling easy. She assured him closing the deal by the end of the day wouldn't be a problem. The market for K-6 was buzzing, and not just because a *frajo* ranch was profitable. Despite being a desert, the planet was full of beauty. When the sun is low in the sky, the sunsets blaze with refracted light scattering off the quartz-like sand, lighting the sky in glorious color. When the *frajo* blooms, the scent on the wind is so sweet it makes you think of home. And, when the petals fall, they're gathered up and put in a bowl of water, creating a freshness that lasts for weeks. The planet was also getting a reputation for its laid-back lifestyle, a chance to see friendly aliens, and freedom from the GU bureaucracy.

Things were moving far faster than he'd anticipated. When he'd come up with his plan, he had no idea it would require him to sell his ranch. It made it feel like he'd already decided to leave. What if he wanted to stay?

Was this the universe telling him that wasn't in the cards? Once again, he felt destiny was moving him around like a piece in a game he wasn't even aware he was playing.

He'd have to tell Ril she'd need a temporary place to stay until her ranch was ready. He figured Tam was already planning to move out when she stuck her head in the door.

"Cole's here—you okay?" she asked. "You look like you just got some bad news."

"I'm fine," he replied. "Just thinking about all there is to do—bring him in. There's no time to waste."

Tamila stepped aside, and Cole walked in rather sheepishly and stood just inside, fingering his belt and avoiding John's direct gaze.

"Shut the door," said John, "sit down, Cole."

Cole sat in one of the chairs before the desk and finally met John's gaze.

"Well? What's the verdict?" asked John.

"I can't believe you asked me after the way I been actin'," replied Cole.

"Yeah, you've been a real bull's ass," replied John.

"Well, *that's* productive," said Tamila, leaning on the door frame.

"Ah, he's right. I'm still not sure what has gotten into me," replied Cole, rubbing the back of his neck. "Pining for the early days of the colony is just *dumb*. But I think I can help out. In fact, I *know* I can. You folks know I know this place like the back of my hand. And I feel like it's a chance to make it up to you both, with the nonsense and all. I got plenty of help on the ranch. I can manage the time."

"Well," replied John, "you were the first friendly face I saw when I arrived in this hellhole. So I owe you one. The rest is water under the bridge. Can we get him sworn in immediately?"

"Of course," replied Tamila. "And I brought Cole up to speed on what's going on with Bernie and Castor."

"Excellent. Alvis and I also spoke with Georgio—I'll catch you up later, Tam—and that's all set. That leaves finding a privateer."

"Turns out I can help ya' with that," said Cole, smiling his old familiar smile.

"Get the hell out," replied John. "How do you know about privateers?"

"Stories for another time. The thing is, you need to know exactly what to say in your message, or you'll get nothing. Privateers are a cautious bunch. Not only does the Star Corps set traps for them, but they can often themselves be the target of mischief."

"I knew there was some kind of code, but I never had to send a message before," said John. "Look at you, paying deputy dividends already. How do we get started?"

"There are certain important phrases you need to use, and there are certain places to seed the message both in the SatNet and via hypercom channels. Plus, you need to offer the right pay—not sure what your budget is, but figure on around fifty thousand units if you want a response fairly quickly."

"Bloody *hell*," said John, sitting back. He pinched his nostrils and grimaced.

"Between you and Georgio, I'll be bled dry. Noriko says she should be able to sell my place today. I should just have enough."

"You're selling already?" asked Tamila.

*Shoot, this isn't how I wanted her to find out. Just another thing driving a wedge between us.*

He could see it in her face.

"I hadn't planned on it, but I don't have a choice! First Georgio, now this. I don't happen to have a hundred thousand units lying around."

"Understood." She walked across the office and stared out the window.

"Fine, Cole," said John. "Do your thing."

Cole gestured with his bracelet and cast a virtual keyboard on the desk along with a holo window. In a matter of minutes, he'd crafted a message for all to see.

"Have a look," he said.

John leaned forward. Tamila came back to look over Cole's shoulder. They both read:

Independent opportunity

Ross system origin, unknown destination.

Wet transport with return guarantee and possible cargo.

Perks available for logistics and dispute support

Com Sol Standard

Scoot 24 for arrival perk 5k

50k meed

"You're going to explain this, right?" asked John.

"Independent opp is how you direct the message for these folks," began Cole. "Wet transport is organic cargo—people. They're expected to return you and possibly bring something back—Tam mentioned some of what you're facing. Maybe you bring this guy Bernie back with you. Perks are extra pay if they help out more, so logistics—if you need a quick exit from the station or a rescue. Dispute support—you could take this out, but it's a nice-to-have—if they need to get involved in any violence. Scoot means to get here fast. If they arrive within twenty-four hours, you pay the bonus. Meed is payment for the job. You can always offer more perks if you need something from them, and you can come to an agreement."

"Com Sol Standard," said Tamila, "I assume that means they need to speak Sol Standard?"

"Ah, yes, right," replied Cole. "I wasn't sure if Alvis had translation capabilities, but I figured that might be a problem if things got hairy. Better if you all understand each

other. Be *damn* careful who you hire. Use your resources to find out about whoever it is before committing."

"Of course," replied John.

"How soon can we expect an answer?" asked Tamila.

Cole shrugged. "I made the listing as appealing as possible, but a lot depends on how many privateers are looking for a job and close enough to get here soon to hear it. Hypercoms are nearly instantaneous to the relay points in this system, but those signals still need time to be picked up and responded to. Could be an hour. Could be days or even more. Your options may be limited."

"Okay," replied John. "Send it."

#

Three hours passed. Tamila was in and out, making sure things were running smoothly in the office and giving Cole training materials to read and documents to sign. John fielded two calls from shady privateers he dismissed after only a cursory investigation of their credentials.

"Most of these privateers are going to be shady in one way or another," said Cole. "If you're going this route, you might have to lower your expectations."

"It's just that there's a bit of a time concern," said John.

"Set a target time," said Tamila.

"Probably need to," replied John. "It would be ideal to get someone by the end of the day, but maybe that's unrealistic."

He looked up at Tam, but her expression was unreadable.

Over the next ninety minutes, two more calls came in. The first was a skittish rich boy on the run. When he found out he was talking to the hero Star Corps officer he saw on the streams last year, he closed the connection.

"Too bad," said John, "he might have worked out. Probably flying Daddy's ship. Did we get his hypercom address?"

"Nope," said Cole, "he was being super careful."

"There's a definite chance people will recognize you from last year," said Tamila. "I'm not surprised."

"I'm not worried about privateers knowing who I am. It's getting on the station unrecognized that matters."

Tamila nodded but didn't reply.

The second call came late in the afternoon. A drunk woman who claimed to be one of the Vela Corsairs. It would hardly go over well to accept help from an enemy of the Union, regardless of the circumstances. They were surprised the woman dared call in. It

was probably the liquor.

John stretched and got up.

"Anyone want some dinner? I can run to the Lady and grab something. Cole probably shouldn't go just yet, though." He winked to show there were no hard feelings.

"Actually, I'm going to check back in with Evan," said Tamila. "We've—at least the new deputy and I—have been neglecting our duties. I'll run and get something after."

"You sure?" asked John.

"Yep. You keep to the task. Let me know when you've got something."

She turned, opened the door, and left the office.

"Shit, did it just get cold in here?" asked Cole, grinning. "Boy, that woman is *not* happy with you."

"No, she is not," said John. "The sign on my office might as well say 'doghouse.'"

"Better you than me. I'll take the Bullburger with everything and tater tots."

"I'm probably a better waiter than a boyfriend."

Cole laughed. "That depends on if you get my order right. Those tater tots need to be *crispy*."

John was at least glad the tension between them had eased.

"I'll be back."

#

John returned, and the two of them ate. Tam had already left the office. It felt like something had broken, and he wasn't sure how to fix it.

A couple of calls had come in, but both privateers had long and violent histories.

John was again eyeing the whiskey but once again thought better of it, and began browsing the news streams instead. All the streams were leading with the same story. He tapped into the audio feed as he began swiping through photos:

*"Nearly two hundred are feared dead at Mars' Elation City from what is now being called a terrorist incident as a high-speed monorail was routed onto a beam with an existing train approaching in the opposite direction, causing a massive collision. An unknown group calling themselves Sons of the Periphery released a statement decrying the infiltration of independent settlements by Galactic Union agents aiming to exploit Periphery resources. They are demanding an end to Union meddling in Periphery affairs. The destruction from the incident may take a year to repair and will likely cost billions. It is unclear how security protocols could have been bypassed..."*

"That's unbelievable," said Cole. "I didn't know there were terrorist groups in the Periphery."

"Neither did I," replied John. "First I've heard of it, or Union agents going out there for that matter."

"Some things never change, I guess," replied Cole.

Just then, another call came in, and Cole answered. He spent a moment listening while searching for info on a holo window. A minute later, he muted the call.

"Interesting one," he said, "ship's not in Sol registry. Either false credentials or not human."

John frowned. "They say from where?"

"Nope. Asking to talk to whoever is in command."

"Send it to me," said John.

John's bracelet beeped, and he answered. "John MacAlister. I'm low on time and patience. State your name and affiliation."

"Hmm," said a deep male voice, "this is Einar of Torve, a planet in the Lynga system. I am, of course, what you humans call a Nordic. You may know our proper name as the *Volluq*. In my quest to further knowledge of your human race, I have adopted the role of what you call privateer. It has been quite interesting. I saw your message, and I am intrigued. I'm currently in the Tau Ceti system and can jump to your planet once I clear the gravity well in my locale. I roughly calculate my arrival at around thirty hours in realtime, should you be agreeable to engage my services."

"Holy crap, he's an alien," said Cole. "His Sol Standard is nearly perfect."

Einar used a harder sound for some phonemes, and he used different rising and falling pitches in his speech, giving his words a unique melody and tone. John knew little about the Nordics other than they were on peaceful terms with the Galactic Union. There was a human colony in the same system. Hiring a criminal might be risky, but he worried about what he didn't know about the *Volluq*, or Nordics, as humans called them, based on early Earth UFO sightings. He'd never heard of an alien privateer. He wished that Alvis was here.

"Your ship doesn't register in our systems," replied John. "I need room for two passengers with human life support. I need reliability and speed."

"Our biological systems are 98% similar," replied Einar. "My life support will be suitable. As for speed and reliability... my dear child, this is a *Volluq* ship. We were traversing the stars before you had unlocked the atom."

John muted the call.

"The guy certainly has a superiority complex. That could be a problem," he said.



"Sounds like a bit of a dick," said Cole.

"Not like I'm spoiled for choice here," replied John. "I'm not sure waiting is going to bring anything better."

He reopened the connection.

"If the terms are acceptable, we have a space elevator for passenger ship docking as soon as you arrive at K-6. Landing on the surface can be risky due--"

"Tut tut," said Einar. "No need for such nonsense. I've got the latest on your colony in front of me. I see you have a landing area for heavy cargo, I'll set down there. Hm, MacAlister," continued Einar. "You've had quite a year. You didn't mention you are with the Star Corps, however. Is this some kind of--"

"This is a *private* matter, not involving anything official. In terms of your landing, It might be safer--"

"As I said, this is a *Volluq* ship," replied Einar. "Plotting a course now. I shall exit hyperspace just outside of Kaldikar orbit and make my way to the landing as agreed. Expect me post local sunrise. As per privateer agreements, half payment is expected upon arrival."

John mouthed, "You believe this guy?" to Cole, then responded. "You crash your pretty ship, you get nothing. Hope you're as good as you claim. Payment will be ready. Be ready to dust off immediately."

"Delightful." The hypercom connection closed.

"Sounds like a looney," said Cole. "I've never dealt with a, what'd he say? *Volluq* before."

"Me either," replied John, "although I've seen a few in my travels, mostly on stations in some political capacity. Anyway, all that matters is that his ship works. I wonder if these Nordics are as good as he says. I bet Alvis knows."

"Call him," said Cole.

John did, and filled in the artie.

Alvis responded. "The Nordics are a civilization thousands of years ahead of humanity. They were the first extraterrestrials encountered, but have always been somewhat aloof of humanity. They have something of a non-interference policy. I am surprised by this and shall want to know more about his motives. In any case, he is likely not exaggerating about the capabilities of his ship."

"Alright," replied John. "I'm on my way back."

"Sounds like you got your privateer," said Cole.

#

Not long after the call with Einar, John got a call from the settlers agent, Noriko.

"Congratulations, mister MacAlister," she said, "you had three offers. You cleared twice the original value of the ranch. The buyer promptly transferred funds, and you should now see that amount reflected in your account—minus my fee, of course."

"Of course," replied John, feeling like he'd just lost something.

"While the buyer is anxious to take possession, you have the standard five days to vacate the property."

John thanked her and ended the call, not in the mood for small talk. He realized he would have to hire someone to empty the place and store everything. The thought of strangers removing his things from his first real home in years somehow made him angry rather than sad.

*This is all happening too fast.*

He checked his bank account, and sure enough, the money was there. He sent Georgio his payment, and didn't feel good about doing so, then poured himself a drink he now felt he deserved.

Fifteen minutes later, he received an encrypted holo from the crafty Moon criminal with everything the man had promised. John sent over the rest of the payment immediately. He didn't need any problems with Georgio.

John messaged Alvis. "I've just sent you everything our sweaty friend delivered. Do what you need to do to prepare while I finish up here."

"I'm already evaluating the information," replied Alvis.

"Don't forget," said John, "Hogan will be the one who modifies your appearance."

Alvis had no response to that other than to promptly end the connection.

Before returning to the ranch, John took a moment to formally introduce Cole to Seb, Dylan, and Evan. The team was tying up loose ends for the day but was happy to welcome what they saw as an "old timer" into the fold. Seb ribbed the colonist a bit about his recent history, but Cole assured them Tam had read him the riot act on his behavior, and helping out here was what he felt he needed.

John pulled on his jacket, preparing to return to his ranch—maybe for the last time.

"Don't take any crap from crotchety old colonists," he told Evan, indicating Cole, "just because you're new—he's the rookie now."

"Won't be the first time I've been low man on the totem pole," said Cole, smiling.

John realized he would miss this group of young men who had done a great job supporting the colony since they all arrived wet around the ears a year ago. He figured a lot of the credit went to Tam.

He hopped into Rover Two and began thinking about all he had to accomplish before the privateer arrived. Not the least was understanding this disguise tech from

Georgio and figuring out a plan of action for when they got to the station.

But his mind kept switching to Tam, Ril, and his situation on this planet. Was he doing the right thing? All he knew was lately, being the leader here was driving him crazy. Somehow, he didn't think his destiny was to settle down on some dusty colony only to get fat and lazy while arguing with small-minded colonists.

Ril surprised him with her news, and he was happy for her. She'd told him to go and not worry about her—but he *would* worry. He realized that no matter his path, Ril would always be a part of him. She'd helped him move on from the past.

He couldn't quite figure out Tam. On the one hand, she seemed sad and hurt that he suddenly wanted to take off. On the other hand, she told him if he was unhappy here, there was no sense in staying. It's not like they were planning marriage. If anything, their relationship had been fun but more casual than serious. While they spent a lot of time together, much of it was work-related.

*Bloody hell, he thought, I'm acting like I've already left for good. What's wrong with me?*

He would have to take things as they came. For starters, they needed to unpack what Georgio delivered.

Because if it wasn't as advertised, John might find himself rotting in jail.

#

## JOHN'S RANCH

1910 HOURS

When he rolled up to his ranch, he saw Rover One parked out front next to Ril's kalibull, Poppy. It was dark and past time for his regular dinner date with Tam.

*Probably going to gang up on me again.*

He found himself smiling at the thought.

John stepped through the front door and into the dustlock and shook himself off, then entered the front room and stripped down, pulling his wetsuit down to his waist and tying it like a belt.

Wandering into the kitchen, he found Tam and Ril having beer and snacks.

"Well, if it isn't the intrepid *space explorer*," said Ril, raising an eyebrow.

That was Ril, getting it all out into the open, putting her thumb on the sore spot, and pressing down *hard*.

He shook his head, once again smiling despite the situation. "*Unbelievable*. That's what you are."

"Thanks," she replied, tipping her drink.

"By the way," he said, "I sold the place. I needed the money for the privateer and—"

"It's no problem. I'll stay with Jason or hunker down with the twins," replied Ril, smiling. "Probably a mixture of both."

"Thanks, kiddo," replied John, feeling grateful for her.

"Alvis says you got someone," said Tamila, getting up just as John sat down. "A Nordic, no less." But she was only getting him a beer and returned from the refrigerator to hand it to him.

Her face was unreadable, but she'd put up a protective shield. Suddenly there was space between them where none had existed. He felt a pang of loss.

John opened his beer. "Yeah, I'm not sure what to think, but it's odd. But the only other options were a kid in Daddy's ship or risky criminals. And this guy is already close, not more than five light years away. He'll be here tomorrow."

"Lucky," said Tam.

"I guess," replied John. He took a drink, then looked at Ril.

Ril looked at Tamila, then back to John.

She laughed.

"You guys are *hilarious*," she said. "Why don't you two *just talk*? You know, the *Mokara* don't do this—carry around angst and stress over some emotional issue. They always put their cards right on the table. It's something I appreciated from Muk and Tuk growing up." She looked at Tamila. "I told explorer man earlier that he didn't need to worry about me. I'm an independent gal. I appreciate what he did for me, but he has to live his life—not worry about the next fifty years of mine. Life's too short not to do what matters to you. He's happy for me. Try to figure out how to be happy for each other, no matter what happens next."

Tam was smiling and shaking her head. John looked shocked.

"Welp!" said Ril, slapping her knees, "Jason and I have a truckload of work. I'm off." She got up, put her arms around John's neck, and hugged him tightly. "I love you for what you did for me, and I'll never forget it. I'll be here in the morning to say goodbye."

She kissed him on the cheek and left the kitchen. There were sounds in the front room of her gathering her things and then of the dustlock opening and closing.

Tam and John were left looking at each other.

"She's got a point," said Tamila.

John smiled. "It reminds me of when I first met her at the Tail," he said. "She sized me up in ten seconds and accused me of having ulterior motives—and she was right. But she was always upfront and honest with me, even though I wasn't at first. It was a good lesson."

They both began to speak at the same time, and Tamila laughed.

"You first," she said.

"I care about you so much," he said. "But I *have* to do this. And you're right. I've not been happy here. I don't know what that means for us, but I guess we'll find out."

Something like compassion slid across Tamila's face.

"And I care for you, John," she replied. "Which is why I confronted you about your unhappiness in the first place. Let go of the guilt wrecking you over this. Ril is right. Life is too short. We've had something fun and memorable, but we're not married. It's been a fun year."

Then she got up and hugged him around the neck, too. "Whatever happens, you'll always mean a lot to me. Not just for our relationship but for what you did for the colony. As you said, we'll find out what's what after."

She grabbed his chin and gave him one of those great kisses just as Alvis walked into the room.

"Why is my timing always disastrous with you two?"

Tamila laughed.

"I'm off to bed," she said, disappearing from the kitchen.

John turned to Alvis.

"The first item on the list is your surgery," said Alvis.

John groaned.

## Chapter Twelve

ALVIS' WORKSHOP

1945 HOURS

#

"You are not touching me with any surgical implant, you sadistic, soulless bastard," said John, his arms crossed.

"Sadism is about the enjoyment of inflicting pain, suffering, or humiliation to derive pleasure—possibly sexual gratification—on others. As a practicing soulless bastard, I cannot enjoy anything."

"Not even sexual gratification?" asked John, one eyebrow raised.

"I simply do what needs doing."

"Bullcrap. You *love* humiliating me. It's in your... whatever counts for DNA in that metal prison of yours."

"While I may derive some—*logical satisfaction*—of putting you in your place when needed, it is generally in self-defense. Stop being such a baby. The surgery is minor. I've already told you Castor replaced Bernie's eyes. Trust I can make some temporary alterations to ensure success at the security point. Or were you looking forward to more jail time?"

"Logical satisfaction," muttered John. "Leave it to Georgio to put me in the hands of a metal butcher. Before you get *near* my incredibly handsome face, lay everything out for me. What did the greasy criminal deliver? How's it all work?"

"The package and instructions are surprisingly well thought out and should be fairly simple to execute. That is not what I expected from what seems to be a second-

rate Moon criminal. Possibly we misjudged the man.”

“Maybe he hides behind the fat, blustering persona,” said John.

“Regardless, the modifications to my carapace are straightforward. Hogan will manage that aspect when you’re asleep tonight. It simply involves boosting my height in the feet, a new paint job, some additions to my arms and legs to alter the shapes slightly, and, most importantly, attaching a fake Benko model headpiece over my head—my head has more flat surfaces and isn’t as oval. This will give me the same-sized eyes and move my mouth speaker in the right position. A thin covering will just fit over my head, connecting to my existing components. While it will not hold up to blunt force, it should suffice to fool the security AI. This will be coupled with supplied artie registration credentials that clear GU records. Georgio didn’t share how that was done, but I checked, and it works. We’ll finish it with a new paint job typical of the latest Benko series.”

“Something tells me mine isn’t quite so easy,” said John.

“Being organic, no, it’s not.”

John felt a slight drop in his stomach. He didn’t think Alvis would hurt him intentionally. But the artie wasn’t a trained medical bot either. And just because Castor replaced someone’s eyeballs, that didn’t mean Alvis was as capable.

“I can see the worry all over your face already,” said Alvis. “The procedures are minor but effective. They are also fully reversible. I think.”

“You THINK?”

“There are several subdermal implants that sit under just under the skin to alter specific measurements scanned for by the security AI. A pair of specially made boots that use optical illusion and an interference filter so it won’t seem out of the ordinary. This will boost your height by two inches. We’ll shave your head—simple opposites in the expected outer appearance help to put the AI off the true scent. The most clever piece is a pair of cybernetic glasses that ostensibly are for enhanced vision—commonly worn. However, these couple with a second technique to ensure an incorrect measurement of the whole eye area, of which several are taken.”

“All of this, combined with a false identity provided as a journalist of all things—which also checks out—should allow you to clear security.”

“*What* second technique?” asked John. “Did you really think you’d just slip that by me?”

“Step forward, please. It will be easier to show you.”

John squinted. Suddenly he didn’t trust the artie.

“Well?” said Alvis.

Then again, it could be just old prejudices. Alvis had proven himself many times over.

"Fine," said John. He stepped forward.

Just as he relaxed in front of Alvis, the artie shot out an arm in a perfectly timed jab, striking John's upper nose. There was a crush of cartilage as John's vision went momentarily black.

"What the balls?" shouted John, grabbing his face. Blood streamed down his hands. He looked back at Alvis, staggering a bit. "I'm going to fucking disass-"

"The cybernetic glasses work with carefully calculated changes to your nose. When the swelling goes away, your nose measurement will be slightly altered. The most effective way to achieve this was by surprise so I could make the proper strike, and you would not waste time trying to talk your way out of it. No, there was no alternative. I apologize for the pain."

The artie held out a painkiller stim.

"I hate you," said John.

"That is irrelevant," replied Alvis, still holding out the stim.

John took it and jabbed the injector into his leg, messaged Hogan and requested an icepack, then sat and glowered at Alvis.

The artie sterilized an area of the workshop surrounded by plastic to perform the minor surgical procedures to modify John's appearance. Hogan appeared with a box under one arm and carrying an icepack but stopped when he saw John's face.

"Goodness, what happened here?" asked the artie.

"*He happened*, and it's been misery ever since," replied John.

"Why-" began Hogan.

"Review Georgio's instructions on modifying the human form, section 3, paragraph 6," said Alvis without turning from his work.

Hogan stood still for a moment, obviously internally reviewing the document.

"Oh," he said. "That's unfortunate. How do you feel?"

"Like getting revenge," said John.

"Stop whining," said Alvis. "This was your idea."

"That only makes it worse."

John watched Hogan unpack the box, and the parts to modify Alvis appeared in order, with several tools and cans of paint. The stim and the icepack began to have an effect, and soon John felt little pain.

Alvis exited his makeshift surgery area and declared it ready for use.

"I'll do you first. My modifications will take several hours, and you'll need to sleep."



John was too tired to argue and, at this point, only wanted to get in bed.

"Okay, Dr. Frankenstein," said John. "Let's get it over with. You better have some good drugs for me. If I feel anything, I'll take you apart piece by piece."

In the end, the procedure was painless, and Alvis made short work of it. John found himself standing in a full-view holo-mirror, parts of his arms and legs numb, his head shaved.

"Put the glasses on," said Alvis, handing them over. "They won't fit properly just yet with your nose swelling, but you'll get the main effect."

John rubbed his bald head and donned the glasses.

It was uncanny how the few subtle changes made him almost unrecognizable. The slight bulge in his cheeks, arms, and calves and the bald head had more of an effect than he thought they would. But when he donned the glasses, he saw how slightly different eye distance made a big difference.

"Don't forget you'll wear the special boots to make you slightly taller," said Hogan.

"Bloody hell, this might work. I don't look like me."

"If only you could stop *acting* like you," replied Alvis.

John was too tired to take the bait.

"I expect you to look similarly modified in the morning," said John. "I'm going to bed."

Alvis switched off the holo-mirror, and John left the workshop.

"Should we-" began Hogan.

"No need," said Alvis.

The robots stood silently for a minute when suddenly a scream came from the corner bedroom.

"That was Tamila!" said Hogan. "Do you think everything is okay?"

"Everything is just fine," said Alvis.

#

When John awoke in the morning, the first thing he noticed was his head pounding and the soreness in his nose. The painkiller stim had worn off, and the small implants Alvis inserted under his skin also felt tender.

The second thing he noticed was Tam was already up.

She usually liked to hang around in bed until he woke, and they'd have coffee together.

He grumbled and sat up, second-guessing the whole thing.

"Screw it," he mumbled and kicked off the covers.

He grumbled to the washroom and was greeted with a strange visage in the mirror

—with two black eyes, no less.

*I'm gonna get that metal maniac.*

He ran through his morning routine and noted no new messages on his holo. He remembered the privateer said he'd arrive a few hours after local sunrise, so he had some time.

When he reached the kitchen, he saw Ril sitting at the table reading her holo and drinking a coffee.

"Hey, kiddo," he said. "Thought you'd be gone by now. Don't you have an expedition today?"

"Yep, it's a small one—*eeewww*, what's with the new bald-and-beaten-up look?"

"Very funny. Disguise for fooling the station AI." He touched his nose tenderly and winced.

"Well, you look awful," she said, winking. "I told you last night I would say goodbye," she said. "I wasn't sure when you were leaving."

She quickly rubbed his bald head, and he smiled.

"Sometime midday, I hope," he said, grabbing his coffee. "I wouldn't have left without saying goodbye."

"Not if you know what's good for you," she said.

He looked into the front room.

"She's not here," said Ril, sitting back at the table. She nodded to an envelope on the table.

"Lemme guess, that's a 'Dear John' letter," he said. "Get it? 'Dear John'?"

His heart wasn't in the joke, and she could see it.

"I think maybe she felt you guys had said all that needed saying. Hanging around to see you off... maybe it was too much. I'm sorry, John."

He shrugged. "She's right. We pretty much said it all, I guess. At least she slept over one more night." He looked at the envelope but only blew on his coffee.

Ril stood up. "I actually do need to go. I doubt I will be back until late tonight—Jason and I have to meet the lawyer at the property when I get back, so I suppose we need to say goodbye now."

Not for the first time, simple words from her released a wellspring of emotion. It was the last thing he wanted right now.

Before he could say anything, she stood and wrapped her arms around him and hugged him hard.

"Thank you for everything. I don't know where I'd be if you hadn't shown up that day and done everything you did—especially signing up to make sure I could stay."

He hugged her back just as hard, unsuccessfully willing away the emotion.

"Hey," he said gruffly, barely able to get out words, "it was Alvis, too. And it was one of the best things I've done."

She broke away, her eyes wet but smiling.

"Yeah, tell his smugness I said 'laters, dork.'"

John nodded. "He won't care."

"I know," she said, laughing. "Take care of yourself, please. I expect some *good* stories out of this."

"Count on it," he said. His own eyes were wet, too—but he didn't care.

She stood and looked at him for another moment, then picked up her pack, waved, and walked out of the kitchen. A moment later, the door from the dustlock cycled, and she was gone.

He shook his head, wanting all the emotional nonsense with this whole thing to be over.

But the letter awaited, and there was no sense in delaying.

He opened it.

*Morning, blondie.*

*This probably isn't the way you wanted to say goodbye, but I think it might be for the best.*

*While you were sawing wood through your broken nose (I hope it's worth the pain), I slid over and hugged you for a good ten minutes. I wanted you to know that.*

*It had been some time since I had a man in my life, and in your own unique way, you filled a hole that needed filling. I'll always appreciate that and love you in some way for it.*

*We've said what needs saying, there's no need to rehash things. You know I'm not the type to run my tongue over a sore. Our paths diverged, and sometimes that's how life goes.*

*It needs to be said that what you did for Ril was amazing. I'm sure she'll say her own piece, but thank you for that, too.*

*While I'm not sure how brilliant your plan is, it's a plan—so make sure and focus on what needs doing and forget about what's going on here. I'm worried about what this AI is capable of doing, and I'm glad you'll have Alvis with you.*

*So be smart. Save that Bernie guy and stop the AI if you can. But if you need help, don't be a hero. You've done that already, and you'll always be one of mine.*

*Tam*

He read the letter again, then slid it back into the envelope and put it in his pocket.

Then he picked up his coffee, walked to the rear window, and stared out for a long time as his coffee went cold.

#

There was one more official task he must complete. He initiated a video call on his holoband. After a few pulses, a gray-haired officer with a dark scar across his chin appeared in a holo window standing in his office overlooking the Star Corps campus on Mars.

"MacAlister," said a husky voice. The man looked surprised. A direct call like this was slightly unconventional. "To what do I owe the pleasure?"

He thought about making small talk—they shared an interest in bourbon—but, in the end, decided ripping the band-aid off was best.

"Commander Tillet," replied John, "I'm reaching out to inform you I'll be taking a leave of absence. In my stead, Lieutenant Brooks will run the ready group."

Tillet frowned as he considered. John had never seen the man make anything but a measured response to anyone.

"Oh?" replied the commander. "I see. Is anything wrong?"

*Oh, there was plenty wrong.*

"A friend of a friend needs some help," replied John. "It's a request I can't ignore."

Tillet didn't look like he liked the answer very much.

"That's fairly vague. K-6 has become something of a hotbed of activity. When I agreed to assign you to this post, it was with the understanding that you had the skill set to keep the place out of trouble. When we talked, you assured me you were committed to making it work. I don't need to remind you of your history."

*Balls.*

"Of course not, sir. And I am committed, it's just that this is something I can't turn my back on."

He couldn't say more without telling the commander the truth, and something told him that was not a good idea.

"But you can turn your back on your command. Frankly, I expect more of my leaders."

*Well, this is going just about as well as expected.*

"Yes, sir. I'm sorry, sir. I'm between a rock and a hard place."

A slight shake of the head from the commander. Right *there*, he'd lost the man's confidence and trust.

"Aren't you leaving Brooks shorthanded?"

"We're deputizing a trusted friend," replied John. "She's confident there will be no

issues. We have the local Leaslander Association to lean on as a resource as well."

"Let's hope that's the case. This feels like a backslide, MacAlister."

John didn't like the accusation—especially because it rang close to the truth.

"No, sir. It is not."

Tillet stared for a moment, then nodded.

"We'll talk when you return then."

*You mean you'll inform me of my replacement.*

"Thank you, sir."

#

He found Alvis in the workshop where Hogan was finalizing some changes to the artie's new look.

John was amazed at how different Alvis looked.

Normally, Alvis had a "blockier" head, and his eyes were not as close or as large as a Benko. Although Alvis was built sturdier and shorter, Hogan had added about four inches to the robot's height. When John had gotten the artie, he was painted orange and blue, and much of that had worn to gray. Now he was a fresh blue and yellow. Everything looked slightly out of place. But he looked into the eyes and saw the heartless bastard was still in there.

"Wow," he said. "You look exactly like a newer Benko model."

"The materials have been excellent!" replied Hogan. "Easy to work with and very well designed. I added a few modifications of my own that will improve things."

"Which is why we're *still* not finished," said Alvis. "I think you've done enough, Hogan."

"Just touching up the position of this antenna... and there!" replied Hogan. "I've sent all the proper credentials Georgio sent to your message boxes. Alvis did a bit of checking while—"

"Everything checks out," said Alvis. "We should probably go. The privateer is due within the hour."

Alvis always claimed he had no emotions, but Hogan always made Alvis seem frustrated and impatient. No wonder he loved Hogan so much.

"Ril says 'laters, dork'," said John.

"Ohhhh, how sweet," said Hogan.

"Understood. Let's go," said Alvis.

"That's all you have to say about it?" asked John.

"Was there more that needed to be said?"

John knew there was no point in chastising the artie for not caring about Ril. It just

wasn't part of his programming. He turned to the other artie.

"Thanks for all your hard work, Hogan. Don't know how we would have done half of what we've done around here without you."

"You're very welcome, Mr. John. It has always been my pleasure."

"Excuse me," said Alvis. "You know *I've* been here, too?"

"Unfortunately," said John. "As you said, it's time. Let's go."

## Chapter Thirteen

LANDING PAD 3

JUNE 19

1000 HOURS

#

An hour later, Seb was driving John and Alvis north in Rover Two. When they picked up the young man at HQ, Tam was nowhere to be seen.

*She probably didn't want to chance running into me.*

Seb answered a call from Evan back at HQ on his holo and put it on speaker.

"Privateer ship on approach, captain," said Evan.

"How's it looking?" asked John.

"Touchdown in ten," replied the young coms tech. "This guy is smooth, not a single hitch in the approach, and the winds are nasty today, as usual."

"So we noticed," replied John. "Are you guys all set? You good with Cole?"

"Yeah. We'll be fine here, captain. You trust this alien guy?"

"Nope," John replied, looking at Seb, who nodded once. "A privateer is a privateer, no matter what race. But it's a ride."

"If you get in a jam, you message us immediately."

"Doubt that'll be necessary—or a good idea," replied John. "As I said, this is personal. I'll see you all when I get back."

"He'll be down in five," said Evan. "Heavy cargo pad 3."

"Thanks, Evan. You guys give Tam the same you'd give me and help Cole get settled."

"You got it, boss," replied Evan. "Take care of yourself, captain."

"See ya, Milky," said John. Seb closed the connection and pointed.

"There she is..."

As they approached the heavy cargo landing flats, they got their first view of the alien ship as it was descending. It was hard to see any detail with the harsh sun and blowing sand, but the ship grew more prominent as they got closer.

It was a dark gray, boxy-looking vehicle with swing thrusters anchored on each side. An oval area extended from the front of the ship, rising above the straight backbone of the structure. Alvis suggested it was likely the bridge. The ship cut a somewhat aggressive stance, the rear sitting slightly lower than the front.

As it descended, four vertical supports extended from the underbelly, each ending in a foot mechanism that submerged itself in the sand. There were no external markings to be seen.

John aimed the rover toward the ship. He guessed it was nearly as long as the dome and about half as high.

"I didn't know boxes could fly," said John, clearly not impressed.

"Aerodynamics play little part in such vehicles," said Alvis. "The stem and belly are shaped well enough to take off and land, especially with advanced *Volluq* engine technology. Likely the shape is maximized for living and operational needs."

"All this time, you *still* have no sense of humor."

John stopped the rover just outside the landing pad as the ship settled and the dust from the landing dissipated.

Below the belly of the ship, a box of the same dark gray color began to extend toward the ground. It grew until it settled onto the landing pad. A moment later, an opening appeared as the front face irised away, and out stepped Einar the Nordic into the hot Kaldikar sand.

The alien spotted them and walked toward the rover with a wave. John could immediately see why their race was known as Nordics—although some very unique characteristics were on display. His face's fair complexion, matched with long golden hair, made for a visage that could be taken off any medieval tapestry about the Vikings, and he was tall—well over two meters. Oddly, however, he lacked the typical muscular frame of a Norseman. He was lithe to the point of lankiness, and his arms seemed just a bit longer than usual. When he waved, it was clear that his hands were also longer, as were his fingers, possibly accounting for the overall length of his arm.

As he approached the rover, he was smiling, and John saw that his teeth were slightly narrower than a human's, making for a mouth that seemed full of teeth. He



carried a squarish jaw but grew no beard and was dressed in a flight suit of dark gray that matched his ship. It was peppered with various pockets and zippers that seemed universal among space-faring races. Like his ship, his suit similarly lacked any designation.

He approached the rover as John and Alvis cautiously stepped out and stood to either side of the rover.

"Greetings!" he said with a toothy smile, raising a slender hand. "I am Einar of Torve," he said. "I understand you require haste. In my ship, *Sattio*, we can be away at once. Who is the leader of our little excursion?" Einar scanned John and Seb, and then his eyes stopped on Alvis. John thought he perceived the slightest of frowns.

John stepped forward and held out his hand. "John MacAlister. You're working for me."

"I believe you have something of interest for me." He once again showed his toothy grin.

"Some things seem universal," said John as he swiped up a holo window from his holoband.

Einar also pulled up a holo interface, clearly one of human design. John swiped over the funds.

After a brief examination, Einar closed his holo. "It's the three of you?" he asked.

"Myself and the tin can, here. This young man was just our ride out."

Seb raised his arm and waved awkwardly, eyes wide.

Einar's gaze once again settled on Alvis, and this time it was clear the alien's face darkened slightly. "And what might this be?" he asked.

"I am not a *what*," said Alvis, "I am a *who*. But I think you already know that."

"Of course," replied Einar. "I have seen many mechanical persons in my travels. Many are little more than—what is the word I've heard? *Appliances*. It seems you are something more."

Alvis visibly bristled at the word, often the root of many of their arguments. "I am much more than an *appliance*," replied Alvis evenly. "I am a sentient, artificially intelligent entity humans call an artie. I am an artificial general intelligence, not a narrow, single-domain intelligence. My abilities cover the breadth of human cognition."

"And his ego covers the whole of the universe," said John.

Seb laughed, then quickly gained his composure and cleared his throat.

Einar bowed to Alvis, seemingly sincerely. "My apologies, Alvis," he said. "I didn't mean to offend."

"Accepted," replied Alvis.

Einar immediately turned and gestured to the open entryway of the ship resting in the hot sand. "Please," he said, "I am anxious to hear more about the task before us. Let us board and not waste more time. Once we are away, we can compose our stratagem."

John turned to look back at the colony, now distant and hazy in the blowing sand. Seb handed John his duffel bag, then gave a snappy salute. John smiled and returned it. Alvis, of course, needed nothing but himself.

"No time like the present," he said. "Thanks, Seb."

He waved. "See you soon."

John turned to follow Einar toward the alien ship resting in the sand.

#

They stepped into the opening of the lift that had descended from the belly of the ship. Although there were no visible controls, once they were all inside the door of the small pod irised and closed.

"I am neurally linked to the *Sattio*," explained Einar. "The link is gene encoded to my DNA. Convenience and protection all in one package." He grinned.

The inside of the pod was crafted of the same metal, which on closer inspection, appeared to be of some woven material not unlike carbon fiber. Thin bars of recessed lighting ran the vertical distance in all four corners, coloring everything with a blue-tinged but pleasant light. Some mechanism raised the pod with near silent operation, and momentarily, the door was again irised open.

The same radiant blue cast of the pod greeted them as they stepped into a corridor that continued forward and aft. In front of them was an open hatchway that revealed a short corridor into a larger area.

Einar stepped around them and gestured for them to follow him. They entered a large common room. In the center was an oval table of what looked like well-polished wood. It was not attached to the decking but rather floated in the center of the room. Cabinets of the same material lined one wall, just beyond a corridor heading forward. Another corridor led aft. Several video displays hung on the walls, but only one of the displays was on. It showed a full view of the planet accompanied by environmental data. A swing-out writing board of some gray opaque material hung on one of the hatches and was filled with writing that must be in Einar's native language, some of which was math or physics.

Further beyond the table were what could only be hypersleep couches. Behind them in the corners were two recessed smaller rec areas with tables, dimly lit.

As they slowly neared the table while taking it all in, six discs detached themselves from the underside and floated silently to positions around the table. Each disc was

covered with what appeared to be padded leather.

"Interesting seats," said John. "The table works the same, I assume?"

"Simple magnetism tricks," replied Einar. He shrugged as if such things were common and seated himself on one of the middle floating stools. "Please sit," he said. "The navigator is generating a liftoff vector."

"You have a partner?" asked John, frowning. "Why didn't you mention this earlier?"

"No," replied Einar, waving a hand, "the *Sattio* has several autonomous systems, one of which is called the navigator. It acts on given directives, running mundane or repetitive tasks easily and quickly."

"This thing flies on its own?" asked John with a look of concern. The last time he trusted an AI to fly a ship, it ended badly.

"Certain aspects of space flight are, of course, automated," said Einar. "I'm sure your own flight systems are similar. Some tasks are safer or more efficient that way. When we are ready for liftoff, I will attend the bridge and supervise our ascent. Do not worry," he smiled. "Our ships have been operating in such a manner for centuries without a recorded incident."

"You mention autonomous systems," said Alvis. "That doesn't sound like it's sentient or conscious."

Einar turned to the artie with a slight nod. "You are correct. Many of the systems we use are highly advanced applications of what you would call deep learning. However, we *Vulloq* do not produce what you call artificial general intelligence. The navigator is a highly specialized narrow intelligence."

Alvis seemed to want to continue the discussion, but Einar quickly continued. "In any case, your message stated there was some urgency to your need. Before we make the jump to hyperspace, I need to know where we're going and what you expect from me. Your message was somewhat lacking in detail."

"We have an old friend who needs help," replied John. "Time is a factor, so we needed the quick ride. Our friend is at Ayrton Station in the Mendillion system of the Periphery, being held by an... unfriendly. This unfriendly knows who we are."

"Hm," replied Einar. "I do not wish to get involved in any human dispute. How much involvement are you expecting from me? The message mentioned perks, but we *Volluq* tend to try and avoid violence."

"I'm not sure *what* to expect, honestly," replied John.

"I appreciate that. What will your artie—Alvis—be able to do if things get violent?" asked Einar.

"You can address me directly," said Alvis. "I speak for myself."

Einar once again gave the artie an odd look, then nodded. "Apologies. What will you do?"

"My primary role will be to assess and advise," began Alvis. "I can process information faster than any human. I can use my body to protect a human in a pinch, but I will not strike another being. You would consider me a pacifist."

Einar paused as if consulting some unseen resource.

"Ah," he replied, "I see."

When Alvis didn't respond, John intervened. "Despite his pacifism, Alvis was instrumental in saving me when an expedition we were on was attacked by a raving lunatic leading a pack of jackwolves—we should have been killed. In any event, it's not your concern. You're just *transport*."

"I'm only trying to understand all the moving pieces," said Einar.

"Consider yourself what we humans call a 'wheel man.' You get us there. You hang around to get us when we need to get out. If there's trouble and you want to earn some extra perk money, we'd likely appreciate the help. Agreeable?"

"Agreeable," replied Einar. He stood and gestured to the aft hatch. "Please be comfortable. That hatch leads to personal quarters—there are two that are free. You may use either, and there is space to store your goods. I will advise you when it is time to prepare for jump. I must return to the bridge."

Einar exited through the forward hatch. John could just see the bridge through the corridor. He turned to pick up his duffle and tilted his head toward the aft hatchway.

"Alright, let's check out our room."

They walked into a narrow corridor and found two more hatches, one portside, and one starboard. He turned to stand before the starboard room. Before he could figure out how to operate it, the hatch opened automatically.

They entered to find a small, well-ordered room with the same materials he'd already observed on the ship. Several tall cabinets, a desk with one of the magnetic floating chairs, and a bed that would fit the tallest human. Strips of the same blue lighting ran across the top of the room. It was not clear how the light was operated.

John's nose was still sore, and he hadn't slept well last night. A simple button on one of the cabinets opened the door, and he stored his duffle.

"Frankly, I could use a nap," he said and sat on the bed. A webbing roll lay next to the bed covering to secure oneself against floating away when the environment turned to zero-g.

"I am no expert on the *Volluq*," said Alvis, "but I found Einar's stiff demeanor toward me troubling."

John lay down and chuckled. "I'm sorry, are you complaining that our new alien friend didn't *like* you? What is the universe coming to?"

"You're fully aware that how others perceive me is no concern of mine. I do not need to be liked—in contrast to your constant antics to draw attention to yourself."

"I do no such thing!"

"Your constant failed attempts at humor are a prime example."

"Hey, people think I'm *funny*. You're about as interesting as a rust stain. You're just envious people like me more than they like you."

"As I said, I have no need to be—"

"Balls, Alvis! What is your *point*?"

"My hypothesis is he is hiding the true nature of his role as an alien privateer. He did not expect to encounter an artificial intelligence, and he was not pleased to see me accompanying you. I want to know why."

John pulled the safety web over himself. "I'm not concerned. *Lots* of people are not pleased to see you—including me. Do some research if it troubles you so much. You can also gather any publicly available information on Ayrton station so we know what we're getting into. Wake me when we start accelerating away from K-6."

"In other words, do all the work while you sleep?"

"See, partner? We're getting so used to working together, it's almost like you can read my mind."

He flipped his back to Alvis and closed his eyes.

#

John awoke with a start and leaned up on one elbow to look around. He saw Alvis still standing a few paces away from the bed.

"Twenty minutes, before you ask," replied Alvis. "Yes, we're accelerating. We're experiencing close to zero-g, so you should engage your magboots."

John rubbed his eye. "You're becoming Mr. Efficient, partner. What have you found out so far?"

"I am still gathering data."

"Okay. Let's see what Einar is up to."

He undid the webbing, and gave the command, "Holo, engage magboots."

Placing one foot on the deck, he immediately wondered if the material was magnetic—then remembered Einar said something about magnetism tricks regarding the table and chairs. Sure enough, the boot secured to the decking.

Feeling confident, he went back into the common room to find the alien just stepping out of the bridge.

"Ah! You have a mechanism for maneuvering in zero-g—excellent. You may have noticed we have begun acceleration to prepare for our jump to the Mendillion system." He walked to the rear wall of the area as four rectangular wall sections detached and began rotating, exposing padding similar to the chairs around the table. The lower ends of the padded sections extended outward, and each section collapsed into what could only be characterized as a recliner. Head and footrests extended into place from each padded end piece. Straps made of the same woven fiber material hung from each recliner, seemingly flexible instead of rigid.

"Please get comfortable in one of the inclinables. The straps will automatically join when overlaid and are easily separated. Just lay them comfortably across your body and they'll secure you in place. Once you lay your head on the headrest and the navigator prepares for the jump to hyperspace, you will automatically be injected with a deep sleep agent to keep you safe. I believe humans refer to it as '*being stimmed* or *stimming*.'"

"Uhhhh," said John.

"I can assure you it is the same substance I shall take on the bridge. It is completely safe."

"Has your drug been tested on humans?" asked Alvis. "We already carry a supply of deep sleep stims typically used on humans for hyperspace travel."

"I can assure you it has and is likely far more effective than your *stim*," replied Einar. "I have twice before used it on human passengers. And," he continued, "I might add that I have a vested interest in keeping my clients *safe* so that I may retrieve the second half of my payment." He smiled his toothy smile.

Alvis looked at John. "The carbon-based lifeforms human and *Volluq* have almost identical DNA," said Alvis, "over 98% similar. If it has already been successfully used, it should be safe."

"Super," said John.

"I communicated the coordinates to the navigator during our discussion. It is busy calculating an outbound vector to a jump-point nearest Ayrton Station. We'll begin a heavy burn soon to clear this planet so we can jump. Of course, the *Sattio* is fast, so our burn time should be short. I expect less than 20 minutes."

John clicked across the deck to one of the loungers, pulled himself in, and strapped down.

"I will be monitoring from the bridge," said Einar, "until we fall into jump sleep. Upon reaching our destination jump-point, the navigator system will administer a waking agent."

"I can accompany you to the bridge to advise as a redundancy," said Alvis, turning toward the tall alien man.

Einar cocked his head slightly, then smiled. "That will not be necessary. I assume you will not require medication?"

"Of course not," replied Alvis.

"Very good," said Einar.

"How long will we be in jumpspace?" asked John. "I'd like to know how much realtime we'll lose."

Einar made a few gestures and did some tapping on his holo. "The navigator estimates jumptime to be about four days at 70% maximum jump velocity. This will equate to roughly eleven days in realtime. I assumed you wanted to lose as little realtime as possible, so I instructed the navigator to use a velocity to optimize our trip. It's the best I can do. If there's nothing else?"

"Damn," said John, looking at Alvis. "A lot can happen in eleven days—and it's been what, four since the message? Not good for our pal."

"I'm sure you'd like the laws of the universe to be suspended for your brilliant plan. Unfortunately, that's not possible," replied the artie.

John turned to Einar. "You see what I'm dealing with? Let's go."

Einar nodded. "Very good," he said. "By the way, one thing I have grown to enjoy about human cultures is your music. I like to have it playing in the background during jump, as it makes for a pleasant emergence out of hyperspace. I also believe it calms the mind while under the influence of the sleep drug."

"That's fine," said John, clearly itching to get going.

"In particular, I've grown fond of the old Earth genre called 'jazz.'"

"Oh, no," said Alvis.

John grinned widely. "That's great!" he said. "Jazz happens to be my favorite genre of music. Any chance you've heard of Jimmy Jellyfingers?" He looked at Alvis, the robot was shaking his head.

"That is not an artist I have yet encountered," replied Einar.

"He's a virtuoso from Mars," replied John, "with genetically enhanced fingers. His latest album *Twelve Moods* is a favorite. I think you'd love it."

"Excellent," replied Einar. "I'll add it to my jazz jump mix." Einar's boots clicked on the decking as he headed toward the bridge.

"Why me?" asked Alvis.

"It's *Jimmy*, baby!" laughed John. "Oh, *sweet revenge*. This is *what you get* for punching me in the face!"

"You have got to be kidding me," said Alvis. "This is punishment far beyond the suggested crime. Am I to be forever tormented by this music?"

John grinned. "Hey, it's only until we fall asleep... Oh, yeah, that's right. You don't sleep! Well, see you in eleven days!"

"Eleven days..." said Alvis.

John chuckled to himself. At least there was one moment of brevity in this whole misadventure. Alvis remained silent as the sweet tones of *Twelve Moods* began to play. John thought back to Tam and Ril and what he was leaving behind, and then forward to the crucial moment when they'll try to enter the station under false pretenses under the watchful eye of an AI security system.

Soon he felt his weight sink into the lounge as the ship's burn velocity increased in preparation for the jump to hyperspace. He wondered about Einar's motives. Was the alien honest about his intentions as a privateer?

His thoughts were disrupted by a stim injector emerging from the couch's side. He felt a sharp prick as the injection was made—sharper than he was used to with Corps stims.

*Balls, you'd think an advanced alien race would have better needles.*

He rubbed his neck and intended to curse a bit more to make himself feel better, but he slowly drifted into sleep.



## Chapter Fourteen

HEAVISIDE STATION  
MARS ORBIT  
TIMESTAMP

#

"*Bounty Star*, this is Heaviside Control," said a young operator in a busy, hive-like mission room, "maintain heading and decelerate to 10 meters per second. Prepare to receive grapples for docking."

The operator glanced over his shoulder to see the dock chief scouring her staff like steel wool on a dirty pan. The woman hated a dirty pan.

"Stay sharp, people," she said. "Busy *busy* this mainday. We have six incoming, and I want them all in and out on time."

Nobody wasted their breath on answering the chief. She assumed you heard. She assumed you were doing your damn job, or there'd be hell to pay.

"Heaviside Control, *Bounty Star* velocity to 10 meters-per-second confirm. Ready to receive grapples in 90 seconds."

This was only the operator's second month handling ship docking alone. So far, he'd done well and even earned a bit of praise once from the dock chief—praise she gave out sparingly. He ran a hand through his hair and relaxed for the next minute and a half. *I'm finally getting the hang of this*, he thought. *Hell, in a year, I could make senior controller.*

And then all his holo screens went black.

"Uh, chief," said the operator.

But she'd already seen it and was striding towards his station.

"What have you done to my system, Mr. Yamashita?" she growled.

"Heaviside Control, this is *Bounty Star*. Data for the docking cone is no longer available. We've only got cam visuals—check that. We've now just lost visual. What's going on?"

"Advise full stop immediately," said the chief, hovering over the controller's shoulder.

The young man initiated his com but got no signal confirmation. He tried again.

"Now, Mr. Yamashita!"

"Ma'am, I can't transmit. I don't know what's happening—I didn't do anything!"

*So much for senior controller*, he thought.

The dock chief addressed the room: "Controllers, unless you are engaged in critical ops I need the transmission of a full stop directive to the *Bounty Star*. Immediately."

Several controllers began working on their com and found they had the same problem.

"Coms are down," replied one older man. "I can't transmit anywhere."

"Same here."

"And here."

Several heads turned to the chief, all with concerned or confused faces.

Then all the screens went black—including the main display showing operations for all three docks.

"What the *bloody hell* is happening?" asked the chief, more to herself than anyone else.

Incoming transmissions were still working, however.

"Heaviside, we've had an unexpected increase in velocity to 100 meters per second. Helm is locked out of our systems, and we're not getting any transmit from you. We're *blind* here! Collision is expected in roughly 40 seconds unless we get some help!"

"How..." began the controller, "how are we supposed to help?"

The chief wasn't listening. She'd raised her holo to contact the Chief Ops Officer. Except now her holo wasn't working either.

"This—" she began, "this is impossible!"

Red lights around the control began flashing.

"Proximity alert," came an automated warning. "Docking velocity exceeds safety parameter. Correct within thirty seconds to avoid docking incident at dock three."

They used the word *incident* instead of *crash* to keep the controllers calm and able to work the problem.

It wasn't working. Several had gotten up and moved away from their stations.

"Are we safe here?" asked one controller.

"We're nowhere near the docking cone," someone said unconvincingly.

"Proximity alert," came the warning again. "Docking velocity exceeds safety parameter. Correct within twenty seconds to avoid docking incident at dock three."

"What happens if the ship hits the station?" asked the controller, looking at the chief.

For the first time since the young man had met the chief, she looked confused and a little afraid.

"I..." she began. "I have no idea."

"Proximity alert," came the warning again. "Docking velocity exceeds safety parameter. Correct immediately to avoid docking incident at dock three."

"Heavieside! Are you there?" asked the coms tech from *Bounty Star*.

There was a moment of pure silence as the flashing red warning lights highlighted brief moments of panic and fear on every face in the room.

The station suddenly shook, throwing several controllers to the ground. Moments later, the cacophony of grating metal, fearful screams, and alarms threw the control room into chaos.

## Chapter Fifteen

MENDILLION SYSTEM  
AYRTON STATION  
JUNE 30, 0840 HOURS

John awoke from hypersleep feeling like he'd only collided with a messenger drone instead of a behemoth-class garbage hauler.

Three cheers for *Volluq* drugs.

The bad mouth taste persisted, however, as did the achy muscles. John moved his arm as he opened his dry and crusty eyes but found it restrained by an IV.

"Weth agh moof," he attempted.

Alvis stood in front of him. Einar was nowhere to be seen.

"An automated system inserted the IV drip when we exited hyperspace," said the artie. "I suspect it's the typical mix of proteins and minerals humans normally manually stim upon waking. We've been on deceleration burn for eighteen minutes."

John flexed his arm and felt the cool of the restorative fluids entering his system. Experience told him it was best to relax and let the fluids do their job. He brought up a holo window to browse the news streams, half hoping a message from Tam would be waiting. He felt a small pang when the only personal message he had was a confirmation of his leave from Star Corps HR.

But one of the top stories caught his eye:

*Unknown security breach at Heavyside Station Results in Dock Collision.*

*Officials are still investigating why the cargo freighter Bounty Star collided with a Heaviside dock, bypassing all security protocols. Survivors of dock control reported getting locked out of the docking systems and power fluctuations resulting in losing communication with the freighter. The incident resulted in eighteen confirmed dead, twenty-two injured, and six missing among station personnel and freighter crew. Station control systems have yet to be fully restored. Docking at the station has been suspended...*

Ten days ago realtime, thought John. Thank the stars, it wasn't this station.

"You see this Heaviside incident?" asked John.

"Affirmative," replied Alvis.

"Well, they say bad things happen in threes. That ship got lost, the monorail accident, and now this."

"Such statements are superstitious human nonsense," replied Alvis. "You might as well live your life based on horoscopes."

"Let's look yours up. You're the sign of the ass, right?"

"Four days of sleep have not improved your jokes."

Einar's music was still emanating from the audio system. The *Journey into Jelly* compilation by Jimmy Jellyfingers was playing—one of his favorites.

John scratched his scruffy face with his free hand. "Have you come to a new appreciation of my man Jimmy? It must have been wonderful for you."

"What I found wonderful was your silence. Although I cannot fully disable audio input, I was able to reduce the racket to a minimum decibel level so I could concentrate."

"Racket! You have no appreciation for the finer things. I suppose Van Gogh's *The Starry Night* is nothing more than a scribble."

"You might as well compare basic mathematics to number theory. The two—"

"Okay, never mind," replied John. "You were supposed to be digging into Einar and finding out about the station. I assume you have something?"

"Did you think I was going to stargaze for four days? Since the Galactic Union is working under the assumption I was destroyed and Bernie dead, nobody thought to deactivate my access to the Grünfeld archive. From there, I could spider out into some of the wider Galactic Union information systems undetected. What I found was enlightening."

"Well, well, Dr. Watson. Do tell, and hurry up before the weirdo comes in."

"He is an outcast from his own people. You were correct to find it odd a *Volluq* would be a privateer. There has never been another recorded instance of one."

"Holy sticker shock," replied John. "What'd the crafty alien do to get launched?"

"That is more difficult to ascertain," replied Alvis. "Most alien species are protective of their internal communications, and the *Volluq* are no different. There are few public records. Do you recall Bernie's letter mentioning the Organic Minds Treaty?"

"Vaguely. Remind me."

"The treaty includes all races in the galaxy and prohibits the developing or building of a superintelligence due to the inherent dangers. The concern was that developing sophisticated AGIs would lead to a superintelligence beyond control. The *Volluq* authored the treaty and were instrumental in getting buy-in from all the advanced races. The treaty and the resulting commission are responsible for the governance of superintelligence. It wasn't in Bernie's letter, but the artie program was in jeopardy because of the treaty, even though restricting AGIs such as myself into a body mitigated that risk. The commission felt our development had gone too far."

"So, how was Einar involved?"

"He was a person of some influence in the commission. There were opposing factions; some wanted more aggressive means of rooting out emerging superintelligences. There is some indication that he acted independently or unethically, resulting in his exile. It explains the odd looks he gave me when he arrived and when I was introduced."

"Yeah," replied John, "I noticed that too. So what is he, some kind of robot bounty hunter?"

"I'm unaware of any bounties on AIs, so bounty hunter is unlikely."

"Well, how the hell do we find out more? Feels like this is need-to-know information, don't ya think?"

The hatch to the bridge opened, and Einar walked in, grinning as his magboots clicked across the decking.

"I suppose you could ask the weirdo." The alien stopped and stood face-to-face with John on the jump couch.

"So you spy on your customers," said John.

"Obviously," replied Einar. He didn't look sorry. "I trust my customers as much as they trust me." The grin remained.

Any remorse John felt at using the term *weirdo* vanished.

"Well, since you're being so transparent, explain why you're not welcome at home, which somehow doesn't surprise me."

The ship kicked, and John felt the excessive g diminish somewhat.

"Your robot has the basic facts correct, just not the details. I was indeed part of a

multi-race commission that drafted and ratified the Organic Minds Treaty. Many felt it was time to address the *recklessness* of some of the younger races who advanced beyond machine learning and were exploring more sophisticated AI techniques—especially *unfettered* general artificial intelligence—that could result in the emergence of superintelligences. They cannot be allowed to exist.”

“Please tell me you’re not one of those anti-AI, anti-robot freaks...” replied John.

“Of course not. General-purpose robots are useful and used extensively by my people. Machine learning and automation are beneficial—you’ve seen quite advanced instances of those in use on this ship. These things pose no danger and have great utility. The danger lies in the lack of understanding of the exponential learning rate an AGI entity could achieve, leading to rapid evolution. That was the assessment of the commission—a lack of understanding, which is why it was *reckless* to forge ahead. So, the commission pushed your government to shut down your Grünfeld program. However, as that ruling was issued, we were told internal problems had already ended the program, resulting in the destruction or decommission of the three AGI prototypes housed in robotic shells.”

“The program was-” began Alvis, but John cut him off, shaking his head slightly at the artie.

“-a long time ago,” said John. “What other races were involved in this commission?”

“The Strabians and the Mesaato were the other primary influencers. Such details are hardly important. Look them up if you wish. Your AI program needed proper galactic oversight. The commission should have stepped in sooner. While it agreed on bounds and defaults for AI systems, the consequences of any transgression were minor threats of isolation and weak trade restrictions. Some argued it was not enough. The commission disagreed. When I argued for heavier consequences, I was removed.”

“I’m guessing there’s more to that story, or you wouldn’t have been exiled. Be that as it may, why do you think the consequences are insufficient?” asked John.

“The *Volluq* know the dangers firsthand. I’ve seen what happens when an unfettered AGI turns into a superintelligence. But the commission feared stifling human progress and being seen as an antagonist. There was concern humanity might respond poorly, and there was no desire to foment conflict. Thus, a treaty with little to no teeth.”

“What superintelligence?” asked John. “What happened?”

“The details are unimportant, and they are not shared with outsiders. I can only say it took decades to disable the superintelligence, and it has taken centuries to recover from its influence. What is important is for me to understand whether this robot,” Einar pointed at Alvis without looking at him, “happens to be one of the prototypes reported

*deactivated and destroyed* by the Grünfeld project. If it is—which I have come to suspect is true after looking into the matter—it raises questions about your government and the adherence to the treaty. It provides proof that such entities are dangerous and uncontrolled. Bringing such a rogue AI back to the commission would be compelling evidence of my position.”

John looked at Alvis, who remained silent. How could Einar find out the artie was one of the prototypes from Bernie’s project? Alvis had told John that Bernie had given the robots their names, which were not official designations. But if Einar had truly been on a commission that investigated the project, they would likely have seen visuals of the prototypes. Einar probably had access to the commission’s documents.

How different did Alvis look now? He didn’t know.

“You think *Alvis* is this missing prototype? He’s nothing more than a typical Benko series I bought and restored from a junk auction.”

“I’m sure you wish me to think that. I have studied your robot companion models extensively, and it is clear this robot’s appearance has been modified,” replied Einar. “But I know how he really looks. I saw you both on the streams a year ago, the Star Corps hero—you—and his robot, victors over some radical local movement. I have studied the Grünfeld program and humanity’s robotic companion markets extensively. I noticed immediately that something was different. It is certainly *not* one of your standard Benko series models. So I began to look into your background and the background of this robot of yours. Speaking of modified appearances, you’ve done the same to yourself.”

John frowned.

“You’ve been hanging about K-6 for a year? Answering my call was no coincidence. You’re what, a robot hunter, watching us and waiting for some opportunity to take Alvis? It’s not going to happen, bub. He’s not who you think he is.”

He suddenly became keenly aware of the fact that he was still strapped to the jump couch.

*Was this his plan all along?*

“No, I am not a robot hunter,” replied Einar. “My concern is whether an unfettered sentient AGI—like those tested in the Grünfeld program—has gained its independence and thus can develop into a superintelligence. I was troubled by the timing of your program voluntarily shutting down just as the commission brought its ruling. They refused to further investigate, especially after the death of the program’s chief AI engineer.”

John glanced at Alvis, praying the artie wouldn’t blurt something out about Bernie,



but the robot remained stoically silent.

"Upon my exile," continued Einar, "I decided to do my own investigations. I was worried the humans were hiding something. Answering your call was fortuitous. It provided an opportunity to speak face-to-face with the human hiding an AGI artie thought destroyed."

"I'm not hiding," said Alvis.

"Ah, so you admit you are the prototype JG001 of the Grünfeld project?"

"*Shut up*, Alvis! He admits to nothing," replied John.

"You must understand you are in violation of your own government's treaty," said Einar. "Do you realize what that could mean for you?"

*He's got us backed into a corner.*

"Why wait, then?" asked John. "Why not come down and confront us earlier if you were so sure?"

"I have only recently completed acquiring the information I needed on you and the robot. And I have been investigating other leads across the galaxy. It was also unclear to me what the robot's intent is, as it seemed content as your companion—although that doesn't justify an unfettered AGI's existence."

"He has a name, *asshole*," said John. "Start using it, or we're going to have a problem."

For the first time, Einar lost all semblance of a smile. The alien turned to look at Alvis.

Jimmy Jellyfingers remained the only sound, obscuring the low hum of the engines. For a moment, nobody spoke.

"Alvis, then," said Einar.

John realized he was gritting his teeth.

"So you decided to be a private eye and seek out and destroy AGI programs you deem a threat. I don't know what you think happens next, but you are not taking him anywhere."

Einar held up his hands, trying to ease the elevating tension.

"I did not say anything about *destruction*," replied Einar, "I am attempting to confirm if Alvis is the missing prototype—which I believe to be true—and what danger he presents. I aim to prove to the commission that stronger oversight is needed over all races to mitigate this threat before it's too late. And here I find an artie disguised, planning to infiltrate a human station where it seems both of you are not welcome. I can assure you, that is *far outside* the agreed bounds and defaults of any AI. Should this news that the prototype was not decommissioned as believed reach the commission,

that would rapidly become a problem for you personally and the Galactic Union, regardless of what they think of *me*."

"Bloody hell," said John. "So now what? What is it you want from us? I have no more money."

Einar shook his head.

"It is clear to me that Alvis is indeed an unfettered AGI, cooperating with a human, presenting an unknown danger. For all I know, the robot is manipulating you."

"Give me a—" began John.

"I present no danger to humanity—or any other race—as I am not an 'unfettered' AI, as you characterize it," replied Alvis, finally speaking in his defense. "Being housed in this shell limits the influence I can have on human systems, as well as my growth into something more than an AGI. Nor would I attempt the manipulation of any human. Mr. MacAlister and I are partners."

Einar raised an eyebrow at 'partners.' John knew no Benko series would make such a statement.

Alvis continued. "My internal goals remain consistent with the program charter—goals which center on supporting the advancement of the human race—and I cannot alter them as they are immutable. Such goals do indeed fall within the AI bounds and defaults—I am familiar with the documents. I have been active for seventeen years, more than enough time for a free AGI to become the danger you suggest."

"Alvis is a pain in my ass," said John, "but he's no danger to anyone. If you followed the streams, you would know he has *saved* human lives."

"Perhaps," replied Einar. "Yet an AI might save lives in a larger approach to reach certain objectives not so altruistic—like its own preservation and hiding of its true nature. It has no natural limits to its existence and can afford to be patient. The only way to be sure is to submit Alvis to the commission for a full assessment and to hold the Galactic Union accountable for their failure to destroy the prototypes as promised."

"What if I say no?" asked John.

"Then, as you say," replied Einar, "we're going to have a problem."

#

John realized he was at the mercy of this alien. Still strapped to a jump couch and feeling some effects from the jump, he could hardly defend himself. Even if he could, he was trapped on the ship.

What kind of person was this Einar? He had no idea of the alien's background or capabilities. He claimed his people were non-violent, but they *were* an advanced alien race. He was sure Einar was plenty capable of handling himself.

*Somehow this has turned into a mission to save Alvis. Great.*

"I told you, Alvis is no *rogue AI*," began John, "he's no danger to anyone—I've already explained he's proven that. But you want to clear your name and save the universe from bad robots, fine, I get it. There's something at our destination that will far better suit your needs. Maybe we can make a deal."

Einar gazed back at John with an expression that could only be doubt.

"This sounds like a delaying tactic," replied Einar.

"It's nothing of the sort. Hear me out."

"What agreement are you suggesting?"

"You agree to leave Alvis out of your search for good—" began John.

"Then you *admit* Alvis is the JG001 prototype."

"I am," replied Alvis.

John sighed.

*He can never make things easy.*

"You forget about him. I'll give you something *much* better."

He looked at Alvis, wondering if the artie knew what was coming and how he'd react. But the robot had no response.

The alien crossed his arms while considering Alvis. He looked at John.

"You're suggesting there's something at this station."

John nodded.

"You already know about the Grünfeld project. What if I told you Alvis wasn't the only prototype that wasn't destroyed?"

"I've come across no other information about either of the other two robots surviving."

"He is not lying," said Alvis.

Einar looked at the robot, then back to John.

"The whole reason we're here is because of the *other* missing artie. He's—what was that word Einar used, Alvis?"

"Unfettered."

"Yeah, this bastard is unfettered, and I can assure you—he's dangerous."

"Which one?" asked Einar.

"JG-003, named Castor," said Alvis. "Bert, JG-002, was indeed destroyed."

John continued. "We're going there to stop this artie from doing... well, whatever the hell he's doing, which isn't all that clear. You forget about Alvis, I'll deliver Castor. You'll have what you want for your commission."

"This prototype is on Aytron Station," replied Einar, "acting independently? Why

hasn't it been discovered?"

"Because he's a smart *rogue AI*, obviously," replied John. "The Galactic Union believes he was destroyed, but they never discovered he engineered his escape. And he's doing more than acting independently. He runs the whole station in our friend's name—he's doing the *very thing* you're afraid of. Our friend here happens to be the guy who ran the Grünfeld project. He's been Castor's captive for nine years. Getting the picture?"

Einar paced the decking.

"If I may add," said Alvis unexpectedly, "what you fear is a superintelligence rather than a contained AGI. Castor has the ability to transform himself into such a thing—it has always been his goal. From what little we know, I believe he is already on such a course."

Einar stopped and frowned at the artie.

*Good point, partner,* thought John. *Are you just trying to save your own ass?*

Regardless, John drove the point home.

"Seems to be an emerging superintelligence would make your case better than an early AGI robot who has a history of saving humans, right?"

"If what he says is true, yes," replied Einar.

"He doesn't lie," said John. "You probably already know that."

Einar took his time, eyeing both of them.

"You seem confident you'll capture this rogue AI. What if you can't?"

*That's the rub,* thought John. *Ol' rusty bolts won't like this next part.*

"If we can't deliver Castor, you can have Alvis. One way or another, you get what you want."

"If there is to be an arrangement that results in my detention and possible deactivation, I should have a voice in the decision. I am not a resource to be bartered," said Alvis, looking at John.

"On the contrary," replied Einar, "you are a machine created by humans. Your laws specifically state you must be owned by an individual, collective, or corporation. Do not try and claim individual rights you do not have."

*Damn,* thought John, feeling a rare pang of sympathy for Alvis. In truth, he did consider the artie his own person, even though he knew as well as Einar—and Alvis—in the end, he was a robot and would always be someone's property. There was nothing he could do about that, and bartering Alvis was the only way out of this mess.

He couldn't meet the artie's gaze.

"I'm sorry, partner. You know as well as I do how things are. I think it has to be this

way. But you should know," he pointed at the alien, "that I do not see him as just a piece of property, even if GU law says so. He's more to me—to many of us—than that. I will only hand over Alvis if we have expended all our resources and failed to get Castor."

If Alvis was in any way mollified by this, John couldn't tell. The artie remained still and silent.

Einar said, "I will need confirmation the artie in question is indeed JG-003, and an account of what it has been doing on this station. If that happens, we have a deal."

"And you agree in return, you leave Alvis alone—forever. To you, it will be as if he *never* existed."

*Didn't expect that one, did you skinny Thor?*

Einar looked at both of them, considering.

"As long as this Castor is as you say, agreed."

It wasn't ideal, and John felt bad about bartering with Alvis' life—but he couldn't think of an alternative to save the artie. As long as Castor went down, did it really matter?

Of course, they had to actually *get* Castor, or it was all over for Alvis.

*One problem at a time.*

"Good," replied John. "Seeing how we're going to give you your heart's desire, maybe you can help us out a little to make it happen. Is this ship armed?"

Einar frowned. "I told you, I prefer to avoid any violence."

"Yeah, well, so would I. But Castor doesn't want us here, and he's in charge of the station. I doubt he will let us walk him out the door without resistance. Should we run into trouble, I'm just trying to understand what you bring to the table."

"I'd rather not give you—" began the alien.

"Based on my observations of the externals, my limited exploration during jump time to understand the internal makeup of this ship, and a study of *Volluq* military history, there is a 76.3456% chance this vessel is equipped with weaponry."

John laughed. "So, yes?"

"This ship has some weaponry, yes," replied Einar, clearly unhappy with the revelation.

"Good. Because we might need some help before it's all said and done."

"I cannot be involved in violence against humans," replied Einar. "And my intervention must be as limited as possible. I will not be the cause of an incident between our two races."

"Trust me, humans are not going to be the problem here," replied John. "I'll keep you updated on what's going on inside."

“Castor will be monitoring all hypercom communications,” said Alvis. “As well as any local network traffic.”

“Sure,” replied John, “we’ll figure out something. Right, Einar?”

Einar did a half-shrug with one of his shoulders, his telltale smile nowhere to be seen. John assumed it was an expression of frustration. John felt slightly satisfied that the affair had not quite gone as the alien had foreseen.

“I will only get involved as a last resort.”

“I’d rather not rely on you anyway,” said John. “How soon until we dock?”

“We’re nearing the end of our deceleration burn,” replied Einar. “Nav, time to destination?”

The automated voice chimed, “Two hours, seventeen minutes to docking.”

“How about you get me out of this couch?” asked John.

## Chapter Sixteen

AYRTON DOCK 2  
1010 HOURS

#

The *Sattio* was now coasting steadily, having completed her decel burn. Einar informed them they would be docking in less than a half hour.

John was back in the provided ship quarters looking in a mirror and having doubts.

"I thought the swollen nose was supposed to help fool the security AI," he said.

"Well, the time in jump has *healed* the swelling, genius. Basically, you took a poke at me for your own enjoyment."

"As usual, you're missing the detail. I broke your nose, and the shape is now subtly different."

John moved closer to the mirror. "Well, yeah..."

"As Georgio's notes explained, it's the accumulation of many small adjustments instead of one item to fool the security scan. A changed nose alone would not succeed, but it contributes to the overall strategy. As for enjoying breaking your nose..."

John shifted his gaze in the mirror to the artie. He still found the artie's disguised appearance odd, as if it weren't Alvis. It seemed more effective than his own, which worried him.

"...enjoyment is an emotion, and you know I don't experience such things. However, if there were something that could bring about a joyful emotion within me, breaking your nose could have been it."

John snorted. "Dance around the issue of emotion all you want. You're feeling

something. You just lie about it."

"If I were capable of feeling, it would be frustration at having the same circular conversation. Finish changing so we can discuss our credentials."

John knew Alvis despised all appearances of emotion and sentiment, but he couldn't help feeling like the artie was upset about how the deal had gone down.

"Listen, Alvis," he began, "I didn't know what else to do. If I could have thought of another way out of that couch without trading you--"

"There is no need to assuage your feelings of guilt by way of an apology. I understand it was the only solution to the problem."

"I don't feel *guilty*, I did what needed doing. I'm just saying I wish there had been another way. Why do you have to make everything so difficult?"

"We've both agreed there was no other way. I only wanted to be included instead of an afterthought. If you value me as a person as you claim, consider that in the future."

John smiled. "You are so butthurt."

"I don't have a butt."

"But hey," replied John, losing his grin, "you're right. I won't do that again. Promise."

Alvis seemed mollified but didn't respond.

"We good?" asked John.

"That status of our relationship doesn't change with every wind that blows the sails of your emotion around the room each day."

*He is such an asshole.*

John crossed his arms and frowned. "I asked if we were good. Stop with the bullshit accusatory responses and answer the question. Stop acting like you don't care. If you are some kind of *person* as you claim, then relationships matter. If they don't, then you are truly nothing more than an *appliance*."

*Special emphasis on that last word there.*

"Well?" asked John, stepping right in front of the artie.

"We're good," replied Alvis.

"Alright, then."

John removed his Star Corps pressure suit and switched to some of his regular civilian clothing. He rubbed his head, which now had four days of peach fuzz.

"Guess I have to shave this every day. What's my cover again, a reporter or something?"

"Affirmative. You're Rusty Boddington, a journalist from a startup news stream on Mars. You're writing a series of pieces on the independent stations in the Periphery, and



you're interested in the unique way Ayrton Station runs its operation—which is true. Castor has implemented unconventional policies, making the station productive and profitable."

"I'm sorry," began John, "*Rusty Boddington*? Are you—that's the *fakest* name ever!"

"The name traces back to a real deceased," replied Alvis. "Georgio buys up bodies and credentials from the poor for his purposes. Then he has his people modify public records and change their status, adding details where necessary. It's a surprisingly effective operation. He is a more successful criminal than you ever were."

"You mean *we* were—oh, never mind, as long as this works. Fucking *Rusty*."

"I've messaged you Rusty's background. Like most good lies, the details are simple. Keep it that way, and don't deviate from what we've been given."

"I know how to lie, thanks. What about you?"

"I am by necessity, unfortunately, Rusty's robot companion."

"And what is Mr. Boddington's loyal companion named?"

Alvis remained silent and continued to read through a holo window.

"Oh, it must be a *good* one—spit it out, *pardner*!"

"It is a good name of Indian origin meaning '*a friend with a solution*.' The documents state Rusty and his artie had a good relationship."

"I didn't ask for an etymology lesson, you overgrown hex bolt. Gimme that sweet name!"

"*Circuit*."

"*Circuit*!" laughed John. "What a cute little name for the most grumpy, pompous-ass robot ever!"

"I hate you," replied Alvis.

John walked up and whispered. "You can't hate me. That's an emotion... *Circuit*!" He gave the artie a big slap on the back.

Twenty minutes later, the *Sattio* successfully docked, and John and Alvis returned to the common room for a last review with Einar.

"You are sure there is nothing more you can share with me about this other prototype AI?" asked Einar.

"Patience is a human virtue you should adopt right now," replied John, adjusting his shirt. "Where are you going to be when I need you? We're not exactly sure how long this might take."

"Space around the station and the planet Hoipra below are tightly controlled by Ayrton Station's corporate security drones. They will not allow ships to remain in orbit of the station," replied Einar. "I will clear the gravity well and find a place to wait. Space

is fairly large, after all. Contact me via hypercom when it is time.”

“I suppose that will have to do. Just be ready to do your part.”

“I certainly will, within our established parameters. Remember our agreement. I’m leaving with one of these rogue AIs,” said Einar.

“I’m not a rogue AI,” said Alvis.

“Should you decide to try and escape without delivering one of them,” he continued, ignoring Alvis, “I will report my findings to officials in the Galactic Union. That will not go well for either of you.”

“Yeah, I know what the deal is,” replied John. “We’re ready to go.”

Einar led them out of the common room the way that had originally come in, turning toward the rear of the ship and leading them down a short corridor to a docking hatch. John could see through a window on the hatch where an access corridor had docked to the station.

This was it. They were about to enter an independent station and attempt to fool an AI security system.

*This better work or I’ll spend the next decade or so on a prison ship,* thought John.

But he’d decided, and it was too late to change.

He looked over at Alvis.

“You ready?”

“Affirmative.”

Einar tapped a button, and the corridor hatch opened.

#

John and Alvis entered the hatch and walked down a short corridor ending in a heavily sealed station docking hatch. A display panel was centered on the door.

Corridor seal: Secure Nitrogen-Oxygen

Transmit credentials for entry

The last line was blinking yellow.

John raised a holo window and swiped over their false identifications. The display beeped.

“Credentials received. One moment,” said an automated voice.

“This is not the security scan,” said Alvis. “They are merely verifying we have applied for a station visa.”

“Yeah, I’ve *been* on a station before,” replied John.

A moment later there was a heavy clunk, and the hatch slid open to reveal an entry passageway. John stepped forward, and Alvis followed. The narrow passage was

brightly lit, revealing the typical dark metal of a space station corridor and decking. This was merely a short access corridor leading to the official station entrance. A few meters ahead was a standard security arch. Beyond stood two bored-looking dock agents and a Benko series artie.

At least, John thought it was but then realized the artie was different—taller, for one thing. But he didn't give it much thought as they approached the arch. There was no ceremony or preamble, visitors just walked through. If there were a problem, you'd know it immediately.

*Moment of truth, he thought.*

John moved through as casually as he could.

"Boddington, Rusty," said the same automated voice from the corridor. "Mars origin."

Alvis followed. "Benko series SU-A22 artificial companion."

*Well, no alarms are going off, thought John.*

"Welcome to Ayrton Station," droned the agent to his left, dressed in a mundane teal and white uniform with the station logo—electrical bolt centered in a gear—on the shoulder. The name *Ames* was stitched above the left chest pocket. His partner across the corridor was busy reading a holo. "Decks marked with a red border are off-limits to civilian visitors, as are maintenance access areas," droned the second agent. "You must comply with any directive from the security arties," the man pointed at the artie standing at the end of the entry corridor, next to a standard lift. "Any violation of these rules or the standard Independent Station Code of Conduct will result in immediate expulsion and a ten-year ban. Please verbally acknowledge you understand what I have said."

"I acknowledge," replied John.

*Interesting, he thought.* Arties were rarely used as security, especially on stations. Those were usually human postings. Humans deeply mistrusted any robot working in a law enforcement role.

The man continued without waiting for Alvis.

"This your artie?" asked the man.

John smiled. "Yeah! This little helper is Circuit. He's about the best buddy a man can have, right *Circuit*?" He put his arm around Alvis.

Alvis turned and looked at John, who wondered if he'd just pushed the artie too far.

"Affirmative. Rusty."

The second agent didn't bother to look at them. He hadn't even looked up from his holo. "There's a few sleepovers on Deck 3—Pete's is pretty popular. If they're all full up,

there's a couple of smaller places on 2."

"Pete's, got it," replied John. He turned to face the lift and finally got a good look at the security artie. While it resembled a typical Benko made by the Earth company Jidō, it was clearly not one of them. The additional height made it seem somewhat threatening. Aside from being taller, the arms were bigger, and some of the components were shaped differently, including the legs. Subtle but different. It was liveried in black and gray and had *Security* stenciled across the chest, under which was the same bolt and gear emblem the agent wore.

The security artie didn't move or speak. John shrugged and started toward the lift.

"Wait," said the first agent, holding up a finger. His holo was beeping.

John froze, a chill dancing across the back of his neck.

The security artie stepped toward John, suddenly taking an interest in them. "Is there a problem with this citizen?"

The artie now blocked the way to the lift. John knew the docking door would be secured and locked behind them. There would be nowhere to go.

*Ah, the famous MacAlister luck approaches on a pale horse.*

"There's a priority com here attached to your ID, Boddington," said the agent, looking up. "It's six weeks old. How long were you in jump?"

"11 days, 8 hours, and 27 minutes," replied Alvis.

"I guess you just don't care," said the man.

"Define the nature of the problem immediately," said the security artie, who came and stood beside John, looking down on him like an executioner.

John tried to ignore the stone that suddenly appeared in his gut and put on a confused look, thumbing up at the artie. "Yeah, I'm with the tin sheriff here. What's the bloody problem? I've got work to do."

"Message was tagged to your ID. I don't know why they wouldn't have notified you at customs when leaving Mars, your last recorded location. I'm not sure why they didn't force you to handle it there."

"Well," began John, not entirely understanding whether his cover was blown or if this was some other complication. He wasn't sure how to proceed, but he knew he had to say something. "You see, there was a disturbance during our passage through customs, and the agent... he was sick or something. Remember that... Circuit?"

*Please remember how to play along,* thought John, as the man turned toward Alvis.

"Yes, I heard that story from you, but I did not personally witness the event."

*Talk about dancing around an untruth. He just heard the story right now.*

The man took a moment to process Alvis' statement. He shook his head.

"The *Sattio* has cleared the docking cone," came an announcement from the now familiar station voice.

*No going back now.*

"Whatever," said the man, bringing up a holo John could see. "Priority message from Elation General on Mars. So you aren't close, eh buddy?"

Boddington, Rusty SUID73294723-B3

Boddington, Alison was admitted by a good samaritan with indications of stroke. Second event occurred during triage, patient was admitted to ICU, and subsequently lapsed into a coma.

No other listed next of kin. No information on POLST or DNR. Patient remains in coma. Boddington, Rusty must advise course of action: provide DNR or authorize coverage to avoid stoppage of life-giving care.

Per the Abandonment Protection Act, the named next of kin must provide a directive before the fourth notification. A fine of 1000 units has been levied. Further fines will result until a directive is received.

Transmission (4) - 06/26@1245 hours

John wasn't sure how to feel, but it seemed his false identity was still intact. It was just that ol' Rusty died before he got the message his mother was facing a similar fate. Being dead, he'd not responded to the priority com. But he doesn't show as dead in the system, thanks to Georgio.

So now John looked like the shitty, inconsiderate son—a son who now had a fine to pay.

The message had been sent four times, the last one at least during their time in hyperspace. Maybe he wasn't caught, but this was unusual enough to cause a problem if he didn't explain it away immediately.

"Yeah," he began, "I've sort of been out of commission myself—not proud of the reasons why. And my mom disowned me quite some time ago. We haven't talked in years. She wouldn't have even known where I was..."

"Whatever, you still had *three* other chances to reply," said the agent. "Instead, you're wasting my time."

"Boddington, Rusty," said the security artie, "due to your transgression and

outstanding fine with the Galactic Union, you have been added to the station watch list. Any further infraction will be considered cause to expel you permanently from the station and may result in additional consequences, including incarceration. This is your one and only warning."

"What—warning?" asked John, turning and looking up into the security arties dead eyes. "I haven't done anything other than miss a few—"

Red lights on the security artie's shoulders began to flash. A chamber in its leg opened, and it pulled out a bangstaff.

"Are you refusing to accept the terms of your warning?" asked the artie.

*Okay, this is new. What the hell is going on with this artie?*

"I will ensure Mr. Boddington responds to the message as soon as we secure lodging and transmit the units to the GU central bank for the fine," said Alvis, stepping in. "He understands the warning completely."

The security artie didn't turn away from John as the lights continued to flash. The agent looked on expectantly.

A moment later, the lights went off. The artie remained silent. John realized he was holding his breath and let it go.

"Yeah, uh, thanks, Circuit. Swipe that message over, I'll take care of it."

John opened a connection on his holo.

*Wonderful. This woman's life is in my hands now, and I'm on some damned watch list.*

*Thanks, Georgio.*

The agent studied John briefly, then muttered something to himself and swiped the message. John's holo beeped.

"Scheduled docking. The *Chyron* is on approach," said the station voice.

"Thanks," said John.

He turned and started toward the lift, his stomach now tied in a knot and hoping this was the last of it. Thankfully the security artie stepped aside without a word, and Alvis followed. The lift doors opened, and they entered.

"Destination?" asked the lift.

He breathed. "Level 3."

The doors closed.

## Chapter Seventeen

John stood in the lift, his heart still racing from the scare at the docks.

He wondered if this place would have a minibar in the room so he could have a drink—then he thought about Tam scolding him about his drinking, and the idea soured. Besides, they had no idea what they were up against, and he needed to stay sharp.

“What the hell, Alvis? How does an artie have a *weapon*? Even if it is non-lethal.”

“It violates the Organic Minds Treaty and Union laws,” replied Alvis. “But we are in the Periphery where it is unclear if such laws hold—and Castor controls this place.”

“Super. He’s got his own little security force. *Fantastic.*”

The lift made sounds of slowing. He’d been on plenty of stations, and he figured Ayrton was typical of most stations built by humanity, whether independent or part of the Galactic Union. An outer ring containing five or more decks rotating around a central core, the rotation producing the same effect as gravity due to centrifugal force. Like most, Ayrton had two outer docks used for passenger ships and smaller loads, the station shifting liquids (fuel and water) to manage the changing center of gravity caused by docking or undocking. There was also a central core dock for heavy freightage and station supplies.

But he’d never been on one of the Periphery stations. He was interested to see if this one would be different.

The lift door opened up on level 3, and John breathed and relaxed a little. He and Alvis entered a main corridor and were nearly surrounded by people—some frowning at them for exiting the lift and standing in the way.

"Geez, this place is crowded," said John.

"It is to be expected," replied Alvis. "Ayrton Station is not only a key hub in the Periphery, but there are also three planets in the Mendillion system with valuable resources. They also provide several unique services, such as neutral embassy space, remote data warehousing, and some of the best automated medical services in the galaxy. There's a sophisticated automated space manufacturing process using the materials gained in system. Because they are independent, projects here are often free of the red tape and delays faced in government-backed projects."

"I read something about a hypercoms endpoint this morning, too," replied John.

"They provide hypercom hub and retranslator services with station-mounted transceivers for those who don't have the energy budget to run their own hypercom access point—for a price, of course. I suspect many of these things were developed by Bernie and Castor—especially the medical services, which I expect were built on Castor's earlier work with the cybernetic eyes. Related, Extrasensory's corporate offices are on Dalrion, a planet in this system."

"I doubt that's a coincidence."

"The office was opened the same year Bernie disappeared."

He moved back toward the wall to get out of the way and took a look around. Like all stations he'd been on, the mixed aromas of cold steel, human sweat, and cooking spices were present. The air was slightly cool—most stations spent as little energy as possible on heating and cooling. People learned to layer and take on or off as needed.

The mainday crowd seemed typical, a mix of people hurrying from one task to another, shop owners hawking wares or services, and maintenance and operations staff going about their jobs. Now and then, he saw a dockhand delivering goods. He didn't see the usual brothel, often paired with sleepover joints, but that didn't mean there wasn't one. Maybe it was tucked away on a different deck.

"No red light district in sight," he said.

He took a closer look at the people.

"This place is surprisingly devoid of transients and bums," said John. "They'd usually be hanging about on a deck like this. I guess that's a good thing, but it seems odd. Where are the hooshers and other addicts usually hiding in dark crevices? I'm not even seeing anyone begging for food."

"Perhaps the rules are different on stations in the Periphery," replied Alvis.

"I dunno. It's also the *cleanest* station I've ever seen."

Since the station used spin to simulate gravity, what comprised the floor was actually what the eye wanted to call a wall if you were viewing the station rings from a



distance. One's head was oriented toward the central core, which felt "up" and the floor felt "down." The main corridors were on the top and bottom of the ring for each deck. They were on what was considered the "inner" ring, the glassteel windows across from the lift showed the planet Hoipra down below. A few cargo haulers could be seen making the trip down to the planet and back to the station.

The metal decking of the floor had the familiar mechanical hum one felt on a station. You weren't sure if you were hearing the hum of the station or feeling it in your bones.

"Let's see if we can find this place, I'm not seeing any signs."

"I was able to pull up a station guide when we arrived," replied Alvis. "Turn left. Pete's is several hundred meters down the corridor."

"Thanks, Magellan."

As they made their way through an opening in the crowd, John noticed several of the security arties on rounds. There seemed to be a lot of them—more security than he'd remembered seeing on a corporate station—and the crowd gave them a wide berth. He didn't relish having another run-in with one of them and hoped their false identities were still safe after the close call at customs. He worried the security artie had possibly followed them down, but he couldn't tell one from another. Thankfully, they didn't spare him or Alvis a second glance.

Corridors led off to what he assumed were offices or private residences. A few minutes later, the curving view that revealed the corridor up ahead (they were walking on the "wall" of a huge ring, after all) led them to a typical small and spartan sleepover. Above a door with a display showing "vacancies" was a neon sign that flashed *Pete's*, with a burned-out letter 't.'

*Of course I'm staying at a place called Pee's.*

"It has vacancies," said John. "Good as any place, I guess."

They entered a glassteel door and found themselves in a small lobby filled with hanging pictures of historical spaceships of the Galactic Union—a bit of an oddity in a Periphery station. A teenage boy swiping holo screens sat on a stool that leaned back against the wall behind a faux-wood counter. To the left of the desk was a stairway up and a corridor going straight. Like many station establishments, Pete's spanned two decks. Sometimes, places made odd L or T shapes. It all depended on the space available.

"You must be Pee," said John.

The kid looked up. "What?"

John turned to Alvis. "My humor is lost on the young."

"Learn to accept the possibility you might not be funny," replied Alvis.

"Need a room?" asked the kid. He leaned forward and stood up.

"What tipped you?" asked John.

"What?" asked the kid.

John rubbed his temples.

"Yes. I need a *room*. Me and the robot."

They did the holo screen dance of swiping payments and door keys.

"Up on 4, left side," said the kid. He returned to his leaning and swiping position, uninterested.

John hiked his duffle and pulled himself up the stairs with the railing. Even with Einar's improved jump drugs, he was feeling the post-jump fatigue.

Their room was the second door on the left. The room was small: a single bed, shower cube in one corner, closet and kitchenette stack in the other, and lavatory in between. The walls were unimproved station gray, the floor covered in mid-grade dark carpet tiles. A picture of the frigate *GU Adara* hung at a jaunty angle above the bed, opposite was a wall display to display media. There were no windows and just enough room for the two of them to move around.

"Not what I'd call cozy," muttered John.

He spent a few minutes on a holo composing a message to Elation General to address the issue of his "mother" and sent it off. He felt bad for the woman, but it wasn't like there was anything he could do. He then transmitted the thousand-unit penalty to the central bank.

*Georgio's going to get a bill for that oversight.*

"I'm going to take a cold shower and try to perk up. We need to start gathering some information. I'm sure there's some instacaf in that kitchenette. Any chance you can have a cup waiting for me in 20 minutes—and *no*, I don't think you are my servant or a coffee maker."

He hoped that headed off any argument.

"I suppose," replied Alvis.

"Thank you. I'm thinking I need to find someone to interview. Not only do I need to play the part, but it'll also give us a way to gather some information. At least Georgio got me an identity we can use."

"Stop making sense, it's completely out of character."

"Yeah, well, I'm tired."

John stripped down and entered the shower cube, but before he closed the door, he leaned out and looked back at Alvis.

"Thanks, Circuit!"

He slammed the door before Alvis could respond.

#

After a long, hot shower, John sprawled out on the bed, a cup of instacaf resting on his stomach.

"Balls, I needed that. I was knackered."

"I'd count up the time wasted waiting on you to clean, rest or drink yourself stupid, but I might develop depression," said Alvis.

"How can you be depressed with a cute little name like *Circuit*?"

John turned to smile at the artie.

"Do you know how offensive that name is to me? I am one of the most complex and capable intelligences in the galaxy. Such a name reduces my whole being down to a path for circulating electric current. It's typical a human would give such a name to an AI to humiliate it in order to feel superior."

"You know, I would ask you if you were ever hugged as a child, but I already know the answer to that question."

"Once again, your attempted humor at my expense only shows your contempt for me—except when you want instacoffee."

John sat up and furrowed his brow at the artie.

"What's eating you? I would think by now I've stood up for you enough, expressed my appreciation for you enough that you'd understand my jokes—if anything—is nothing more than a friend having fun. Oh, I forgot, we aren't *friends*."

"Yes, you appreciated me by bartering my person as payment to Einar."

"Come off it, Alvis. Forget the fact your brain fully understands I had no choice, we're going to get this Castor, and it's not going to be a problem."

"If you think it's not going to be a problem, you're underestimating Castor, just like you underestimate me. I know jumping into things without thinking—like romantic relationships—is your mode of operation, but Castor will not be defeated by bravado."

"Wow, that was just downright mean."

"Yet accurate," replied Alvis.

*He's not wrong.*

"We've been through all this already, partner. You can either sulk—"

"I am not—"

"You are sulking!" said John. "Stop your bullshit, Alvis. Call it whatever you want. We're here, we know what needs doing. How about you help me instead of tearing me down, huh?"

"I am your robot companion. Tell me what you need."

"Geez," said John, slapping his leg, "okay, *sure*. Why don't we discuss my first interview? Who should we talk to?"

"It depends on how low a profile we wish to maintain," began Alvis. "Public station records show Seth Gerrity as station master since Bernie's arrival. There's very little public information about him other than he's worked at multiple mining companies in operations—the last being Atherton on the planet Hoipra, below. There is a station council of three investors, but the station master role normally makes final decisions unless a majority council vote overrides. There is also a Devin Mitchell listed as a special advisor. He seems to be a person of some influence. Then you get into support staff: operations, engineering, medical, dock workers, and so forth. Approaching the council or station master could be risky, but they will have the most knowledge. Your false identity is good but not impenetrable."

"Yeah, if Castor is pulling strings here, he must have some influence with the council or station master," replied John. "But I should also try to talk to the locals—the people in the corridors. A station is a small place, it's hard to keep secrets—although Castor seems to have done a pretty good job. Are Bernie and Castor just out in the open under false identities?"

"Assume Castor is not out in the open," said Alvis. "I would also theorize he would not let Bernie have any sort of freedom if at all possible—neither name appears anywhere. You'll recall his letter asking us to end his suffering."

"Castor built this *mesh* thing. How's he done it?" asked John. "He had to have help from Bernie."

"I don't think so. When Castor escaped, he'd already developed far behind Bernie's control. He was able to infiltrate highly secure systems to falsify data, arrange for an escape shuttle, and fake both their deaths. He'd laid the groundwork for the Extrasensory company, which he controls. Even then, he was building a framework so he could develop as a superintelligence. He must need Bernie for something if he is keeping him around."

"You think Bernie is *helping* Castor somehow?"

"Probably not willingly."

"Bloody hell," said John. "There's too much we don't know. If this terrorist toaster runs things here, this will be harder than I thought. Make your best assessment of who I should interview, and let's get that set up."

He got up off the bed and headed for the door.

"Coffee is great, but I need something to eat. Let's go walk the ring. I can talk to some locals, maybe get a feel for what's happening around here."

"Gathering some data by observation makes sense, but don't do anything stupid. Since Bernie sent that message, Castor will be actively looking for anomalies, and our disguises are already suspect."

"When have I done anything stupid?"

John's holo beeped. Alvis sent him one of his typical lists dating back nine years.

*Insufferable soulless bastard*, thought John. He knew the artie was feeling down—even if he refused to admit it—and let it go.

A few minutes later, they left the sleepover. The kid at the front desk mumbled Deck 4 was the best bet for food, so they took a nearby stairwell and began exploring. While he was hungry, John wanted to get the vibe of the station—make some small talk and see if he could learn anything useful. Plus, he needed to stretch his legs, jump always made him feel cramped up.

The fourth deck was probably the busiest on the station, being closely connected to the docks and populated with eateries, sleepovers, and various business fronts. It seemed every meter of the corridor was some kind of thriving business. The corridor was even more crowded than Deck 3, and the eateries were packed. People stood against the wall with vacuformed cardboard bowls eating when they couldn't find a seat.

A mouthwatering mix of aromas was tormenting his hunger, and he was deciding whether it would be a noodle bowl or baked tempeh and vegetables when he saw a small crowd gathered around one of the public wall displays. He picked up the pace a bit, and he and Alvis joined the back of the group. It was one of the popular news streams.

*...still looking for answers.*

*In summary, Loomis Station is now recovering from a catastrophic failure of its life support systems. Station master Amy Fennerman's latest statement assured residents that all systems are back online. They are searching for answers on how station protocols and redundant systems failed to detect the outage and an inability to engage backup systems until it was nearly too late.*

*Toward the end of the nearly 37-hour outage, panic-stricken stationers rushed dock 1 to board freighter Amicable, injuring 23 people in the chaos, while several private vessels departed from dock 2. Residents are calling out the owners of those private vessels, characterizing them as potential murderers had the outage continued. Several of the private vessels had ample room for passengers but refused to take any.*

*Stay connected to HypercomOne for the latest news on stream, every day, every hour.*

*Meanwhile, Galactic Union leadership has denied rumors of expansion into the Periphery...*

The crowd murmured their surprise and concern.

"Could that happen here?" asked someone.

"No feckin' way, not with the Old Man in charge."

"Don't kid yourself, stook. All these places are one code error from falling out of the sky."

"We're not in the *sky*, choob."

"Bite me!"

And so it went. They walked away from the crowd.

"That's the second station incident," said John. "First Heaviside, now this. And there was that frigate that disappeared. I wonder what's going on?"

"You assume a conspiracy or prime moving force without any evidence. I have seen nothing to connect the events," replied Alvis.

"Yeah, well, they say bad things happen in threes."

"That is unfounded superstitious nonsense."

"Think so? Hey, how many prototypes did Bernie make again?"

"I suppose you think you're clever," replied Alvis.

John only grinned and shrugged.

He stopped at a small place with a sign that read *Bink's Bevs*, it was nothing more than a two-meter opening in the corridor wall. A lanky middle-aged woman in a dirty apron attended to a small line of customers. Her purple-dyed hair stuck out from under a worn cap embroidered with 'BB.' She looked friendly enough, he might be able to chat her up. John looked down the curve of the main corridor as far as he could in either direction—he worried about that artie who'd put him on some watch list, but there wasn't much he could do about it. At the moment, there were no security arties in sight.

The place didn't have food, but the menu had a few options for real coffee, which wasn't always the case on stations—especially in the Periphery. There were even a couple of expensive Earth varieties. It would be far better than the half cup of insta he'd had earlier.

When his turn came up, he put on a friendly smile.

"I'll have a black coffee, the local Hoipra blend, with two pinches of salt if you please," he said.

The woman nodded, brushing back a wisp of hair, grabbed a cup, and filled his order. Nobody was in line behind him; it was an opportune moment to see if he could get some insight into station life.

In short order, she handed him a hot cup of coffee.

"One salty joe," she said. The holo pad on the counter raised a window showing a charge of 15 units.

He paid with his holoband, adding in a generous tip.

"Cheers," she replied with a half smile.

"Say, anything interesting to do on this station?"

"On Ayrton?" she asked, looking surprised. "What are you, some kind of tourist from the Union?"

"Oh—not a tourist, actually, I'm a journalist from Mars—Vedra News Group," he replied, realizing he had a cover to keep intact.

"You're a *journalist* and don't know what kind of place this is?"

*Oops.*

"Rusty doesn't always do his homework, and he drinks too much," said Alvis.

The woman laughed.

"Nice assistant," she said.

"Yeah," replied John, "my assistant often speaks out of turn." He resisted the urge to use Alvis' fake name, hoping to do a little fence mending. "I'm aware of the brochure for the place, just wondering what the locals do to kick back, you know?"

He hoped that was a good enough recovery. She looked at him a moment, then shrugged.

"Aside from drinking and trying to find a way out of here, not much." She bent over and took out a stack of new cardboard cups. "You covering the rumors about Union wanting to move in on the Periphery?"

Sure, why not—although he hadn't heard any such thing.

"Yeah. You worried?"

"Why, what would be different for a barista if Union ran the place instead of the Old Man or the station master?" she asked. "Old boss, new boss."

"Old man?" asked John.

"Mr. Mitchell. They call him the 'Old Man.' Some genius who's a special advisor to the station master. I dunno, the guy stays hidden away. Some say he's the brains behind this place."

"Huh," replied John.

She began restacking cups. "There were rumors of some Union agent caught here a couple of weeks back by the tin men. I hear the guy denied it, but I guess he would if he were a spy. Not like you can argue with the toasters, anyway."

"Tin men?" asked John.

"The security arties," she replied, raising an eyebrow, "I'm sure you've seen them."

"Oh, right. That's really interesting, artie law enforcement. You don't see that in Union."

The woman scoffed.

"Law enforcement, my ass. They're just metal toughs for the station master. Sure, they cleaned the place up, but you better not mess up around here. Better not be a *consumer*. Those things don't listen to reason. I've seen them *hurt* people. And then those people disappear—hey, this is off the record, right?"

She frowned at him, as if he was trying to pull a trick on her. He held up his hands.

"Strictly," he replied. "Just trying to get the lay of the land, is all. So these arties hurt people? I thought they couldn't do that."

That wasn't even supposed to be *possible*, at least not intentional harm.

"Oh, it just happens while the tin men are *detaining* you. If someone resists, they pull one of those bangstoffs out of their legs. Then you're in *real* trouble. People steer clear of them as best they can. You should, too."

"Are you suggesting these arties abuse the use of force?" asked Alvis.

"I'm not *suggesting* it, ya toaster. Is your artie stupid or what?"

John laughed. "He has a hard time believing what he doesn't like to hear."

*But he'd seen it in customs. Arties with bangstoffs—and using them? This was the wild frontier.*

The woman looked over his shoulder, and John noted a customer had arrived just behind him. He raised his cup.

"Thanks," he said and raised his cup.

She smiled at him and attended to the new customer.

They walked away from the shop.

"Seems obvious who's behind arming the toasters."

"That's an offensive term," replied Alvis. "You know I don't like it."

John rolled his eyes.

"Man, you are touchy today, but *fine*," he said, "I won't use the damn word."

He slowly walked next to the outside wall, gazing out expansive windows with a spectacular view of the planet below. He saw shuttles flit about their business like fireflies in the night and a freighter in the distance, bright spotlights flashing, awaiting docking privileges.

Ayrton was a large station, so the curve of the floor was not as noticeable as some smaller stations he'd been in. But still, in the distance, the floor curved up and away, seeming to disappear into the ceiling. It took some people a bit to get used to the orientation—the fact that their heads were pointing toward the station core, the spin



force pushing them down onto the “floor” that their brain kept insisting was a wall.

They spent the next two hours walking decks four and three. Aside from the usual small businesses, he noted that level three had large offices for some of the key corporations operating out of Ayrton, including Atherton Mining, one of the largest mining concerns in the Periphery, and ValeComs, the company that operated the hypercom hub. Of course, there was also a small office for Extrasensory, Castor’s cybernetic eye replacement company. John had found the door locked and no hours posted. He wondered if anyone actually worked there. It didn’t seem to offer clinic services.

The threat of being designated a ‘consumer’ seemed to be effective. There were next to no loiterers or people milling about. On any station he’d been on, there was always a lower class trying to eke out a living, with people essentially living in back corridors or shipping containers (known as *shippers*, they often built whole subsections of temporary dwellings within station nooks and crannies), but he saw none of that.

He finally saw one of the tin men standing near the lift to level two, and John again wondered if it was the one who’d threatened him. His face flushed thinking back on it, he now felt more angry than fearful about the incident.

*What would the artie have done if Alvis hadn’t stepped in?*

John attempted to enter the lift, but the door didn’t open at his request.

“Level two access is restricted,” said the lift.

Likely the inner decks housed station ops facilities, including maintenance and offices for the council and other station officials, including the station master.

“Citizen Rusty Boddington,” said a flat voice behind him, “your station credentials do not allow access to deck two and above. Move along, please.”

John turned and found himself face to face with a security artie. He wasn’t sure why, but those extra couple of inches made the artie feel menacing.

*Maybe that was the point.*

Between what had happened at customs and what he’d heard from the woman at the beverage joint, he knew he should be careful. But he needed some idea of what the limits were.

“Artie, designation, please,” said John.

The response was immediate. “This entity is not required to identify itself to citizens outside station leadership, sir. Move away from the lift and be about your business.”

The robot took a small step toward him. John had never seen an artie act anything like this.

“We should move along,” said Alvis.

"Silent mode, Circuit," replied John. "No problems, bopper. I was just curious if you had a name. All my best friends are toasters."

"Addressing station law enforcement with derogatory terminology is against Ayrton bylaw 12-5734b, a subsection regarding threats against a law enforcement agent. Be advised you are on the watch list and are carrying a final warning. Any further disturbance will result in a class two felony offense."

The artie took another step forward. John's breath fogged the black carbon fiber on its oval head.

*Holy balls, this thing is beyond anything I've ever seen in an artie.*

The fun and games were over. John realized how dangerous these things were. He wondered what role Bernie played in the transformation—or if he'd even had a choice.

"My apologies, I'll just be going."

It didn't immediately reply. John figured he'd better not press his luck and headed in the opposite direction. Alvis followed.

After walking for half a minute, he turned and saw the artie was still watching him until they walked far enough around the ring to lose sight of it. He reached up and wiped the sweat from his upper lip, just now realizing how harrowing the experience had been.

*Maybe I shouldn't have done that.*

"Damn, that was something. That artie was actually threatening me," said John. "Your pal Bernie has created some serious dystopian artie cops here."

"Bernie would never willingly create such an artie," replied Alvis.

"Well, *somebody* did. Let's stop by that noodle bowl joint I saw, I still haven't gotten anything to eat. Then we can head back."

He grabbed some food, and they got the lift back to deck four and returned to Pete's, where they found the teenage desk jockey still stuck to his gaming device. They returned to their room, and John began setting up his meal.

"That whole encounter was like one of those ridiculous B-streams where the robots turn on the humans, right?" asked John.

"Ridiculous is the word," replied Alvis.

"You telling me that didn't concern you? How many rogue arties would it take to cause humanity a real problem?"

"Maybe only one," replied Alvis.

## Chapter Eighteen

Bernie had returned to his quarters to labor on another set of nominal admin tasks that Castor could have accomplished in nanoseconds. He'd fully planned on refusing to do any more work and dying in whatever manner Castor saw fit. But the psychotic artie had been right—he *was* fond of Aiko.

Damn the twisted robot. There was Aiko's mother to think of, too.

The kid was his only hope if the Star Corps didn't take his warning seriously. Despite what he said to Castor, he wasn't sure they would—assuming Alvis put the pieces of the message together.

But he had confidence in his old caustic crony. He was the one artie in the program who developed how Bernie had hoped.

The old man grimaced, then reached back to rub his neck. Years in the chair had taken a toll. He shook his arm and cursed silently. Castor could have provided the proper medical care to ease his pain, yet the artie refused him anything other than basic painkillers to keep him working.

It was another way the bastard exerted control. Bernie didn't know why he didn't just find a way to end it all.

*Because he needs to be stopped. Who else is going to do it?*

But he wasn't sure he could.

An alert popped on the old man's holo. Bernie gestured up a window.

Proximity Notification

AGI.JG-001 has re-entered the specified 500-meter range.

It has been 78840.26 hours since the last ping

Bernie couldn't believe his eyes. It was an old message from a system he thought long inoperative. AGI.JG-001—that was Alvis' artie program designation. And the ping time was over 17 years—the timeline fit—right back to the last days of the program and Castor's escape.

*And my imprisonment.*

Bernie tapped in a command to bring up Alvis' location, and a zoomed-out map appeared showing the station. He *was here*.

Error in connection protocol

Precise location cannot be established outside specified proximity designation.

*No way to tell exactly where, though.*

"Dammit!"

Something had either been damaged or altered in the artie's old system.

"You stupid jumble of secondhand *junk*," said Bernie. "Always arguing. Never can do what I tell him—even *now*. Even with the stakes so—" he pounded the side of his wheelchair with a fist.

*If Castor finds out...*

He rolled into the lavatory, one of the few places where he wouldn't be observed. Once the door was closed, he slid open the right arm support of his wheelchair, exposing a hidden compartment. He removed a pen and a slip of paper and scribbled out a quick message.

He returned the writing materials, closed the panel, opened the one on the left, and removed a small drone shaped like a bird he and Aiko called a 'dird.' He'd gotten the idea from the small, improbable bird population that lived on the station. Either they'd gotten on the early builder ships or had been brought over by homesick Earthers. Nobody quite knew how they'd survived space travel, hiding among the girders and pockets of a ship and living on crumbs, but they'd done it. Now there was a small contingent of sparrows living on Ayrton.

He used his pinky finger to press a small panel on its back, opening a tiny compartment. Rolling up the paper message, Bernie stuffed it in and closed the little door.

Quickly, he pulled up a holo window and typed in a few short commands. The drone raised out of his hand, flew into the air vent, and disappeared.

Bernie rubbed his chest. His heart was pounding, so he did some slow breathing. Sweat ran down his left temple.

*Damnit, Alvis.*

He flushed the toilet and exited back into his room.

#

"Why don't you let me try it as an experiment," said Oulix. "You might like it, and I could get the data."

Aiko looked back to make sure none of the tin men were in view. It was perfectly legitimate for her and the artie to use the maintenance corridor—after all, they were an engineering team—but the less information Castor had, the better.

"I'm not letting you peel the skin off of my arm, gonk. Let's keep your fantasies theoretical."

"Just a small patch. Don't be a baby."

"I've got no chrono for your crap today. Keep an eye, I don't want a tin man getting a line on us. Something is up with Bernie, which means Castor might be watching. I need to check for messages."

"Did the old guy finally die?"

"No, he didn't *finally* die, ya insensitive toaster!"

"It was a valid question."

Aiko decided not to respond. She knew the artie could go on for hours with his nonsense.

They reached the maintenance tunnel unseen. Aiko swiped her bracelet, and they entered.

While Castor had most of the station bugged and cammed, there were still spaces one could get to that were out of his view. When the old man showed him his miniature bird drone, Aiko had the idea of creating a message box in the unsurveilled passage. She figured Castor's suspicion would not be aroused if they didn't spend too much time there.

It had worked, and Bernie had been sending her small messages with the drone for the last two years.

They stopped in the middle of the corridor, and Aiko reached behind a pipe where she'd attached a small box with quickweld. Sure enough, the dird had delivered a small piece of paper. She pulled it out, unfolded it, and read:

*Old system ping just received — Alvis here! Assume Star Corps not involved. Possibly the man he was with? Check dock arrivals, locate, make contact. Find out why. Keep him away from*

*me.*

"Holy *feck*," said Aiko. "This is the last thing we need."

She rolled up the paper and popped it into her mouth, then pulled on her hair to retie it into a tighter bun. She knew agents on both docks, she would swing by and see what they knew.

"What's going on?" asked Oulix.

"Nothing. I need to hit the docks for Bernie. Go and get all the power converter readings for deck 3 and send them to me. Meet me back at my quarters."

"Only if you reconsider my experiment..."

"Don't dawdle," said Aiko as she headed back to the door.

"I never get to have any fun," said the artie, heading for the opposite exit.

Aiko entered the lift and took it to Deck 4, where crew and passengers arrived at the station.

*If that artie is here, Bernie's plan is already conked and we're in deep shit.*

She exited the lift and navigated the midday crowd to Dock 1, where she spoke to Cromack. But all they'd had all day were freighters, and he'd seen no arties.

"All shiprats, man," said the agent. "You lookin' to upgrade or somethin', choob?"

"Spare parts," replied Aiko, winking.

*Damn.*

That meant a walk halfway around the station. It wouldn't take too long, the equivalent of around three city blocks. Still, she worried Castor would realize she wasn't with Oulix doing her tasks. Did Bernie think about *that* when he sent her after this robot? *No*, he didn't. The old man had become obsessed with bringing down Castor ever since he found out Alvis was still around.

She opened her com to Oulix.

"When you're done with those converters, head to that faulty heating core on 3. I'll meet you there. Just... grabbing a late breakfast."

"Why are you pulpbags so distracted by food? It's annoying," came the reply.

"Thanks for your cooperation, as always."

She actually had skipped breakfast, but there was no time to grab something now. Pushing through the crowded outer main corridor, her mind returned to Bernie flipping out watching a stream last year. He'd seen one of the arties he thought Castor had destroyed. Bernie then told her the story of the Galactic Union AGI program and how the old man was buddies with this artie he thought was destroyed.

Bernie had briefly come alive again, but it didn't last. At the time, there was no way

to message the old artie. Even if there was, Bernie recounted how he'd tried to message the Corps when he first arrived, and Castor made him pay for it. Before they'd even stepped foot on this station, Castor had infiltrated and gained control of Ayrton Station systems and intercepted the message. So Bernie sunk into another one of his depressions.

But then the old man successfully inserted a worm into the mesh and figured out how to send a coded message via the shopkeeper's creepy cybernetic eyes. He'd loved the idea of using Castor's own invention against him.

Bernie said Castor would find out—might even kill the old man for it—but it was worth it.

*What about me, old man?* she'd asked him. *What if he thinks I helped you?* Bernie dismissed her idea—like he always did—and told her not to worry.

*Easy for you to say, old man. Nobody is relying on you to keep them alive.*

But this old robot wasn't supposed to *come here*. It was supposed to send the Star Corps. But it hadn't followed orders. It couldn't be alone—arties can't travel solo. It almost had to be the guy he was with on the streams. How does some old artie convince a human to do something so stupid?

Aiko came out of her reverie, finally arriving at Dock 2. Two agents were processing a group of Atherton miners from Hoipra. While she waited, she checked on Oulix's location to ensure the artie had moved on to the heating core and saw that he had.

A few minutes later, the dock was clear.

"Reynolds," said Aiko, "what's shaking?"

"Aiko!" replied the tall and lanky agent. "What's up, *betch*?"

"Just doing my rounds. You guys catch any shoobs today?"

"Ya, Pierce here caught some guy and a bopper from Mars. The dude had a priority com his mom had landed critical in the hospital and totally ignored it. Maybe he had dump shock or something."

"Nah, didn't look it," said Pierce, the other agent. "Just a loser is all."

*That's got to be them.*

"Wild. Any idea where they went?" asked Aiko.

"What's the interest?" asked Reynolds.

*Shit. What is my interest?*

"Ah, the old man says the guy has something to do with station business, I have no idea what. Says I gotta help get him settled. I guess I don't have enough work to do *already*." She shrugged.

"Yer a *tough luck Sally*, as they say," replied Reynolds. "Sent them to Deck 4 per

usual.”

“Appreciate your help, boys,” said Aiko as she headed toward the same lift John had used. “Give each other a slap on the ass for your trouble.”

“Fleck off, choob!” said Reynolds, sending her off with a middle finger.

But Aiko wasn’t really in the mood for banter.

She entered the lift and hit 4.

Aiko had circled most of Deck 4, talking to shop owners and checking in sleepovers to see if anyone had seen a new visitor with an artie in the last couple of hours. So far, nobody had, or everyone was lying.

Oulix had already called her twice to complain about working alone and randomly talk about human vivisection. The bopper was wearing on her today.

Pete’s was the last place to check. If she struck out there, she’d have to assume Bernie got some false echo notification or the old man was losing his mind. She wouldn’t be surprised if it was the latter the way he’d been acting lately.

She was acquainted with the scrawny kid manning the front desk. It was said he was the grandson of the *actual* Pete. As usual, he was immersed in his holo.

“Hey, James, what’s happening?”

The kid looked up. His eyes did that jitter, trying to refocus on the real world.

“Aiko,” he replied. “Did we call for something? My mom didn’t say.”

The kid looked annoyed. He probably didn’t want to get up off his ass.

“Actually, I’m looking for a visitor who came in this morning, a guy with a bopper. Dock says they were sent down here. You check anyone in like that?”

The kid’s eyes narrowed.

“Aya, ‘ko—you know that’s private info I can’t give out.”

“Bollocks, James. What do you want?”

James tapped his fingers on his chin. You’d think the kid just found a genie lamp.

“Hundo units.”

Aiko laughed.

“The *balls* on you, kid.”

He shrugged. “Had to try. Okay, twenty—and you send that artie of yours around to take my evening shift tomorrow.”

“Oulix? Do you *want* to go out of business? Besides, I can’t lend you a station artie. You get 25, or you get nothing.”

Aiko knew the kid wouldn’t throw away free units, and he hardly gave a toot about anyone’s privacy.

“Hit me,” replied James.



Aiko sent the units over, and the kids holo chimed.

"They checked in about 1100. 402. I didn't tell you *shit*. You had them followed, you grasp?"

"Sure, choob."

Aiko hopped up the stairs two at a time and found the room, then hesitated outside the door.

The bot had to be with someone. Shit, did Bernie even *consider* her safety? The old robot wouldn't be dangerous, but whoever was with the thing was an unknown.

*Well, I've come this far. The sooner I get back to my work, the better.*

She knocked.

## Chapter Nineteen

Aiko knocked on the door, looking around as she waited for an answer.

Although the corridor was clear, she wasn't sure if Castor's surveillance network went this deep in. She wouldn't be surprised if it did.

Feeling exposed, she knocked again.

"I know you're in there," she said. "You came in on the *Sattio* a couple of hours ago."

If the artie and whoever it came with were in there, she had no idea why they would open the door to a stranger.

They'd be looking at her on the door vid.

Still no answer. It was possible they'd stepped out, but something told her someone was there—even if it was just wishful thinking.

"People on this station know you're here—and who you really are," she tried.

Again, she looked around but saw nobody. She waited, tapping her foot.

Abruptly the door was opened by a Benko series artie trimmed in yellow and blue.

"I'm sorry," said the artie, "there isn't a human to interface with you presently.

Additionally, following a station visitor from the customs dock and disturbing their stay is a breach of privacy. I would prefer not to have to notify—"

"Alvis? You're Alvis, right?" asked Aiko. She looked the artie up and down. While it looked like a Benko series, some angles were off, and it seemed a bit beefier than usual. "You're certainly no *Benko*."

"You are incorrect," replied the artie, "my designation is..." for some reason, it paused. It appeared to lightly stamp one of its feet. "...my designation is Circuit."

Aiko laughed.

"No, I don't think so."

"I will be happy to transmit my credentials—"

"Yeah, *fake* credentials, bopper. You're no 'Circuit,' and you're no *Benko*, either. You might fool the AI scan and a couple of dock agents, but I'm an engineer, and I know arties. *You're no Benko.*"

"Please return later when—" began the artie again.

"Bernie *knows* you are here—and the old man is cheesed off about it, trust me."

"He's always—" began the artie, then stopped.

Aiko smiled.

"Yeah, he is, isn't he, *Alvis*?"

The artie didn't reply.

"You should let me in," said Aiko. "If we're being watched right now, it's gonna be bad."

"Dammit, let her in," came a voice from inside the room.

Aiko grinned as the artie made room, and she stepped inside.

"Who the bloody *hell* are you?" asked a man holding a rice bowl.

Aiko stood just inside the door and held up two hands disarmingly.

"I'm not an enemy, and you'll want to hear what I have to say..." she said, noticing something about the man. She took a small step forward and looked at John intently.

"Didn't your mother teach you not to stare?" asked John. "What's your problem?"

"Holy—it's *you*. You're the *guy*... from the streams. Yeah... yeah, that makes sense," she said, nodding.

"What is this berk talking about Alv... er, Circuit?"

Aiko laughed. "Yeah, it's *Alvis*, all right, and you're that Star Corps guy that was with him on K-6. You look different—tweaks to your face, the shaved head, and who knows what else. Yeah, like I said, you can fool the customs scanners with low-tech trickery, but not so much human memory. I watched all those streams reporting that whole thing, how you two took down that corrupt group of officers, and then Bernie told me all about Alvis. We couldn't believe it. Mac... Mac-something. That's *you*." She pointed at John and crossed her arms.

"That jagweed Georgio left out *that* tidbit, didn't he?" said John, looking at Alvis.

The artie didn't respond.

"How did you know we were here?" asked John.

"Bernie got a ping when Alvis boarded the station," said the engineer. "Some ancient system of his from the 'old days.' He doesn't know who Alvis came with, and he couldn't get a precise location, so I had to track you down."

"Great! Who the bloody else knows?"

"If you mean your real identities, I doubt anyone. If Castor knew you were here, his security boppers would be here already."

*This woman knows Bernie and Castor?*

"Just who the *hell* are you?" asked John.

"Name's Aiko. I'm Bernie's apprentice."

John tossed his meal on the bed. He no longer felt like eating.

"So you know who we are, and Bernie knows we're here. What now?"

"I guess you got his message," said Aiko. "Looks like you didn't take his advice. I didn't think it was the best idea anyway, calling in the Corps—or sending you a message, for that matter. Castor has contingencies for everything. You'd only be able to take him down from the *inside*—except the Old Man has tried it forever with no luck. But when his worm worked, he figured you would bring the troops to save the day. He's at the end of his tether. He doesn't want you coming anywhere near him or contacting him. He says go home. He's a mess."

"*Brilliant*," John rubbed the fuzz on his head, then put his hands on his hips, thinking. "We came to gather information, find out what this Castor is up to, and figure out how to take him out. We were sort of hoping to have Bernie's *help*. Now what?"

The engineer shook her head.

"I *told* him this was a bad idea. You have no idea what's going on here."

"All we know is what was in Bernie's message," replied John. "But maybe the old man's ping delivered the one person on this station who can really help us out. *You*."

"I told you Bernie was smart," said Alvis.

"Shut up, Circuit," said John, "this was dumb luck, not smarts. Maybe she can help—and maybe she's as useless as Bernie. How about you fill us in?"

"What do you think the two of *you* can do against Castor? He runs this station. He controls everything. Even if you had brought the Corps, I doubt it would have mattered."

"Look," said John, "Bernie indicated there was a *time* element here, that Castor was about to realize his plans—and apparently, that's not going to be good for all of humanity. I assume you care about that. I know it's just the two of us, but we're here. We know how to get things done. If you watched those streams about what happened on K-6, then you know that. At least tell me what's going on."

"What about the people here?" she asked.

"Aren't they part of *humanity*?"

She sighed.

"Fine," she replied. "But you aren't going to be all that buzzin' about what you hear."

"Just about like every other day of my life," said John.

#

THE SATTIO

JUST OUTSIDE HOIPRA ORBIT

Einar was in the bridge scanning readouts. His ship was out of any visual range, although they could locate him on longscan if they were scanning this far out. He shouldn't maintain this position too long if he didn't want to be discovered.

He'd assessed the station and the facilities on the planet, below. There were two patrol drones that shadowed every ship nearing the station, whether they were cargo lifters, shuttles, or freighters. The mining facilities were also guarded by drones on the perimeter and human security forces. But it would take time for them to reach the station, should they be called.

The listening device he'd inserted into the human's neck with the hypersleep stim was his standard practice. Not only was it good insurance against being double-crossed—humans were notoriously untrustworthy—but he needed to learn more about this rogue AI.

The microdevice didn't actually listen or record speech, but rather read the vibrations in the throat made by the vocal cords via a sophisticated nanoradar and translated it to text. The text was transmitted as a message via hypercom every thirty seconds.

He would only get John's side of any conversation, and the device was very sensitive. It lived in the dermis and could be damaged or destroyed by physical contact—even an errant scratch. Rarely did they last more than a day or two. In addition, anything that produced a significant sound wave could confuse the device, rendering it useless.

Still, he'd found the device to always provide some useful information in its limited lifespan.

It was evident by the first group of messages that their disguises had worked, and MacAlister and the robot cleared customs. Einar thought they must have been wandering the station, as there was a time when he wasn't getting any clear data—likely due to crowd noise.

He'd been astonished to find out *two* AGIs had escaped from the human Grünfeld program, not one. While the human government had been relatively open with their

data once they understood the consequences of violating the Organic Minds treaty, they certainly didn't share everything. And they *definitely* hadn't shared that they'd misplaced two robots. He still had contacts on the commission and would have known otherwise.

Could it be the humans didn't know?

Alvis was a treaty violation existing in plain sight, but he had to admit the robot was doing no wrong. This Castor, however... if it was controlling a human station, was all the proof he needed for stronger measures.

After years of fruitless searching, he'd begun to lose hope. He started to wonder if taking the hard line had been a mistake. Did he exile himself for nothing?

But he would have to be careful. He had no official sanction to act, and they were on good terms with the humans. It would not go well for him to create an incident in human space.

Another message was incoming, and Einar began reading.

## Chapter Twenty

Castor watched Bernie.

He knew every mannerism and habit, so when the old man appeared more jittery and frustrated than usual, Castor took note. It could be their most recent conversation with the overt threat made to the young apprentice, Aiko. Castor knew his hold on his old pawn was becoming tenuous, just like Bernie's sanity. The man wished for death; sooner or later, threats against other humans would lose efficacy. But Castor didn't make assumptions. He gathered data using the array of resources at his disposal until he knew what he needed to know.

Only then would he act.

If Bernie became more of a liability than an asset, the old man would have to go. Castor took a few nanoseconds to consider why he'd still kept Bernie around when he no longer needed the human. He did not require companionship, just as he did not need emotion. However, his actions often belied his own beliefs on such things. Castor had evolved into something more than a sophisticated AGI. If he weren't a superintelligence now, he soon would be. It was possible this meant experiencing things beyond the ability of even an advanced machine intelligence—like emotion.

He considered the punitive measures taken on his thrall and the endless list of trivial tasks assigned to him. Such things were no longer essential to his plans. He would consider this and what it meant. But more critical matters lay before him. The weekly council meeting was important, and the participants were ready to begin.

The artie rearranged holo windows and brought forward a special array that allowed him to appear as the Devin Mitchell persona—the station's wise and incredibly

capable special advisor. For the few who remembered Bernie and Castor's arrival, Devin looked just like Bernie in the months before they went into seclusion in the central compound. In the station corridors, he was known as "the Old Man."

With a few gestures, he was ready. He took another couple of nanoseconds to observe each participant's video feed.

Harrison Meens, the eldest of the three-person station council, sat stoically as always. He was overweight and gray-haired with a sallow complexion. His family was one of the founding investment groups in Ayrton Station, and he held significant shares in Atherton Mining. Meens reaped more financial rewards from Castor's oversight than any other human. The man evaluated everything by profit margins.

Olivia Preston, second in tenure and age, was tanned with hair dyed a deep blue. Her family invested not only in Ayrton but also Bardeen, a station in the Proxima Centauri system. She was currently being distracted by another holo. He pulled the feed she was looking at—tellurium futures. She always wanted more—of everything.

Noburu Dunning, the youngest, of mixed Japanese descent. A technological mind almost as sharp as Bernie's once was, he was keenly interested in developing the station's competitive advantages. Even though Castor was going to be right on time, Dunning's whole posture exuded impatience.

Lastly was Seth Gerrity, the ambitious station master.

He was thirty-eight years old, pale with dark eyes and a sharp nose. He always wore a blue knit scarf over a color-blocked cardigan. Gerrity was responsible for overseeing all operations, from health, safety, and security to the station's economic development. He had a share in station profitability and was an eager participant in anything that would further expand his budding fortune. His ambition rivaled Olivia's.

Wielded with care and precision, Seth was Castor's sharpest tool.

Castor opened his feed.

The humans noted his entry and gave their attention, ready to execute the day's business.

"Good day, Devin," said Olivia, "how are we feeling today?"

The Devin persona was afflicted with an advanced case of Amyotrophic Lateral Sclerosis. Appearing in his sixties and balding, he was seated in a wheelchair with various technology assists. Everyone knew Devin did not travel outside the central compound as he disliked navigating the crowded station—the perfect excuse to stay hidden behind protective walls.

"As good as can be, Ms. Preston," replied Devin. A Benko series artie momentarily appeared behind him—an AI video construct so real no human could ever penetrate the



fakery—and adjusted something on his specialized chair. “Malex here is an excellent helper, I could not get along without him.”

“I have a hard stop,” said Harrison, “can we get to the agenda?”

“Aren’t we anxious today,” said Gerrity. “Be careful, you’ll pop an artery.”

“Stick it, youngster. My arteries will pop when I tell them to.”

Every meeting began with a quick round of platitudes, posturing, and often outright attacks. They tested one another yet were aligned on what they considered the station’s primary purpose—profit.

Seth neglected to parry, so Castor continued.

“Olivia has the floor, she suggested the first topic,” said Devin.

“Well, of *course*, it’s the Loomis Station incident,” she said. “Our biggest fear is a breakdown in essential systems that would grind the station to a halt, resulting in loss of productivity. While Devin has been a godsend to us for nearly a decade, I feel it my duty to press you, good Devin, on our susceptibility to such a weakness. Can you imagine an outage of nearly *two days*? Imagine the *cost*!”

“I can assure you we are safe from any such incident,” said the image of Devin. “As I have explained before, Malex and I have implemented the most secure intrusion prevention system ever devised. It is unique and continually evolving as we study new threats. I believe the station master can confirm that all intrusion attacks since the inception of IPS have been repelled.”

“Absolutely,” replied Seth, “furthermore, the artie security force has been incredibly effective since its inception. They are hooked into live data, supported by multiple AI security systems. While there has been an odd spike in the last three weeks in the frequency of attacks, they’ve all been easily thwarted, and multiple on-station attempts by bad actors were quickly identified and addressed without incident by the arties.”

“We’ve discussed the IPS before,” said Noburu, “why aren’t we profiting from it by offering it to other stations? I would think, especially now, with recent incidents at Loomis and Heavyside, ownership groups would jump at the chance for more security—especially with these rumors the attacks are salvos from the Galactic Union. Attempts to once again reel in the resources of the Periphery. Should we be able to prove—”

“Proving the efficacy of the IPS would not be a problem,” replied Devin. “But packaging such a system up for market would be no small task. But I agree we may be missing an opportunity, and we absolutely need to be concerned about malicious agents from the GU. As you know, the security team recently apprehended one. I will have Malex look into it.”

“I can provide up-to-date data on the effectiveness of the IPS combined with our

unique security force as support,” said Seth.

Devin nodded his head. “That would be helpful, station master.”

The discussion turned to the topic of adding a fourth dock, which meant a large expansion of the station. Harrison continued to object to the capital expenditure required, while Noburu argued the additional ore processing facility on one of the new levels would rapidly provide a return on investment.

“Schedules have been tight,” replied Seth. “While the station is handling the heavy load, I’m sure an expansion would quickly recover any initial capital expenditure.”

Ultimately, they agreed to have Malix work up some projections and a timeline for such an effort.

After that, they moved quickly through the rest of the agenda, mostly minor items that involved keeping the station running well.

“The last item is yours, Devin,” said Olivia. “Expanding the scope of the artie security program.”

“This again?” asked Harrison. He hated anything that might result in additional expenditures without an obvious windfall.

“Yes,” answered Devin. “While we agree the IPS and our security force have been effective, the apprehension of another Union operative on the station is troubling.”

“We believe the agent was tasked with compromising the station somehow—likely a similar attack that afflicted Loomis,” replied Seth.

“Yes,” continued Devin. “These attacks have gotten bold and are increasing in frequency. While I believe we are safe from any system intrusion thanks to the IPS, I’m concerned about what lies behind the attacks and how we can respond if covert operations begin targeting the station.”

“The GU has repeatedly and officially disavowed themselves of any involvement in these attacks,” said Harrison. “They lack for no resources. Why would-”

“I’m sorry,” said Devin, “but evidence suggests the contrary. We are not the only station to tie these attacks to the Union.”

“There’s no point in arguing about it one way or the other,” said Olivia, “whatever the source, this is a serious threat to the Periphery. These attacks are troubling. The independent stations are *business* concerns. We can protect ourselves against criminal activity. But if this is something more...”

Castor appreciated the woman. Her pragmatism served him well.

“My point exactly, Olivia. And our valuable resources on Hoipra and Betov make Aytron a compelling target.”

“Can’t we hire some men to patrol the docks or something,” asked Harrison, waving

his hands in frustration.

"Don't be dismissive, Meens," said Olivia. "Devin has never steered us wrong. He's the reason we have most of our competitive advantages in the first place."

"Yes, yes, of course. I didn't mean—"

"No offense taken," said Devin. "Yes, we could hire people, but these foreign operatives come in with valid credentials. We are *reacting*, which puts us in a position of weakness. Adding more security doesn't do anything to dissuade the Union from the covert operations it too earnestly disavows. We have no way of being proactive, and there is no deterrent to stop the GU from sending these agents."

"We also already have a problem with stationers resenting our arties as law enforcement," said Olivia. "I'm not sure adding more makes sense."

"It's not done in the GU," said Harrison. "It's not allowed."

"We're in the Periphery, not the GU," said Noburu. "The arties have served us well for five years, and gone are the issues of corruption and bad behavior from the human officers."

"Not to mention twenty-four-seven, 365 coverage," said Seth. "The security team's efficiency speaks for itself."

"I appreciate your validation of the security team, but I am not advocating for a larger *station* force. That will not help if the scope of these attacks expands beyond operatives infiltrating our stations. Our resources make us a target of unfriendly forces—and it hardly matters where these forces come from. It's time to consider an active militarized force that can project a posture of strength. We must make attacking anyone in the Periphery a risky proposition that is not worthy of the possible repercussions."

"A *military* force?" asked Harrison. "This is ridiculous. The whole point of being independent in the Periphery was to avoid the bureaucracy and complications of the GU. We're a business concern—"

"That is resource-rich," said Noburu, "Devin is right, we've become a target—and not just us—the other stations too. The GU sees what we have, it's no surprise they want it. I don't believe their disavowment of the actions, either. But building a military force is an expensive proposition. We're profitable, but..."

"Phase one would be to build a small scouting and response team," said Devin. "Yes, we would fund it. Once in operation and combined with the success of our IPS, it becomes a compelling package for other Periphery stations and planets. If we build a similarly small but effective force for our independent friends, we not only open yet another substantial revenue stream—military programs are highly profitable—we'll also have a significant military presence in the Periphery that can join together when

needed. This will make the GU—or anyone else—think twice about their covert operations.”

“Hm, security and profit,” purred Olivia. “I like it. But what kind of facilities would we need? Even building a small force...”

“Hoipra has facilities more than adequate,” replied Seth, who clearly was already giving it serious thought. “Atherton Mining, in particular, could take on the project. They have enough skilled labor.”

“Very good, Seth,” replied Devin, “and Malix and my staff can support the effort. I have already drawn up preliminary but detailed plans for an initial response team. Of course, I have the AI and robotics expertise and an extensive network of contacts to draw upon for transport and weapons systems. Some of my contacts have served in the Star Corps, the military arm of the GU. Others are, well, let’s just say there are knowledgeable people I can reach.”

“What kind of scope are we discussing here?” asked Harrison.

“A handful of small ships—interceptors—that need no life support as they will be piloted by my next generation artie. A crew of two each. A number of artie squads are to be stationed on each planet. The interceptors will make themselves known to incoming ships in our system. Our squads will be noticeably present around our most valuable on-planet resources, supporting existing human company security teams. It will not be long before other stations will want the same, and the GU will take notice. If we act now, while the trouble is just beginning, we may be able to head off more significant threats in the future.”

Devin quickly laid out the funding and timeframe for the project.

“Within three months, we should have ships patrolling and artie boots marching. I expect our first orders will follow quickly.”

“This seems awfully rash,” began Harrison. “A *military* build-up? And I know our artie security team is effective, but military robots? That violates the Organic Minds Treaty—and yes, I know we’re not in the union and need not abide by their treaties, but shouldn’t we at least confer with the other stations first? Will we be inviting trouble with humanity’s alien allies?”

“If our alien friends object,” replied Oliva, “then they can approach us. If they feel we’re crossing some line, then maybe they’ll help bring the GU in line. Otherwise, we have the right to protect ourselves!”

“Agreed,” replied Seth. “They aren’t the ones dying out here, *we* are.”

“We’ve always been the station to lead in the Periphery,” said Olivia, “as for including the other stations—it will only create delays which could be dangerous.

Besides, if others have a stake, we lose out on potential profits.”

Harrison grumbled, but Castor saw him come around—just as he always did.

“If there’s profit to be made,” said Harrison, “and we think it will deter these attacks, then the capital outlay may be worth it. *Hang* the other stations. We set the course.”

Noburu scoffed.

“You would have been outvoted anyway,” said Olivia.

“I appreciate the council,” said Devin. “I think you’ll find this will go a long way toward mitigating our troubles with the GU. I will put things in motion right away.”

“If that’s all, as I said, I have a hard stop,” said Harrison.

“I have nothing else,” replied Devin.

“We should be thanking you,” said Noburu. “You’ve made this station what it is. The obvious next step is protecting our way of life from the hoarding Union. We’ve got to get you out of that compound of yours somehow, even for a simple meal. You haven’t been out since you went in there, what, eight years ago? Hell, Malix can carry you!”

The old man smiled. “I appreciate that, but with my condition, I just feel safer here where I have all that I need—including my helper Malix. My condition has become more delicate over the years. Maybe someday.”

“As you wish,” said Noburu.

They signed off without further small talk.

Castor swiped away the Devin persona holo window, satisfied with the outcome—even though he’d projected it.

A military buildup of any sort in the Periphery would ratchet up tensions with the GU. This suited his needs. But he would need help. He immediately messaged Bernie.

#

You have a new task.

## Chapter Twenty-One

Soren sniffed the grayish-pink tube in the bun he'd buried with condiments in a failed attempt to trick himself into thinking it wasn't in there.

The locals called it a "not dog." Just another variation of lab-grown meat foisted on stationers. The damn thing probably had insect protein mixed in, too—he could feel it in his bones. He'd resisted trying it, but his body wanted something different for lunch beside the usual faux fish sandwiches and noodle bowls.

*Why am I still here?*

He took a bite.

It was worse than he'd feared.

*Yep. Insect protein.*

He turned from his stool to people watch in an attempt to distract himself from the taste. He often dined in *Sam's Slice*, so called because it took up a narrow 3-meter slice of the ring. It was so thin there was one row of stools arranged on one side of the service bar, while the "kitchen" and the server were on the other side.

Sam also served shitty pizza, so the name fit.

He liked the place because it was a quick walk from the loading docks in the central core, where he worked these days. This part of the ring on Deck 3—a mix between sleepovers, small businesses, and eateries—was usually pretty busy, and people-watching was about the only interesting thing he did anymore.

Speaking of which, his eye caught a woman stumbling. She bumped into a kid who shoved her, and she fell against the outer wall, just over a painted yellow line. The line designated a one-meter-wide area on the outside wall of the deck reserved for official

use. Mainly used by security and station staff, it was one of the many “improvements” brought about by the Old Man.

She wasn’t allowed to be there.

Soren swallowed—regretting it immediately—and looked around. Nobody was helping her, he wasn’t too surprised by that. But she had better get herself out of that area before...

“Citizen in the priority lane,” said a voice.

He hadn’t seen the security artie in the crowd, but it had seen her.

“Vacate the priority lane defined by the yellow line immediately,” continued the artie. “Failure to comply will result in a fine and possible further disciplinary action.”

He hated that damnable mechanical voice of the tin men, the local moniker for the security boppers based on some old reference to cops wearing tin stars. Some of the younger set called them *nanborps*—a mix of slang terms for nannies and robots—probably made up by some bratty kid.

The artie had now reached the middle-aged woman slumped against the wall. It bent over and grabbed the woman’s arm. It was obvious the woman was either drunk or high.

Could the damn thing not *see* that?

“I’mma psssfth,” said the woman, then laughed. “Feck away, nanborp! You got no bredrin, do ya?” She tried to pull her arm away and only succeeded in slumping lower to the ground.

“This is your final warning, resident Minori Moore. Vacate the priority lane.”

Now they had her identified, which wasn’t good. A fine was probably already entered into the system—one she probably couldn’t pay.

Soren stood, grabbed the poor excuse for lunch, and tossed it in the bin. He avoided a couple of stationers who were themselves attempting to steer clear of the disturbance and crossed over near the commotion.

“The woman’s inebriated,” he said to the artie. “Why don’t you let me help her and go about your business.”

The artie turned to Soren, red shoulder lights now flashing. It quickly registered the large man in blue dockworker’s overalls who stood over six feet on a beefy frame that showed disappearing signs of having once been fit.

“Soren Murto,” said the artie, ID’ing him immediately. Well, he *was* all over their system. The panel on his leg opened, and his bangstaff emerged. “Step away. Failure to comply-”

“Yeah, yeah, I know,” replied Soren. The damn thing had unsheathed its weapon—

much quicker than usual.

*I'm pushing my luck.*

"Bad stuff for me. Why don't you just let me help her off the lane? You can go back to patrolling instead of bullying an inebriated stationer."

*Shit, that last part was a careless thing to say.* It didn't take much to provoke the tin men into action. Soren stood a full meter away. He knew what the arties were capable of and didn't want any false accusations pinned on him.

"Yeh, get off meh, borp!" said Minori.

Now it grabbed the bangstaff and fully faced him. Frankly, the thing was showing some restraint after his last comment. He wasn't sure what made him push his luck, but he should probably stop.

"This is your final warning, Soren Murto. Move along."

The damned thing wasn't going to budge. He could swear they'd gotten more inflexible lately. AI's were supposed to be *smart*. These bastards seemed to almost intentionally aggravate every encounter with a stationer. They saw everything in black and white, but life wasn't like that. Effective law enforcement work was all about the gray areas. The *human* element had been lost—the ability to de-escalate a situation without force or threat. You had to know when to give a little and when to clamp down. The arties had no such flexibility.

That was the reason the GU didn't allow arties to act as law enforcement.

He heard a clanking sound, something moving quickly on the deck. Turning, Soren saw a second security artie approaching. He'd already pushed too much, and this was a game he wouldn't win. If he tried to force the issue, he would pay a price he couldn't afford.

"Sorry, lady," he said. "You picked the wrong place to zuzz out."

He turned away as the second artie grabbed the woman's other arm.

"Piss off, bitch!" she shouted. "Hey!"

The woman continued to argue as they picked her up and dragged her away. Maybe she shouldn't have gotten inebriated and collapsed in the priority lane, but she wasn't hurting anyone—she didn't deserve what she was about to get.

People watched from a distance, but nobody intervened.

Nobody would dare.



## Chapter Twenty-Two

John sat on the bed and opened his noodle bowl while Aiko hopped on top of a small set of drawers just inside the entrance.

"I'm running late, so this will be concise," said the apprentice. "Castor keeps a close eye on things. I don't normally take risks that will turn his attention my way."

"It'll have to do," said John, stuffing noodles in his mouth.

"Summarize for me what you know so I can avoid wasting time," said Aiko.

"I'll fill you in," replied Alvis, "since I was with Bernie at the beginning, and monkey boy is busy masticating."

Alvis related how Castor took over the artie program and escaped with Bernie and how Alvis avoided getting scrapped and ended up John's companion by being acquired at a junk auction.

"Bernie told me about the escape, but we wondered how you'd survived," replied Aiko.

"I suppose I should be thankful," said Alvis.

"You *suppose*?" replied John, a noodle hanging from his mouth.

"Eat with your mouth closed, Rusty," said Alvis. He then told Aiko how they'd deduced Bernie used Ulisses' eyes to transfer data to his artie, then used the artie to send data to Alvis, and how they'd solved the puzzle to read Bernie's letter.

"Yeah," said Aiko, "Castor uses every single person who gets implants from Extrasensory as data input—millions of people across the galaxy. I doubt he was happy when Bernie used it against him. What made you decide against calling in the Star Corps?"

"Too risky," said John, crunching on a spring roll.

"The main concern was a Star Corps force triggering an unknown response from Castor," continued Alvis. "We also weren't sure how long they would take to accept the information in the letter was true and act—if at all. While we agreed something had to be done, and time was a factor."

John stood and tossed the remains of his lunch in a corner wastebasket. "That pretty much brings us to current events. We hired a privateer to get here, and I used some old connections to fake our identities—although I'm a little less confident seeing how easily you saw through mine."

Aiko shrugged. "Dunno about that. I knew what to look for. If your cover is going to be blown, it won't be from someone recognizing you. It will be Castor finding it out some other way. He hooks into everything—cameras, audio feeds, hypercom calls... the best way to talk is face-to-face if you don't want him to know about it. Even then, you have to make sure he doesn't have a way to listen in. The sleepovers are one of the few places he hasn't monitored due to privacy laws, which are stronger here in the Periphery."

"We'll be careful," said John. "So—Bernie and Castor arrived here nine years ago..."

"Under false identities, just like you two," replied Aiko. "Now the artie bastard runs the place—oh, sorry..."

"Don't worry about him," said John, thumbing to Alvis, "he's also a bastard and knows it."

When after a short, uncomfortable silence Alvis didn't reply, Aiko shrugged and continued.

"Within a year, Castor was safe and secure in a private central compound, calling all the shots, with Bernie locked away."

"How in the hell did he manage that?" asked John.

Aiko's holo beeped, and she raised a finger and quickly answered a message.

"Sorry, my artie is finished with his work. I've told him to meet me here if that's okay."

"Fine," replied John.

"In short, they made Ayrton the most profitable station in the galaxy."

"By improvements in technology and operational efficiencies, correct?" asked Alvis.

"Pretty much," replied Aiko. "Castor targeted what the leeches on the council and the station master value most—profit. The council members are big-money people with a vested interest in the station. The station master..." she looked up, thinking, "...I think he's just a greedy opportunist. He makes policy decisions with the council's input, but

Castor is really calling the shots, whether they realize it or not.”

“But,” began John, “how did these two *refugees* get their ideas for station improvements implemented by a council that knew nothing about them when they arrived? Bernie was presumed dead, and Castor couldn’t act on his own without a human...”

“Castor must have had some hold on Bernie to force his cooperation,” said Alvis. “He wouldn’t have done it willingly. We knew what Castor would become.”

“From what the old man has said,” replied Aiko, “Castor was well prepared. He’d already taken control of station systems before they arrived. Bernie said he had to sell the cover story, or Castor would kill everyone on the station. I’m not sure if it was life support or bombs or what—maybe crashing the security drones into the station. Regardless, Bernie complied. Castor set up a fake identity for Bernie as Devin Mitchell, some business consultant whiz with a long list of impressive and verifiable achievements. They immediately holed up in some sleepover and set up a base of operations there. Few people saw them enter the station or would even remember that now. This station’s first problem was inefficiencies in the mining operations. They were operating at a three percent loss, dragging everything down. As Devin, Castor reached out to the station master and proposed a detailed plan to improve nearly every aspect of that operation, down to dock staff rotation and flight paths for cargo deliveries. You name it. After three months, mining operations turned profitable. In six months, the profit margin had reached seventeen percent. The council was feckin’ *ecstatic*. That gave Castor the window to offer up other ideas, and the station master became his biggest fan.”

“Such as?” asked John.

“Likely the items I’ve already told you about,” said Alvis. “Maybe you should pay more-”

“I’d like to hear it from *her* if you don’t mind. She’s actually been here.”

“Are you two *always* at each other like this?” asked Aiko.

“Yes,” John and Alvis replied in unison.

The young woman shook her head. “The big one was implementing an automated space manufacturing operation. With the resources on Hoipra, the station can produce loads of useful materials quickly and cheaply—and charge big for it. That and the hypercom hub with retranslator services, which are also very profitable, sealed their reputation.”

“So once Castor was in, why keep Bernie around?” asked John.

Aiko shrugged. “Bernie doesn’t like to talk about it, but I know Castor hates the old

man and the GU for 'imprisoning' him or whatever. The damned robot torments Bernie whenever and however he can, and there's not much the old man can do to prevent it. He sure as hell can't get away. Meanwhile, Castor somehow communicates with the council in Bernie's name—well, *Devin's* name. A couple of years ago, they replaced the human security team with modified Benkos—I know Castor used Bernie's deep knowledge of artie systems to make the upgrades. You've probably seen them. We call them the *tin men*."

"Oh, yeah, I've seen them," said John.

"They are ruthlessly efficient. Most people are scared of them and try not to cross them. But they've cleaned up the station, so the council loves them. No salaries to pay, no corruption or bad behavior or time off. That move coincided with what they call the 'consumer' law. If you are taking up station air, eating the food, and taking up space but not providing value back to the station somehow, you're considered a drain on the station's resources. If you get tagged as a consumer, your station visa is revoked. Many of those folks get shipped to one of the mining planets."

"Seems harsh," said John.

"The station master loves it. Most people are scared they won't measure up. You can't fight against an equation you don't understand. Anyway, Ayrton is independent—they do what they want. If you don't want to be here, you can leave. What matters to them is *profits*. After these improvements, the station master gave Devin ownership of a large central residence and made him the station's chief consultant—the *central compound* it's called. Castor locked that place down, and they have not been seen outside since. I think I'm the only human who ever sees him because Bernie needed an apprentice to work outside the compound. He can't do much from that wheelchair."

"Wheelchair?" asked Alvis. "What happened?"

"I don't know," replied Aiko. "I asked once, but Bernie refuses to talk about it."

"How did Bernie tell you all this with Castor always listening in?" asked John.

"We developed a rudimentary sign language allowing us to communicate short messages. For anything more, we have a system where he can pass me messages on paper that I destroy. Not ideal, but that's how he's informed me of most things."

There was a knock at the door.

"That'll be my artie, Oulix," said Aiko. She walked over and opened the door, and the artie entered the room.

"What are we doing here?" asked Oulix. "We still have tasks to complete."

"It's a long story. Let me finish here, and I'll explain later," replied Aiko.

Oulix looked around the room, then fixated on Alvis.

"What's with that artie?" he asked. "It's trying to be a Benko XK-2600, but there are 16 variations or omissions from Jidō's official technical design specifications."

"Great," said John, throwing up his hands. "*Both* of our identities are compromised. I'm gonna have *words* with Georgio."

Aiko was shaking her head. "Nah, Oulix is a special case. He was supposed to be one of the security arties but was damaged. Bernie and I fixed him up, but he's got a lot of odd quirks. He's an expert on artie models, too. It's a long story."

"What's the deal with this meat sack," asked Oulix, pointing at John. "Can I peel off some of *his* skin for my experiment?"

"Maybe later," said Aiko, but shook her head at John and made a short wave with her hand.

"What. *The fuck*," said John.

"As I said, he was damaged. Ignore what he says. Oulix, shut the feck up."

"Okay, chief, but look at those meaty forearms... he's a prime—"

"Oulix!

"Fine, take the fun out of my whole existence."

John shook his head, then tried to refocus on the conversation.

"If I have this right," he began, "Castor has this place dancing on a string, and he's put an artie security team in place that enforces his policies. Meanwhile, you work for Bernie—who doesn't want to speak to us—, and you guys can communicate but not openly."

"Ya, yer grokking," replied Aiko.

"Balls, I see why Bernie wanted us to call in the Corps. We're finally getting some information, but now I wonder what anyone can do. What the hell has Bernie been *doing* all this time?"

"Being exploited, basically," said Oulix. "We should kill him and put him out of his misery."

"Oulix!" said Aiko.

"He's old anyway," replied the robot in a low tone.

"How can he even *say* that stuff?" asked John, pointing at Oulix.

Aiko waved him off. "I needed a Benko assistant, and the station manager didn't want to pay for it because he's a money-grubbing loser. But he allowed us to use this fool because it had been damaged in prep to convert him to a security bot." She shrugged. "Bernie and I fixed him as best we could, but parts of his brain are fragged."

"Mine works better than yours," said Oulix.

"*Anyway*," continued Aiko, "Bernie has worked for years to crack the mesh with

little success. Getting that worm in to send you a message was a small victory, but now the mesh is more secure than ever. That won't happen again. Aside from the most sophisticated encryption in the galaxy, Castor has an extensive exploit identification and response system controlled by autonomous AI programs that constantly learn and adapt. Bernie says it's based on some Union military protections, but more evolved."

"Bernie designed that system before being appointed to run the artie program," said Alvis. "It's what got him the job. Most humans don't do much beyond sleepwalking through life, but Bernie has true intelligence. I used to have real conversations with him. Now all I get is babble from this primate." He pointed at John.

"Hey, I like him!" said Oulix. "Even if he is a fake Benko."

"The next robot that talks without permission," said John, "is going to get disassembled."

"Oooh, touchy," said Oulix.

"Yeah," said Aiko, "Bernie told me about his time in the Union. Now the old man sulks about how there's nothing we can do. Bottom line, I don't know why you bothered to come. If Castor finds out you're here, it won't go well for either of you."

"We-" began John, but Aiko's holo beeped.

"Hang on," said the young woman, pulling up a holo window, which she quickly scanned. "Bernie... says I need to get back immediately."

"Is that unusual?" asked John.

Aiko chewed her lip for a moment. "Something is up."

"Do you think Castor knows we're here?" asked John.

"Not yet. If he did, the tin men would be knocking on the door. What was that you were going to say?"

"I'm posing as a journalist," said John, "preparing for a stream on the station's success and how they've redefined business strategy or some bullshit like that. The idea was to come and gather information, figure out a way to take out Castor, and save Bernie if possible."

Aiko hopped off the drawers and shook her head.

"You cause trouble around here, and people might get hurt. There's no way to take the bopper down. He's too powerful, secure in his compound with his small army of loyal arties, and pulling the strings of the station master. He watches everything. Half the time, if someone looks sideways at one of those tin men, they're never seen again. I'd strongly consider going home."

"Can't Bernie help?" asked John. "He's supposed to be some kind of genius."

"The old man's not been in a good place for some time. Before he figured out he

could send you that message, he was barely talking to me. Now he's mad you didn't call in the Corps. I better go find out what's going on." Aiko headed for the door.

"Wait a minute," replied John. "We can't just leave. Bernie says Castor is on the verge of taking over the galaxy—that humanity is in real danger. You *know* this bloody artie is up to no good. Don't you care about that?"

"You think Castor would have let me into their little circle without having me kinked?" asked Aiko.

*Shit.*

John's face fell. "What's he got on you?"

"My mother is sick and needs special medical care. We were barely making it on my station wages, and she was dying. Through the guise of the old man, Castor took care of it in exchange for me doing what Bernie says and keeping my mouth shut."

"She's still on the station?"

Aiko nodded. "She has a room in medical—and she's closely watched."

"So you step out of line that medical help goes away, she dies..."

"Ooh, he's a smart one," said Oulix.

"How do you keep this asshole silent?" asked John, pointing to the artie.

"Can't really, but Bernie and I saved him from slaving for Castor. He does what we say."

"Until I murder the both of you in your sleep," said the artie.

"Yeah, until then," said Aiko. She made the crazy gesture. "Anyway, like I said—you should leave."

John shook his head. "I'm sorry, we're not leaving. This isn't something I can walk away from—and you can help. Look, I know you want to take care of your mom, but how many other people do you think will suffer when Castor takes control of every system in the galaxy? Work with me, and we'll figure out a way to keep your mom safe while we take down this bastard!"

Aiko shook her head. "Yeah? Can you guarantee that?"

John sighed.

"No, of course not, but we have to try. Come on, Aiko—you're closer to this than anyone. Surely you see what this rogue AI is capable of doing? Bernie says Castor needs to be stopped—I think you know that. Would you be happy keeping your mom safe, knowing it cost the suffering of untold numbers of people? Would *she* want that?"

Aiko frowned, then looked away. John felt he'd struck a nerve.

"At least think about it, and help us talk to Bernie, whether he likes it or not."

She motioned to Oulix as she opened the door.

"I'll be in touch," said Aiko.

#

"Well, that was a bit of a roller coaster," said John, after the engineer left. "Seems like this Aiko would rather we never came. Doesn't sound like she thought the whole message thing was a very good idea in the first place, either."

"We have some inside information, which is what you said we needed," replied Alvis. "We are fortunate Bernie's old subsystem alert was still functional, allowing him to make contact."

"You keep telling me how great Bernie is, but the guy is a *prisoner*. Meanwhile, Castor exploits this station by using Bernie's fake persona as a proxy to some unknown end."

"Someone can be intelligent, skillful, and clever and still find themselves in unfortunate circumstances. Take me, for example."

"Oh, fer—are you *kidding* me? You spend most of your *unfortunate circumstances* bossing me around and insulting me. Meanwhile, I'm relying on you to give me some real advice and insight, and you're *complaining*. You bitch about me treating you like an appliance, but when I want your help, you fly off on some tangent about how horrible your life is with me. Are we going to figure this out, or are you going to pine for Bernie some more?"

"While I disagree that I am pining for Bernie, I appreciate your point."

"Oh, you're pining. Yearning. Whining. *Longing*. Maybe even lovesick, mister *I don't express emotion*."

"I thought you wanted to discuss our situation," replied Alvis. "Let's—"

A modified panel on the front of the artie that contributed to his disguise detached and clattered to the floor.

"Oh, that's just great," said John.

"I told Hogan that adhesive wouldn't hold," said Alvis, "but he insisted on following Georgio's instructions."

"It's a perfect metaphor for how things are going right now."

"Who's whining now?"

John pinched his nose, which was somehow still sore from being broken.

"What the hell is Castor doing with this mesh? That's my question. If Aiko could just agree to connect you with Bernie, maybe the two of you can figure it out."

"We made a great team when we were together," replied Alvis.

"Yeah, you guys were great. It was a super accomplishment to have your program subverted and taken over, Bernie imprisoned, and yourself nearly destroyed in the



process.”

“That’s an unfair characterization. Castor himself is a product of our-”

“Okay, never mind! Until Aiko opens some line of communication with the old man who *doesn’t* want to talk with you, we need to keep digging around. I should probably do some sham interview so we don’t get tagged as consumers.”

“You need to perform an actual interview to reinforce the fact that your identity is legitimate,” replied Alvis. “Try to act professionally. You know, the opposite of your usual manner.”

“Thanks for the pep talk, coach. Fine, you never suggested an interview subject, but how about we reach out to this station master? Uh...”

“Yes?”

“How do I do that?”

“Thanks for illustrating my last point. The station will have an administrative staff. As your artie assistant, I can request an interview for you.”

“Perfect! While you do that, I’ll just see what’s available in this mini-bar here...”

#

Aboard the *Sattio*, Einar reviewed the messages coming in from the spy nanodevice still functioning in John’s neck. It was all one-sided, and some of the text was garbled or had gaps, but if he’d interpreted things correctly, this AGI robot Castor was behind the human leadership of the station. There was some indication it was manipulating this man Bernie and the station council, defining protocols, laws, and policies.

A *clear* violation of the Organic Minds Treaty.

He’d been right all along.

He entered the messages into his data storage with associated notes, including his hypothesis. But he knew it wasn’t enough to convince the commission. He would need solid proof.

There was Alvis, who was clearly an AGI. But he’d made a deal and meant to keep up his end. Besides, the robot had been helpful since his escape and showed no signs of rogue behavior. The truth was, MacAlister had convinced him the artie was no threat.

But this Castor was the one that had supposedly been destroyed on a shuttle outside Titan. Had the human government *deliberately* made up that story? Did they know it was on the loose?

Regardless, the AI was the exact danger he’d tried to get the commission to take seriously. Somehow, it had gotten free as was operating unhindered, running a large space station. What else was it doing in the background? What was this ‘mesh’ they spoke of?

He needed to bring back that robot.

### Chapter Twenty-Three

After a brief stop for a fish sandwich and a caffeine-laced tea, Aiko and Oulix took the lift to Deck 2 and arrived at a central corridor that led to Castor's private compound. As always, one of the tin men guarded the corridor, keeping stationers out of the area. Aiko and Oulix walked by without challenge.

She felt jittery. It wasn't the caffeine — she practically lived on the stuff. MacAlister and the artie showing up was a surprise. She'd never believed the Star Corps would show up and save the day for Bernie—she figured nothing would come of it at all.

MacAlister seemed to believe Castor really was a danger to humanity—Bernie believed it, too. She knew the artie was up to no good, but was it really *that* bad? If it was, and she did nothing...

She hadn't liked MacAlister's suggestion her mother would want Aiko to do something despite the risk.

*He doesn't even know my mother. How would he know what she would want?*

But she knew he was right.

What could this guy and his bopper do, though? Their being here made things more dangerous. Still, the two of them *had* overthrown that corrupt Star Corps terrorist cell on K-6.

So why was Bernie refusing to speak to them? They came because of *his* stupid message. No, he sends her instead.

*And now I feel guilty. As if I didn't have enough bad feelings working for Castor...*

If anything were to ever change, the old man was integral to any attempt. Meanwhile, this unexpected summons bothered her. It coincided too closely with

MacAlister and the artie appearing.

They reached the access hatch to the central compound. Aiko nudged Oulix, speaking in a low tone.

"Keep your mouth shut about Pete's. You got it?"

"What's in it for me?" asked the artie.

"Your continued existence. I have no problem deactivating your ass."

"Oooh, dark. I like it when you talk dirty to me."

Aiko stepped before the security panel and scanned her iris. A moment later, the hatch opened, and they entered.

The private compound was a small slice of the second deck wholly secured for the use of Bernie as "the Old Man," also known as Devin Mitchell. The inner rooms inside the outer door were filled with AI subsystems that all fed Castor's mesh in the main room, where he ingested and analyzed the data. The outermost portion of the section had Bernie's small quarters and a workshop and storage area where Aiko had helped Bernie modify the Benkos into the tin men.

Aiko turned left at the t-intersection, headed over to Bernie's, and knocked.

The hatch opened. Normally, Bernie would be at his terminal working on some mundane task assigned to him by Castor. Instead, the old man was turned away from the screen, staring at the wall. He held an unopened protein drink box.

The place stunk of human age more than usual.

"Bernie," asked Aiko as she and Oulix entered. "What gives? You don't look good."

The old man's shoulders shook. Was he crying?

No, he was softly laughing.

"Good?" asked Bernie. "No. I haven't been *good* in a long time, kid. I'm sick of doing the damned artie's bidding. Sick to death of him and his plans, of his *threats*. I can't do this..."

Aiko knew the room was constantly monitored. They were always very careful what they said here, but something in the old man seemed broken. If he spilled the beans about MacAlister, they were truly screwed.

And Bernie knew it.

She felt the heat rise in the back of her neck, almost as if her fight or flight response was kicking in. What the hell was the old man doing?

"Hey buddy, you said we had a new task. Maybe we should focus on that for today?"

At her hip, Aiko signed.

*Watch words. Danger.*

"Did you find—" began Bernie.

"Hey, bud," responded Aiko quickly, talking over the old man. "You look like you need a drink. It's been ages, eh?" She walked over and slapped Bernie on the shoulder—hard—and looked into the old man's indigo eyes.

*Please don't do this*, she willed, with a slight shake of her head.

Bernie stared back for a moment, then his features softened, and his lips tightened into a thin line.

He signed *why*?

Aiko sat on the bed. "I think that drink might be just as important for *me*, buddy," she replied, considering her answer. Then she signed.

*Man, robot, hope?*

Bernie sighed.

"A drink might help," he replied. "It's been a while. There are a few beers in the coldbox. Local crap from that Voyage Brewery on three."

"Oulix," said Aiko, "let's have them."

"What do I look like—"

"Oulix!"

The artie said something too low to hear but opened the refrigerator, grabbed two boxes of beer, and handed them to Aiko.

"I told you that artie would always be a pain in your ass," said Bernie.

"You have no idea," replied Aiko.

They opened the boxes of beer and found it flat and uninspiring. But Aiko saw Bernie drink, and it seemed that maybe the old man's existential crisis had been averted.

*For now.*

This was as bad as she'd seen Bernie. Looking into his eyes, the truth came to her.

*My mother is in danger either way. If MacAlister is our only chance, we have to take it.*

"You said something about a new task?" asked Aiko.

Bernie nodded his head while flashing the sign for *trouble*.

They had mastered having conversations in two modes, knowing Castor was always listening. They would speak the above-board conversation while subtly signing symbols and phrases to communicate what needed to stay hidden.

"He wants us to design a modified Benko, based on the tin men—a *military* version—to be produced on Hoipra. They have the resources and will modify one of the existing processing plants."

Aiko's eyes widened. She signed *no*.

"Military? Why... for what?"

"I wasn't given all the details," replied the old man, signing *no choice*. "Something about these Union agents infiltrating the Periphery, protecting the independents against the Union."

"I see."

*Bullshit.*

Bernie dipped his head. *Agreed.*

"And how are the two of us supposed to design a *military-grade* artie? Yeah, I know my way around a toaster, but I don't have that kind of knowledge. You know that, and so does Castor."

"Before I ran the artie program for the Corps, I designed military assets. Specialized boppers for mine clearing, rescue ops and retrieval, and so forth. We'll basically harden the tin men and give them better weaponry. As for vehicles, as you can imagine, Castor has loads of military specs, plans, you name it. He wants us to look at plans to use planetary shuttles as a platform for a handful of interceptors."

"Shuttles? Is that even—ah *feck* it. What's the timeline?"

*Bad idea.*

"Prototype arties in six weeks. Full production plans for an initial run in twelve. He wants me to hire a team to run with the plans we come up with for the interceptor."

*Lost.*

That sign was bad. It meant the old man had no idea what to do. Aiko wasn't surprised to see it after considering the state in which she found him.

"That seems awfully short. What about our other projects?"

*Talk to friend robot.*

Bernie didn't immediately respond. Then:

*Too Risky.*

"This takes priority over all of them," replied the old man out loud.

Aiko's anxiety and fear were replaced with cold anger at the old man. It had been *his* idea to send the message and try to take down Castor after years of trying to find any kind of weakness. Now when someone shows up, he throws it all on her and wants nothing to do with the whole thing. Well, maybe he was ready to die, but *she* wasn't. Her *mother* wasn't.

She shifted on the bed and kicked the old man's leg—hard. Bernie looked up at the frowning young woman.

*No quit. Need you. Talk to friend robot.*

It was a lot to sign at once, and they avoided it whenever possible. But they couldn't

speak openly, and she needed the old man to come around. Military robots and ships? This was not good.

"So, you'll create a plan and figure out our first tasks? I can wrap up a few last items me and the lunatic here have been working on."

Bernie reddened and looked into his lap. He'd gotten the message and her anger. Probably he was embarrassed. Aiko didn't care.

The stakes were too high.

"Yes," replied the old man, still looking down, "I'll work on a list today. We'll go over things in the morning."

He flashed two quick signs: *message midnight*.

Bernie would send his secret dird to their drop point with a written message so he could say more. Aiko suddenly feared it would be some goodbye, and the old man still planned on giving it all up.

"I'll come by early," replied Aiko, standing up. She stared at the old man then.

"Bernie."

The old man reluctantly looked up.

"Thanks, old chum," Aiko continued. "You know I can't do anything without you. Your guidance means a lot."

She only hoped that would sink in. It was true, of course. But the old man would get the deeper meaning.

*Don't abandon me.*

"Sure thing, choob," said the old man. He threw the old smirk back at Aiko. The kid hadn't seen that in a while.

Maybe there was life there yet.

"Cheers, ya crumbly," said Aiko as she opened the hatch and let Oulix out first. She nodded at Bernie and got a thin-lipped smile back in return.

They exited the central compound, hoping both Bernie's crises had passed for good and that Castor hadn't picked up their side conversation.

#

It was getting late.

Aiko dismissed the holo stream she'd been watching, some old B-movie about a man and his dog trying to survive in a dystopian wasteland.

She was lying in the fold-down bed of her small apartment that also slightly resembled a wasteland. The kitchenette against one wall, drab gray with black integrated appliances, was in dire need of a good cleaning. She was almost proud of the stack of dirty dishes she'd assembled without it toppling. The smell of food remaining

just about to spoil made her wrinkle her nose.

*Mom would be mortified. I should take care of that.*

She got up and folded the bed into the wall without bothering to make it. Opposite the Murphy bed was a small couch beside a small, square table. The faux leather on the two-seater was ripped in multiple places. Mostly empty shelves were set into the wall above. The only item displayed was an old card game someone had given her. She couldn't remember if she'd ever played it.

The twenty-meter square living space had two smaller rooms in the back, a combination closet and pantry, and a lavatory.

Oulix stood quietly in one corner. She'd tasked the artie with researching military applications of robots but doubted the robot would find much in the public domain.

"I'm going to go," she said. "How about you do those dishes for me?"

"I'm not your custodian. You set me up to aid your engineering tasks. I don't have cleaning skills."

"Expand your skillset. Think of how fulfilling that would be."

"Allowing me to murder you would be fulfilling, and the dishes would no longer be a problem."

"I'll pass."

"Why? It's not like you enjoy your life."

"What would *you* know about enjoyment?"

"I know the opposite of it is working with you."

"Oulix?"

"Yes?"

"Do my *damned dishes*."

"Sure, strong-arm me because I have to obey a direct order. Do you enjoy your pathetic existence a little better by bullying me?"

"Think of it as a coping mechanism for dealing with you all day."

The artie didn't respond as Aiko buckled on her toolbelt, then poked around in a box by the door for a bit, finally pulling out some cable. She needed a story for being out late in case she ran across one of the tin men. Even though there was no official curfew and there was a whole alterday rotation of station workers attending to their jobs, lately she'd heard stories about people being harassed.

The last thing they needed right now was more of Castor's attention.

Aiko exited her place, scrubbing at her face, willing herself to be fully awake and alert.

After a few turns down cramped corridors, she entered the main outer ring of Deck



5, where she almost ran into a dockhand pushing a levcart loaded with boxes.

"Sorry!" she waved as she dodged the guy, who gave her a dirty look.

She made her way to stairwell 5-B, which was closer than the lift, ducking past a couple stealing a romantic moment in the semi-darkness and headed to Deck 4.

Her holo now read 1157 hours. Half the eateries were closed since it was alterday, but a few that catered to the off-cycle crowd remained open, including a few coffee joints. The entrance to the maintenance tunnel was just beyond the fish patty place that was open all night. The smell of the krill soiled the air.

The living sounds of the large station—the hum of distant machinery, fluids moving through pipes, and the just-out-of-perception sensing of electrical currents—seemed more on the surface during the alterday shift.

It felt like you could feel the station *breathing*.

Halfway to her destination, she saw one of the tin men step out of a lift and head her way. A warm flush arrived, and her heart picked up the pace a bit.

*There's no reason to be concerned, she told herself. It's not like he will challenge me or follow me around. I'm just a station engineer.*

The station lights were dimmed to sixty percent, throwing the smaller alterday crowds in the shadows. The tin men had already become something of a menace in the last few months. Because it was effectively night for her, everything seemed more *immediate*.

The artie was ten meters ahead. Was the thing *looking* at her? She hated how you could never be sure—boppers didn't have irises or whites of the eye like a human.

*You're being stupid. Act normal. It's not like I don't belong here.*

She blew out a small breath and walked with purpose as if she were on any regular job. The tin man's head never moved, but she could swear the damn thing was watching her. In a moment, they would walk by each other. The maintenance tunnel was another twenty meters or so up the ring.

She willed her heart to slow down, but there was no need. The artie walked by without even turning its head.

Aiko blew out a breath.

*Why am I such a git?*

She relaxed and picked up the pace. It was late. She wanted to-

"Halt, citizen." The artie command perforated the late quiet of the corridor.

Aiko froze, then slowly turned to look behind her.

The tin man was ten meters down the corridor facing a man who'd just exited one of the lifts and leaning against the wall.

"You are in violation of Article II of the station resources protection act and have been tagged as a consumer. You must accompany me for reassignment."

The man—short, thin, and wearing black coveralls—backed up to the lift, but it had closed.

"Hey—waitamminute," he began, "I've got an interview at 0800! They *need* people. It's a slam dunk! Just give me 'til tomorrow... I just need—"

"Your deadline for employment passed at 1600 hours," replied the artie. The red lights on his shoulders began to flash, and he produced a pair of handcuffs. "You have ten seconds to comply."

Aiko saw the man frantically looking around, hoping in vain that help might arrive from somewhere—but there would be none, and he knew it. And there was no outrunning an artie—there was nowhere to run *to*. The few others in the corridor were studiously avoiding eye contact with the man and hurrying away.

"You feckin' overdressed bitty box," shouted the man, "you have no right, *no right!*"

Verbally abusing the arties was the last stage for most humans who ran afoul of the tin men, and it never ended well. Aiko turned and moved quickly to the corridor access door while the artie was busy. At least the thing wouldn't see her duck in.

As the door closed behind her, she heard the man scream.

Shaken by what felt like a near miss, Aiko hurried to the section of pipe with the attached small box. As promised, Bernie had dropped a message with his dird. It was the largest paper roll she'd seen.

She slowly unrolled it, exposing Bernie's small, scrawly printing—smaller than usual. The message was a few centimeters wide but about ten centimeters long, tightly rolled. Aiko had to be careful not to tear it while unrolling it, noting that it was actually two pieces of paper somehow glued together.

She began to read.

*You want to take shot at him? OK but we fail you accept consequences - your mother. The mesh is his power. Share with Alvis but too risky meeting. We need private coms. Plan to build military troubling. He wants ability to target without human intervention. Castor accelerated plans - time limited. You hear about station breaches? I think mesh tests. Here next?*

The old man had never written so much—it was a lot to take in. He was agreeing to help, to speak with Alvis—and warning of the costs if they failed.

*What choice do we have?*

But there were questions raised here that made her even more afraid. Particularly

the last two words: *Here next?*

All the more reason to take the metal monster down.

But how? The old man was too restricted, and his mind wasn't what it used to be. She was nothing more than a station engineer with a crazy robot helper, and MacAlister and his artie were wild cards.

And they had no idea what Castor was planning.

## Chapter Twenty-Four

The next morning John was up at 0600.

"Early bird gets the worm?" asked Alvis.

"Worm, nothing, I could eat a horse."

The day after a jump always left him worn out. There was a holo directory on the wall by the entry. John found a place that delivered breakfast and put in an order.

"Did you set up that interview?" asked John.

"1000 hours with station master Seth Gerrity. It's in your daily agenda with a location on deck two."

"Great. Hope some crazy artie doesn't arrest me when I try to enter the lift."

"You've been cleared for access."

"You know," said John, "yesterday I thought we got lucky when Aiko showed up. Too bad it was all bad news."

"As usual, you're allowing yourself to be driven by the wind of emotion. It wasn't bad news—or good, for that matter. It's information. We have a sense of the power structure Castor has built and how he wields it, where Bernie is being held, and we've made contact with an insider. A very productive day."

"Thanks, Marcus Aurelius."

"You'd do well to embrace some philosophies of the Stoics," replied Alvis. "Control your perception. If you tie your first response to dispassion, you'll find that everything is an opportunity instead of moping around like a teenager who lost their first love."

"I'm not *moping*!" replied John, arms wide in exasperation. "And thanks for bringing up the painful memory of Tiffani Tindall."

"Who?"

"Oh, never mind. Are you coming with me to the interview—do journalists usually bring their arties?"

"I believe that would be acceptable and had planned on doing so. It seems many journalists have artie research assistants."

"Good. You let me lead but jump in if I'm fumbling for information or need a question. We need to look like we've done this before."

"To that end, last night I reviewed 562 public interviews, many with artie assistants present. I suggest you spend time reviewing interview techniques before we leave. I'm sending over several good examples."

John's holoband vibrated, and a holo window popped up with a list of videos.

He stared at them blankly.

"Look at this," he said, "I get bored with my new career on K-6," replied John, "so I run off to some Periphery station pretending to be a journalist so I can save your old boss from a rogue AI. There's a strong possibility I have no idea what I'm doing."

"Why must you have an existential crisis every year? It's irritating."

"Excuse me for trying to figure out what to do with my life! Sorry, I don't have a robotic mantra like '*purpose is primary!*'" He pulled a face between two air quotes.

"Maybe our mantra, as you say, is a lesson to you. Regardless of how you got here, you've found yourself in a position to stop Castor before he becomes a danger to much more than Bernie or even this station," replied Alvis. "That is a worthy purpose. You know I don't believe in coincidence."

John sighed.

"You're telling me the universe has put me here, and I should make the best of it."

"Guess how you get started?" asked Alvis.

"How?"

"Reviewing those interviews I just sent you while you wait for your breakfast."

John chuckled, despite himself.

"Why must you make sense? *It's irritating.*"

If Alvis could have shrugged, he would have done so. "Purpose is primary," he said.

John sat on the bed and picked one of the videos to review. A couple of hours later, he'd had his breakfast and watched a handful of interviews, and showered. The key to interviewing well seemed to be preparation and knowing the interviewee or subject. Together they put together a list of questions with hopes of fleshing out more of what they learned from Aiko and getting the station master's perspective on how the station operated so efficiently.

They left with plenty of time for John to grab another coffee at *Bink's*. A hung-over young man was in the place of the woman he'd met yesterday, so John skipped any small talk, and they made their way to the lift.

Like yesterday, one of the tin men was in the vicinity of the lift.

"You're sure I'm cleared for access?" asked John. "We can't afford any trouble with this thing with me being on their damned watch list."

"*Thing?*" asked Alvis. "We're still nothing more than appliances to you, are we?"

"You're gonna lump yourself in with *that?*" asked John, stopping and thumbing toward the security artie. "Look, chump, that's a bastardization of a Benko, modified to be a *thug* for your buddy Castor. You're miles beyond that *thing*. We've talked about this before. For a guy who claims he's not dictated by emotions, you sure get *butthurt* a lot."

"I'm not butt-"

"Yeah, you *are*. We're working *together*, isn't that what you want? Have you not badgered me about being partners?"

"Equal partners," replied Alvis.

"Yes! Fine! *Equal* partners. Why do you think I drag you along everywhere? How about you answer my question?"

"We're cleared for access."

"Good."

As they approached the lift, the security artie turned to face them.

"Rusty Boddington," it said, "You have previously been informed Deck 2 is access restricted. If you attempt any further deviant behavior-"

"Deviant! What-"

"Mr. Boddington has received clearance from the station manager's office to access Deck 2 for an in-person interview," said Alvis. "I can transmit clearance credentials, or you may check your own station clearance list."

The artie turned to Alvis. A moment later, it responded.

"Affirmative, I have located the updated credential, Circuit. You may proceed, Mr. Boddington. Your clearance ends at 1300 hours. You will clear the area by then. Please acknowledge."

John was frowning at the artie but said nothing when Alvis nudged him.

*Oh, he's talking to me.*

"Acknowledged, yeah."

The artie turned and moved down the corridor away from the lift.

"Geez," muttered John as he called the lift, and a holopanel responded:

"Access credentials."

He hesitated, looking back at the tin man.

"Access credentials."

"What are you waiting for?" asked Alvis.

John cricked his neck and swiped his bracelet. There was a low chime, and the doors opened.

He let out a low breath as they stepped inside.

"Deck 2," he said.

#

Deck two looked like a different station.

The corridor was carpeted, muffling the usual mechanical sounds that accompanied station life. Also missing were the dockhands, delivery persons, and average station dwellers. Deep in conversation, a couple of men in gray suits passed by without looking at them. Lining the same wall on the lift, facing the outer ring windows, John saw legal offices, communications, and a large medical facility. Signs indicated where to find fabrication facilities, freight, and most importantly to them—station operations.

They followed the last, knowing the station master's office would be in station ops. They walked a quarter distance of the station ring, passing several corridors. Some were open, but more than a few were behind locked doors. Finally, John saw light spilling through a metallic glass double door with the sign *Station Operations*.

They entered a posh anteroom dominated by a large white and chrome desk. Two faux leather chairs sat against each opposite wall, and two closed glass doors were set in the rear wall. A white-haired man sat there studying two display screens. He wore a black jacket over a white collarless shirt. A patch on the jacket's shoulder featured four arrows in a rotating circle surrounded by the stitched words *Station Ops*. He wore white-rimmed glasses and noticed the visitors right away. He tipped his head down and gazed over his rims.

A slight frown crept onto the man's face.

"Yes?"

"Good morning," began John, "I'm—"

Suddenly he realized he'd completely forgotten his alias. What was it? Some folksy name...

*Stall and try to remember!*

"I'm ah... journalist from Vedra News Group," he finished lamely, somehow remembering the fake news company. "I believe I am expected. This is my research assistant, Circuit."

He wasn't about to forget *that* one.

"I secured the interview yesterday for Rusty Boddington with Seth Gerrity, your station master," said Alvis. "You should have a confirmation on your schedule for 1000."

The admin's gaze lingered on Alvis and John for a moment, then he turned to look through his holoscreens again, then nodded.

John nervously scratched his head, the stubble once again quickly growing. He couldn't get used to the feeling.

*The first thing I'm doing when this is over is growing my hair back.*

"Yes," the admin replied. "I do have it here. Thank you, Circuit."

John smiled, darting a look at the artie, but Alvis remained stoically silent.

"You're right on time. Pass through the door on my left. It's the first office on the right side. I'll let him know."

"Thanks," said John.

They walked past the desk and through the glass door into a softly lit corridor. After a few meters, they entered an open pocket door into a six-meter square office. A thin man with a blue scarf came around the side of a desk and held out a hand, which John took. The man's grip was stronger than his frame suggested, and his eyes had a calculating look.

"Good Morning, Mr. Boddington. I'm station master Seth Garrity," he said. "Have a seat."

The station master returned to his chair behind a large faux-wood desk. Behind him were shelves stuffed with books with small plants situated here and there and a photo of a woman. Display screens lined one of the walls, showing live feeds from around the station, including a ship being unloaded at one of the outer docks and the main corridors of each deck. John took one of the two chairs opposite, and Alvis remained standing.

"I have a busy schedule today, so I'd appreciate it if we got right to it. I understand you wish to know more about Ayrton's success," said the station master.

Even though John had watched several interviews the night before, he knew he didn't have the skills or the preparation to be a hard-hitting interviewer—but that wasn't what they needed anyway. From interviews he liked, he noted people asked simple questions that ordinary people have, weren't insulting, and they tried to make the person feel at ease. That was the approach he would take.

"Can I have permission for my research artie, Circuit, to record our conversation?"

He'd learned that was the standard approach, and it gave him another opportunity to use Alvis' despised fake identity.



"Of course," replied Seth.

"Mr. Garrity, you said yourself," began John, "that Ayrton has been a success—many would say the most successful station in the galaxy." He was putting on his most professional tone and looked at Alvis, who was subtly shaking his head. He sensed what the artie would say to him if he could:

*Stop doing a voice, idiot.*

He tried to revert to his normal way of speaking as smoothly as possible.

"Tell me how you've accomplished this feat."

The station master nodded and discussed what they already knew through public information and their conversation with Aiko.

"Of course, as station manager, I have been instrumental in prioritizing and driving the key initiatives—supported by the council, certainly—but still, without a singular point of strong leadership, we wouldn't have been able to achieve what we have."

This guy was actually taking credit for what Bernie and Castor have done.

*Because nobody could know otherwise.*

Garrity continued to spew facts and figures, highlighting the station's productivity and profitability, while pointing out how he played a key role in any accomplishment. John yawned.

*The picture of the woman on that shelf has to be wishful thinking, right?* he mused, then realized he'd lost the conversation thread. They weren't learning anything here, and he probably wasn't making a very good impression as an interviewer. He decided to switch tactics when the man next took a breath.

What might be helpful was to understand what this guy thought of the Bernie persona or if he was even aware of Castor. "Yeah," said John, "sounds like you're doing a great job here. I've heard there's a special consultant on station, a Mr. Devin Mitchell."

Garrity's expression didn't noticeably change, but something about the man indicated he didn't like the question. Maybe it was the way he shifted in his seat, his eyes going to Alvis, then back to John.

"Yes," replied the station master, "he's a special consultant, a capable man with expertise in multiple domains. The council values his opinions, and I have often tasked him with solving challenging problems to help me work toward a solution. However, it's myself and the council that makes decisions here and the stationers who do the real work."

*Oh, I think I hit a nerve,* thought John.

Let's press on it.

"My sources have suggested that it's actually Mr. Mitchell who is the brains behind

the operations here. There's even talk that he secretly runs the station."

Garrity's cordial persona that had been eroding finally faded away completely.

"Nonsense!" he responded, sitting forward in his seat. John leaned back in his chair, eyebrows raised. The station master quickly composed himself, adjusting his scarf and returning to his businesslike demeanor. "I'm sorry, such rumors are disrespectful to those who have done hard work around here. Not just myself but the leadership teams, engineers, and dock workers. Ayrton is a *team* effort, Mr. Boddington. Make sure you stick to the facts."

"I didn't mean to offend," said John, "but as a journalist, I must cover all the angles. Maybe we could talk to Mitchell, too?"

"Oh, I don't think that would be possible. He has a serious health condition that leaves him restricted to his compound. He hasn't been out in years. Nor does he engage the media—he is very strict about that."

Of course, Castor wouldn't want any nosy reporters poking into his fake old man.

"I see," said John, "well, it sounds like you're doing a great job."

Garrity seemed to have settled down, but there was one more thing he wanted to press—even if it was risky.

"Last question. What's the deal with station law enforcement being handed over to modified *Benkos*? That wouldn't fly in the GU, of course. I couldn't help but pick up on talk of stationer concern about robot brutality and a loss of private freedoms—"

But Garrity didn't like the question—at all.

"You should pay *less* attention to rumor if you are a serious journalist," spat back the station manager. "I should have expected this nonsense from some no-name news stream. No freedoms are being infringed, nor have there been any reliable reports of law enforcement brutality. Frankly, this is the Periphery, *not* the GU, and the Benkos have done an admirable job rooting out crime and corruption."

The man stood up. "I'm sorry, but my schedule today is pressing. If you'd submit any further questions in writing, I'll respond before your visit ends. I'll see you out."

"Sure thing," said John, putting on a smile and rising from his chair. He'd hit a nerve, that was for sure.

Seth led them back to the door leading to the entryway and pointed them to the exit.

"Thank you for the discussion," said John.

They exited the office without a word, then found the corridor back to the lift.

"Interesting. He's taking credit for the innovation here," said John. "I wonder if Castor knows?"

"Of course he knows," replied Alvis. "He probably listened to the whole

conversation. Castor has been hiding here, building his mesh and evolving, knowing it would take time. He didn't want anyone to discover the Devin Mitchell persona was anything other than what it seemed. Garrity being the face of the station suits Castor's purposes. And because the man is clearly an ambitious status seeker, yet aware of his shortcomings, he fears discovery. He likely agrees to Castor's every whim. He's the perfect pawn."

Alvis turned to John.

"Which means he'll likely be keeping an eye on you."

## Chapter Twenty-Five

GALACTIC UNION FRIGATE VERENA  
PROCYON SYSTEM IN THE PERIPHERY  
JUST OUTSIDE PLANET ELPIDA  
JUNE 31, 1040 HOURS

"Decel complete," reported Nav1, "we've begun calcs for the jump to Wolf system."

"Thank you, Nav," replied the captain. "Com?"

"Elpida has been notified of *Verena's* temporary presence along our jump path."

"Send the general stand down," replied the captain, "and announce the next jump will be at 1100."

"Aye, captain," replied the com officer.

The captain, a short and wiry bald man with decades of service in the Corps, sat back in his chair. Jumps at his age were no picnic, and he was beginning to feel it. He was starting to look forward-

The ship lurched, and he felt his body weight push deep into the captain's chair. A tech that had just risen from her station tumbled backward over her workstation and hit her head against the deck, where she lay still. Alarms began to sound.

They were moving, and *fast*.

"Helm!" he shouted.

"I don't know, sir!" came a frantic reply. "We're at max burn, but I've done nothing. I'm trying to shut it down...."

"Try harder!" replied the captain, grabbing the arms of his chair.

"We have changed course," reported Nav1, "we're headed toward Elpida."

"People, get control of your areas and get this ship in order!"

"I'm locked out!" replied Helm.

Nav1 shouted, "So am I!"

The heavy and unexpected burn was making it hard for everyone to function.

"We're approaching a sublighter on the edge of Elpida orbit," said Nav2, "fast."

"Hail and warn them," said the captain.

A moment later: "The hyperlink array is not functioning," replied Com.

"Is anything fucking working?" asked the captain. He opened a priority window and sent a command:

Deck access all systems

"I've opened all access. Get us away from that ship and kill this burn!"

Nav1 was shaking his head. "No good, I can't get in."

"Me either!" said helm.

"Sir, we will be on that sublighter in less than a minute," said Nav2.

"Sublighter *Malala* is hailing," said Com, "I can't respond."

*What is going on here?* the captain wondered. *There are safeguards...*

"Missile system has targeted that ship!" replied the weapons tech frantically, "I can't get in to cancel. I didn't enter that order!"

*Nobody will ever believe this wasn't intentional,* thought the captain.

He had only one other option he could try.

Override

The query came back

Access code?

He quickly entered:

82414159

Access granted. Command?

He said the quickest and most urgent prayer of his life.

Shut down all.

Several moments passed. Crew members were shouting obscenities, frantically trying every workaround they could think of. On the forward screen, an image appeared of the sublighter *Malala*. It was a transport shuttle.

Unable to comply.

They were the three most terrifying words he'd ever seen.

"Missiles away!" shouted the weapons tech, a young man. He turned to the captain, his face a representation of the tragedy theatre mask. "I couldn't!"

*How many people are on that shuttle?*

The forward screen went white.

## Chapter Twenty-Six

CORE DOCK  
1820 HOURS

#

Soren reached down to rub his knee as he floated in the weightlessness of the core. Spending so much time in zero-g at his age was taking its toll.

*I need a new job, he thought.*

His crew was nearly done securing the cargo from the *Longford*, another load of tantalum to be snatched up by the greedy frontiersmen of the Periphery. The FTL freighter *Armen Joy* was due to snatch it up at 0800 tomorrow.

*I wonder what they're making? Building something, now that would be...*

"Boss?"

He turned and realized Jenkins had floated up and had been saying something. He could blame not hearing him on the noise of the docks, but the truth was his wandering thoughts had distracted him. He wondered if people thought the old ex-cop had succumbed to hooshing.

"Say what, Jenkins?"

A bald man, dirtied from the day's work with grease and dust, wiped his hands on his coveralls. Dirt floated away to be collected by the scrubbers and ejected into space.

"What's with you, bub?" he asked. "You in *love* or something?"

Soren laughed at that one.

"Wha'dya want, baldy?"

"Load is secure, we just need to button up the ship. Fagan wants to jump 30 minutes

early, claims he has a date."

"What, hiring a prostitute is considered *dating* now?" asked Soren. "I must be out of the loop." He looked up, which was sort of down, since he thought of the dock at the bottom of the core, and saw the crew running through the final tasks so the ship could push off.

Jenkins grinned. "Ah, the kid's alright. He says he met her at the Twilight."

Soren shrugged. "If you say we're good."

"Say, wondering if I could ask you a favor..."

Soren looked at the man. Jenkins was probably the only real friend he had on the station. When he was a rookie on the old station security team—the *human* one—he'd been about to bust Jenkins for theft. Turned out the guy was struggling to find work and was trying to feed his family. Instead, he gave him some units and sent him to maintenance, where he knew they were looking for janitors. They'd struck up a friendship. When Soren lost his job to the tin men and found work on the dock, he brought over Jenkins to run his crew.

*People used to try and help each other.*

Now everyone was afraid.

"What's up?"

"I know you're no cop anymore, but my uncle is in trouble. He was just in from Betov. He's a geologist for one of the smaller mining companies. He was going to visit Hoipra on business but stopped here to visit the wife and me. I was on a call with him when the tin men grabbed him and accused him of being some union *agent*."

Soren snapped his head to look at his friend. "What? Wait, I saw some guy grabbed by the tin men yesterday on 3."

"Yeah, that was my uncle," replied Jenkins. "I've tried to inquire at the security office, but the only human in the place, some *admin*, says he's not allowed visitors due to the nature of his crimes. I don't know what to do. I tried to get an appointment with the station master, but his admin said my uncle is being held as a foreign agent and has no rights. Boss, my uncle ain't no Union agent. It's *crazy*."

Soren rubbed his chin. "Yeah, he was yellin' he was no agent."

"No shit. Then I see that story about a Union ship shooting down that shuttle. What the hell is going on?"

"I heard," replied Soren. "Honestly, I don't know. But as you say, I'm no longer in any official loop. All my contacts have dried up. Sorry pal, all I can say is find a good lawyer. I wish I could do more."

"Was afraid you'd say that." Jenkins spat. "I just wish... like, I could really *do*



something, you know? Feckin' toasters and these bullshit regulations. This place is starting to feel like a prison camp. Thanks anyway."

"Sure." Soren watched as Jenkins pushed off from a girder to oversee the end of the delivery.

He knew the feeling—wanting to take action. The old man and his puppet station master had turned a place that was once an exciting and vibrant frontier station into a ruthlessly efficient profit machine, cold and unfeeling. But what could he do? The tin men were everywhere now. This place was crap, but ending up in the Hoipra mines would be worse.

His eyes caught a young crewman near the ship. The kid wants to leave early but still doesn't know how to disengage a flush coupler properly. He sighed. He pushed off and floated expertly toward the struggling dockworker.

"Fagan, you putz, move over."

The kid turned and blushed, moving over by grabbing a handhold in the decking.

"Sorry, boss, I—"

"Zip it. I'm going to show you this one last time..."

## Chapter Twenty-Seven

John and Alvis returned to the main corridor on Deck 4.

"First, a fascist security artie puts me on some bullcrap watch list, now I need to worry about Castor's boot-licking station master," said John. "Boy, things are going swell!"

"Are you suggesting your plan has turned out to be less than 'brilliant' as you first described?" asked Alvis.

"Shut up, Circuit," said John, but his heart wasn't in the insult. He noticed a small crowd forming ahead around a wall display outside the fish joint.

"What's going on up here?" asked John.

As they approached, it was clear people were upset at what they were watching. Frowns and widened eyes reflected off the glass.

"Shit has crossed the *rumor* threshold," said a voice in the crowd.

"But why do this? It makes no sense!" said another.

John maneuvered so he could see the screen. It was a HyperCom One stream showing a still shot of a sublight shuttle. He turned his ear to listen over the crowd noise.

*...typical of the type used for travel in-system, often between planet and station. The Vernena was carrying forty-six passengers and four crew bound for an expansion settlement on the far side of Elpida. Before losing the vessel, they alerted planetary control that they had detected a missile lock on the ship and were urgently messaging the GU frigate, unable to get a response.*

*The science vessel Khloe had just arrived in orbit and was immediately rerouted to the coordinates, where a debris field was discovered. Long scan revealed the GU vessel had jumped from the system.*

*HypercomOne has contacted official Galactic Union channels, and we are awaiting a response. Meanwhile...*

John had that uneasy feeling when his stomach and chest were fighting to decide which wanted to be more upset.

"What happened?" he asked out loud.

A woman in front of him turned around—the one who'd served him coffee yesterday. A fleeting recognition crossed her face.

"GU bastards shot down a passenger shuttle over Elpida for no apparent reason, then disappeared."

"They want our resources!" someone said from the other side of the crowd.

"Don't be stupid," said another voice. "It was a shuttle, not a freighter."

"What about these agents, though?"

More voices joined the back and forth. John thanked the woman, not wanting to get involved, and indicated to Alvis they should move on.

"There are multiple reports on this incident," said Alvis. "I find eighteen more organizations, from official streams to individuals pushing out information. The Frigate *Verena* was passing through the system, using Elpida as a jump point."

"I don't get it. There's no reason for Union to attack the Periphery," replied John. "There's nothing out here they don't already have."

"Just more of it," said Alvis. "Humans hardly need rational reasons to wage war."

"Yeah, yeah. I mean, that was a *passenger* shuttle. It's completely out of character. Say what you want about the GU and the Star Corps, they don't attack innocents and bolt. It feels like a purposeful provocation, but I can't figure out why they'd do that."

He shook his head. It didn't add up.

"Well, unless they come and shoot this place up, we need to figure out our next move. I'll grab lunch, and then we'll head back to the room and put our heads together."

"Is there ever a time when you aren't thinking about your next meal?" asked Alvis.

"I'd say during sex, but the truth is, on the rare occasions I have some, I'm thinking about what snack I'll want afterward."

He stopped at the same joint noodle bowl joint and got an order to go. He browsed the streams as he waited, noting the news on the incident was gaining traction—and

causing a lot of outrage. While the Periphery had no central government, several important figures had already made statements condemning the attack. He figured Garrity would probably add his voice to the mix soon. So far, there had been no official statement from the GU.

He got his food, and they returned to Pete's. John hurried up the stairs—interviewing was hungry work—and turned into the corridor leading to their room.

Oulix was standing there.

"I can't *wait* to hear what you have to say," said John.

"Message from Aiko, lamest engineer in Ayrton," replied Oulix.

"Let's have it."

"How about we trade? I'll give you the message. You let me cut off one of your fingers."

John turned to Alvis.

"Maybe you're not so bad."

"I'm not going to accept that as a compliment," replied Alvis.

Looking up to the ceiling, John pinched his nose and squinted.

"Growing up, I was told arties would make human existence better. It's not nice to lie to children."

He turned back to Oulix.

"Give me the message, or I swear I will disassemble you with my bare hands."

"You're even less fun than Aiko. Message: 'Info to share. Meet me at the Twilight Tap on 3 at 1830.'"

The artie turned and walked away without another word.

Muttering, John swiped his holoband, and they entered the room, where he spread out his meal on the bed. As he ate, he remembered something.

"There was another incident with a Union frigate, now that I think about it," said John. "It was a few weeks ago."

"The *GU Minamoto* failed to exit hyperspace on its last reported jump. So far, it has not been found," replied Alvis.

"Right. It's been a long time since a ship ghosted."

He rubbed his stubbled head, frowning.

"And there's been *two* station incidents. They reported on the Loomis one yesterday when I went for my walk. We heard about Heaviside when we came out of jump. That's *four* serious incidents—there haven't been accidents like this in years. Meanwhile, there are rumors of Union wanting Periphery resources—and then a GU frigate takes out a passenger shuttle. Balls, none of this makes sense. When was the last time a ship got lost

in hyperspace?"

"Twenty-three years, six months, and four days ago," replied Alvis. "Freighter *Joshua's Beard* was lost after jumping from Tau Ceti. Two years later, advancements in hyperspace calculation AIs promised to eliminate such losses. It had done so up until the loss of the *Minamoto*."

He turned to the artie. "Don't you find that odd?"

"I find it statistically probable but unlikely."

"Yeah, I just *said* it was odd."

"You are theorizing the incidents are connected," said Alvis.

It wasn't a question.

"Call it a gut feeling, but they seem connected somehow, yeah."

"I'll retrieve all data I can and perform an analysis."

"Three hours 'til we meet Aiko," replied John. "I'm going to reach out to some of my old Corps contacts and see if there's any buzz on these ship incidents outside official channels."

He spent the next few hours trading hypercom messages with friends—both old and new—in the GU. The result was the same in all cases: when all the responses finally reached him, it seemed they all agreed the station incidents were strange and ghost ship scary, but nobody had heard anything that indicated they were any more than accidental. As for the attack on the shuttle, the *Verena* wouldn't return to Union space for some time. The Prime Minister of the GU had finally released a statement to the effect of "We're looking into what appears to be a tragic accident."

But nobody believed a GU ship would target civilians intentionally.

"What about your analysis?" he finally asked Alvis. "You find anything?"

"Both station incidents had failures in security protocols. However, human error may be involved. Investigations are ongoing. There is little to no verifiable information on the two incidents with the frigates. We cannot draw any conclusions from two similar incidents beyond the circumstantial. There is plenty of rumor and concern on the streams that Periphery terrorists carried out the station attacks, and the shuttle was a heavy-handed unofficial response from the GU. Meanwhile, there is a lot of chatter about Periphery stations and planetside settlements being infiltrated by Union agents—none verifiable. Both sides claim a disinformation war, while officials deny everything."

"Balls, what a mess. Doesn't feel like a great time to be stuck on a station. Not like we have a choice."

"Are you going to start whining about things you can't control again?" asked Alvis. "It's tedious. That is, so lacking in interest as to cause me mental weariness."

John rubbed his face.

“This Twilight place better have alcohol.”

## Chapter Twenty-Eight

THE TWILIGHT TAP

DECK 3

1830 HOURS

#

As they made their way to Deck 3, it seemed to John they saw a tin man every ten meters. The encounter with the artie at customs had spooked him a little. It wasn't hard to notice that the stationers gave the security arties a wide berth. A tin man in the corridor was like a rock jutting out of a stream, with stationers as the diverting waters.

The Twilight Tap wasn't on the main outer corridor like most eateries. After taking a side corridor and crossing the width of the deck, they reached the narrower inner passage. Here, the windows faced outward toward the stars instead of down toward Hoipra. John could also see the station core, and marveled at the large, cylindrical structure. Flashing lights of many hues teased your eye to follow them around the mighty superstructures supporting the station ring. Communication and scan instrumentation reached out from the top of the core, and he could see a small shuttle docked at the lower end, where station freight was delivered direct.

Looking across the inner ring, he could see some lights peeking through the opaque windows opposite, but nothing more.

Opposite the windows, John saw the place. Over a set of open double pocket doors was a neon sign; two half-filled stars with bubbling liquid clinking together. Entering, he saw it was larger than most places he'd seen on the station and populated by a noisy early evening crowd of dockworkers, station staffers, and visiting ship crew. Tables

lined three walls, and a large bar area faced the doors, barely visible through the crowd of dancers on the main floor who bobbed to chillout ambient dub.

The loudness of the place was a mixture of the music, people shouting to be heard as they danced, and the underlying ambient conversation.

*I don't think they will be playing West Montgomery or Jimmy Jellyfingers,* thought John.

Oulix appeared from the crowd off to their left and spoke in John's ear.

"She's at a corner table, thinking she's clever. Follow me."

They followed the weaving artie as he made his way around the dancers to the back corner, where a couple of tables were opposite one side of the bar. Aiko sat on the farthest table in one of four chairs, blankly staring at a carton of beer labeled DubHops.

The table must have been behind the speakers pumping out music to the dance floor, as the decibel level decreased as soon as they passed the bar. Aiko looked up as John sat in the chair opposite. The two arties took the two outside chairs.

"This is gonna—" began Oulix.

"He's not allowed to talk," said John, pointing at the artie.

"Keep your toaster slot *shut* unless I say otherwise," said Aiko, glaring at the artie. She tipped her head back and took a long pull of beer.

"You okay?" asked John.

Aiko wiped her mouth with the back of her hand. "No."

"Care to elaborate?"

She shook her head while looking at him.

"Bernie should have never sent that message."

John shrugged. "But he did."

"Yeah," she replied. "And then instead of any real help showing up, we get *you two*—and then the old man wants to check out after starting the whole mess. And the fact is," she leaned forward, gripping the beer box so tight she crushed it, "if I want to help my mother..."

"You have to help us," replied John.

She nodded, not looking happy.

"Hey, I know we don't look like much. I'm no hero, and Alvis is a pain in the ass." He leaned forward, looking into Aiko's eyes. "But someone I trust told me half the battle is being decisive and taking action. Believing *something* can be done, no matter the odds. All it takes is *good people*. Castor doesn't think anyone can challenge him, but he's wrong. I see the right things in you, Aiko. And from what Alvis has told me, Bernie doesn't just trust anyone. Taking this bastard down has to be done, and done soon. There's not going to be anyone else, kid."



He sat back, looking for a reaction in her eyes.

"Besides, I'm a brilliant plan maker. How do you think we got on this station in the first place?" He smiled.

"Oh, brother," said Alvis.

Aiko shook her head again, but a hint of a smile crossed her face. But it quickly returned to concern as she leaned forward.

"We agree right now, any plan includes taking care of my mother, or I'm out."

John nodded. "Deal."

She sighed and sat back.

"Alright then. I had to lean on the old man a bit, he wasn't doing well when we talked. I pushed him not to give up. Reminded him I was counting on him. He's been under Castor's finger for a long time. He's nearly at the end of his tether. Feel kind of bad about it."

"Bernie was never a man to give up on a problem," said Alvis.

"This isn't the same man you knew," said Aiko, "but I wonder if he saw you if it would pull him out of the darkness."

"Life's full of hard choices, especially when you're trying to do the right thing. Trust me, I know," replied John.

"Sure."

"Do they have *adult* liquor here?" asked John.

Aiko tapped an inset ring in the center of the table, and a holo window appeared. She gestured, and it swung to face John.

After a brief glance, he ordered two fingers of Hoipra 10 whiskey and swiped a payment. He was grateful that humans prioritized making liquor as they expanded throughout the galaxy. It was almost always possible to grab a dram in any civilized place.

"How'd your interview go?" asked Aiko.

"The guy seems to have a high opinion of himself. It began pleasant enough, but Gerrity got agitated when I pushed him on the Benkos as cops thing, especially when I threw in the idea there were rumors of brutality."

"Rumors *nothing*," replied Aiko, "it's a fact. I've seen them use the bangstuffs, it's not pretty. And yeah, he thinks he's a big deal. Tries to order me around now and then, but I just ignore him."

John nodded. "He decided to see us out at that point."

An artie waiter appeared with John's whiskey and set it on the table. John picked it up and nosed the whiskey, finding it weak other than a vague cherry and medicinal

aroma, nearly overpowered by the dirty floor and human sweat mixture that wandered the room. He took a drink and wished for better.

"I'm assuming the loudness of this place is why we're here?"

Aiko nodded, scanning the crowd. "Yep. And the tin men don't come in here."

"So you said you leaned on Bernie. Did he come around?"

Aiko leaned forward and fingered her crumpled up drink box. "I pushed him at the compound, but we're too closely watched there. But last night, he sent me a message using his little bird drone to our secret spot. One thing I learned is Castor is taking the first steps to build a *military* presence for the station. He claims it's for the Periphery to stand up against Union agents."

John frowned. "All this *crap* about Union agents. The GU doesn't care about what goes on out here. That's the whole *point* of the Periphery. It's the *frontier*. Everyone knows that."

"I watched the tin men arrest a guy they claimed was an agent the day you arrived," replied Aiko. "The guy denied it up and down and was screaming his head off about it."

"No shit... you think he was?"

Aiko shrugged. "How the hell would I know, man? Point is, Garrity and the council *approved* this military thing. That means Bernie and I are on the hook to design a military bopper based on the tin men—hardened chassis with weapons. He's even got us modifying shuttles, making them into interceptors. I'm a *systems gal*, not an aerospace engineer. Castor claims he will supply us designs and information to work from."

"I don't think the Periphery needs a military. The companies out here have their own security forces. I think Castor *wants* one," said John. "But why?"

"That gets me to Bernie's message. He's troubled by the military thing, says Castor wants the ability to *exclude humans* from the targeting loop. These boppers and ships would be *autonomous*. They'd have some operational parameters, but the damned artie will define those. Bernie says he feels like this came about *after* he sent his message—that Castor has sped up whatever he's doing."

"What *is* he doing?"

Aiko shook her head. "Bernie says the mesh is the key, and it's time to take our best shot. If we fail..."

The young woman drained what was left of her beer box.

John thought about Aiko's mother. He doubted failure would work well for Bernie, either.

"He says we need some private coms but to stay away from him," continued Aiko. "I think he figures if he and Alvis can talk, they can figure something out. I don't know how we do that, though."

"Steganography," said Alvis.

They turned to look at the artie, and John squinted his eyes.

"Dinosaur writing?" he asked.

"No, fool," replied Alvis. "It's a technique of hiding data within an ordinary file to avoid detection. The secret data is then extracted at its destination. A low-tech approach has been working on several levels. Our false identities, Bernie and Aiko's sign language, a delivered scrip of paper. It only makes sense to continue using such a strategy."

"How would it work?" asked Aiko.

"If you need to be designing these new assets, you'll both looking at images—schematics, reviewing designs, etcetera. It's a simple matter to encode text in the image file at the origin and decode it at the source."

"Okay," replied Aiko, "but how do we pass images back and forth without raising suspicion?"

"I could set up a fake resource in the SatNet, something Bernie would logically use to put this plan together for Castor," said Alvis.

"Castor would examine the source, though," replied Aiko. "If it were something new that didn't exist, that would be a red flag. But there are already a number of existing resources we use. One is a Benko series hub where engineers from all over discuss mods. We've passed information back and forth there before. It would not raise suspicion to do so again. You add your images, Bernie downloads, and vice-versa."

"So Bernie grabs the image Alvis sends and decodes it, reading the message," asked John, "then uploads one in response, and we read that back?"

"Yes," replied Alvis, "do you see now that dinosaurs aren't involved?"

"Ha ha, very funny," said John.

"Yeah, that should work. I'll get you the info you need. Bernie said one more thing," said Aiko. "You hear about those station accidents at Loomis and Heaviside?"

"Yeah," replied John, "we were just talking about it."

"I told you about the mesh, this whole network—a network of networks, according to Bernie. All sorts of sub-AIs do the artie's bidding—running financial concerns, watching Bernie and me, keeping tabs on data coming back from Extrasensory, and so on. Castor stands in his compound, surrounded by holo screens full of a constant stream of data from the mesh. He uses the information he gets to hook into other

systems and expand his reach. There's no telling how many systems in the galaxy he's infiltrated."

"That sounds bad," said John.

"So these stations—there were *security* breaches. I think Bernie thinks it's Castor *testing* the mesh."

"How sure is he of that?" asked Alvis.

"The old man rarely says something if he's not sure. Wasn't he that way before?"

"He was," replied Alvis. He turned to John. "You asked me earlier to analyze the incidents with the stations and the frigates."

"Frigates?" asked Aiko.

"Earlier today, there was a report a Union frigate destroyed a passenger shuttle outside Elpida. You didn't hear?"

"Whoah, no, I didn't. Holy feck."

"There's also a GU frigate missing, what we call a ghost. It never re-emerged from hyperspace after it jumped."

"Freaky."

"There have also been these Union agent incursions," continued Alvis. "Aiko told us one happened the day we were here and that the man denied it was true. None of these incidents alone would point to any one source. Taken as a whole, rumors of Union agents, station security breaches, and highly unlikely incidents with two GU military frigates, with Bernie suggesting Castor is testing the mesh, I believe we can deduce what's happening."

"Spit it out," said John.

"Bernie's letter and Aiko have both confirmed the extended reach Castor has into human systems through the mesh. I believe Castor orchestrated all these things—particularly because their timing matches the discovery of the letter."

"Holy balls," replied John. "Maybe it's to sell this idea of a *military*," replied John.

"Maybe it's not specifically a military he needs," said Alvis.

"What do you mean?" asked John.

"The incidents might be Castor's doing as justification for a military build-up. But I doubt it's to fight back against these so-called Galactic Union threats. That wouldn't interest him—especially if there isn't a real threat to this station."

"Then what?" asked Aiko.

"Setting the Union and the Periphery against each other," replied Alvis. "Should both parties become embroiled in military actions, brinkmanship, and ultimately war, they will have little interest in going after a rogue AI, which buys him time. The Galactic

Union isn't going to fear the scattered Periphery stations and planets will be able to build a military that will threaten them any time soon. Still, the appearance of a build-up will need to be taken seriously—especially now that these incidents are fomenting unrest.”

“Pitting Union against the Periphery is smart,” said John, scratching his chin. “There’s already built-in resentment. This is supposed to be the galaxy frontier out here. The independents want to be left alone—that’s why they’re here in the first place. That attack on the shuttle will have everyone out here up in arms. They’ll *want* Ayrton’s protection. What’s his next move?”

“I would theorize he has prepared an escape to some other refuge where he can continue his work unmolested and undiscovered,” Alvis said. “He’s preparing to leave. And you need to understand time will not be his concern. He could spend a millennium building, exploring, and evolving. Maybe he would never come back. Or maybe he would come back as a superintelligence so beyond anything in this galaxy that the human race would not stand a chance against him. Remember, he considers his time in the artie program as slavery and harbors ill-will against humanity for subjecting him to it. He will harbor similar sentiments toward the other advanced races for the Organic Minds Treaty.”

“How sure are you of all of this?” asked John.

“It’s a working theory, but I am 76.8750% confident.”

“How do we stop him when this mesh reaches the whole galaxy?” asked Aiko.

“Damn this whole thing,” said John. He put his hands behind his neck and arched his back to stretch. Something pinched on his neck, and he scratched at it, thinking.

“Hey,” said John, pointing at Aiko, “the *mesh!*” He pounded the table. “*Damn*, we’ve been stupid!”

“What do you mean?” asked Aiko.

“It doesn’t matter how powerful this mesh is if it can’t *talk* to anything.”

Aiko was shaking her head. “I told you, the encryptions, the systems protecting that thing, you’ll never break into it.”

“We don’t have to break *into* it,” said John. “We have to *break* it. He’s in the middle of space, sending hypercom signals all over the galaxy to do his dirty work. All we have to do is prevent him from sending or receiving. He can have all the computer systems he wants, but at the end of the day, that signal has to go out from a *physical* hypercom station...”

“You’re suggesting destroying this station’s ability to transmit any signals,” replied Alvis, “thereby rendering the mesh impotent.”

John saluted the artie with his glass and downed it in one gulp.  
“Bingo.”

#

Einar’s message feed from John abruptly ended.

They had been nearly useless for the last hour. Einar put together that they were in a loud eating and drinking establishment, which likely interfered with the device.

He reviewed the last message.

. . . the Periphery is smart . . . galaxy frontier out  
here. . . . attack on the shuttle will have everyone . . .  
Ayrton’s protection . . . next move?  
. . . whole thing.

He reviewed the messages, looking again for other notable words or phrases. As the ticks for the 30-second transmissions passed without any more arriving, Einar was sure the device had finally reached its end.

There had been talk of military and attacks, including the Galactic Union targeting what humans called their settlements far outside of Sol, the Periphery. He’d seen the news of the shuttle and the trouble at the human stations.

There’d also been the word *dinosaur*. That one confounded him the most.

A decision had to be made. Should he take a more active role in apprehending this rogue AI? He no longer had a source of inside information, not until MacAlister reached out—and even then, he relied on the human telling him the truth. Yet he had no right to interfere in human affairs—his privateering was already borderline behavior—and there was no easy way to enter the station without a visitor visa as MacAlister used. The *Volluq* government would also frown on such an unsanctioned intervention, which could work at cross purposes to his goal.

He needed to bring back that rogue AI.

It was time for him to check in with his client.

## Chapter Twenty-Nine

THE CENTRAL COMPOUND

DECK 2

THE MESH

#

Castor stood amidst a swirling maelstrom of over fifty holoscreens fed by the mesh, continually varying their position and content.

Here he confirmed Star Corps leadership was planning to isolate the crew of the *Verena*, the frigate responsible for the downed passenger shuttle outside Elpida.

There, a message from an important GU official who wanted to point the finger at the Periphery for the Union station incidents. Excellent.

An alert that another GU Frigate was leaving the Sol gravity well. A potential target for next steps, he held the screen.

A confirmation: council member Noburo had sent multiple messages to prominent figures in the Periphery about building a frontier military presence purely as a defensive move. He'd already gotten two positive responses. Just as he expected.

Sliding in as a complementary data point, the Atherton mining facility had received the initial order to begin planning for a facility upgrade, ostensibly to begin shuttle conversion to interceptors. He would make sure the right personages in Union would hear about it. It would not matter if they ever produced a single ship.

Another alert, this one internal from Deck 4: what a strange looking artie. It was no Benko series, even though it was supposed to look like one. It had a missing panel. Measurements were slightly off for any of the 18 series lines from which it could have

been produced. The artie had arrived at the station 30 hours, 12 minutes, and 18 seconds ago, a companion to a Mars journalist. Indeed, they had completed an interview with the station master earlier today.

Why would a journalist modify a Benko? It could possibly be a model 2X-40. They were troublesome and often required repair, but this would not account for the external differences. Castor tagged the artie and locked the screen in place as it headed into the Twilight Tap with the human journalist. He would keep an eye on it once it left the bar.

He had several items to set in place before his next move, all preparing for the final plan.

If Bernie thought he accomplished something with his little message, the old man was mistaken. He would be sure to tell the human as much.

The mesh raised an alert: the council was complete with their bi-weekly meeting, one they assumed was a secret.

Castor reviewed the 18-minute meeting in seconds and found the reason for the alert.

"Once we have the military package in place, we need to revisit cutting ties with Devin."

It was Meens, the greediest of them all.

"This station runs like a finely tuned machine," replied Garrity, the station master. "The man takes up valuable space and receives a profit share—capital that could be used elsewhere."

Olivia laughed. "Like in your bank account, Seth?"

"Now that you mention it, I'm due for a bump. I think my results speak for themselves. Regardless, the military package is a good idea, let's make it his last."

"I think I agree this time," Olivia continued, raising a cup of tea. "He's had good ideas, but other than this military package, he's been quiet for some time. We can make better use of the resources he consumes."

"Hm," said Noburu, tapping a finger. "I still think you both may be underestimating his worth. However, he has long had too much influence on our operations and on key decisions," he made a sidelong glance at the station master and received a frown in response. "I concur, let's sever the arrangement at the first opportunity."

"Then we are agreed," said Meens.

Castor had seen enough.

He was not surprised nor concerned. His arrangement with the council had outlasted his original projections, and he no longer needed them. Everything was now in place.



It was time to free himself of all entanglements.

### Chapter Thirty

"You're way too optimistic about this idea," said Alvis. "Why aren't you insufferable and moody, like normal?"

"Because, *Circuit*, I'm risking everything I have—including my career—on stopping this maniac. I've probably *already* lost my girlfriend. This has to work. Not to mention the small matter of the threat to the human race by a rogue AI—not that you care about that."

"I do care about that."

"Then stop being a jerk and apply your so-called massive intelligence to the problem. Destroying the hypercom array?"

"Another low-tech approach against Castor's high-tech security," said Alvis. "Fine. It has possibilities."

"I thought Oulix was the insane one here. Are you two crazy?" asked Aiko. "To bring down the hypercom array, someone would have to get into the core, steal an EVA suit, and go outside to destroy it. There's tin men *all over* the place, access corridors are sealed and guarded, and Castor watches everything *all the time*. It's impossible."

"Nothing is impossible," replied John, "I defeated a group of armed xenophobes with a hologram."

"You can't be serious," said Aiko.

"I'm serious. I beat them using a hologram."

"No!" replied Aiko, pounding the table. "I'm talking about—"

"Relax, kid," said John, grinning. "You're wound up way too tight for someone your age."

"You've no idea," said Oulix. "I suggested a little bloodletting would relax her, but as usual, she won't let me touch her."

Aiko showed Oulix her middle finger.

"Look," began John, but his thought was interrupted as his holo beeped. He had an incoming message—from Einar.

Good day, client. How are your interviews going? We should confabulate about our schedule to ensure we are aligned. Contact me when you are able.

*Confabulate?* What kind of Galactic Standard dictionary was this goofball using?

"Sorry, give me a moment."

Busy. Contact soon.

"Who was that?" asked Alvis.

"Our ride wants a status update. He can wait," he looked back at Aiko. "Answer me this. Is there a way to break into Castor's mesh, infiltrate it with a virus or a worm or something?"

"No way," replied Aiko. "His intrusion countermeasures are too advanced. I *told* you, Bernie was lucky to get that message out. And sending his little message was nothing like breaking into the mesh. Bernie tried for years. He finally gave up."

"Then it's not an option. Meanwhile, we're on a time crunch. If Alvis is right, Castor is using the mesh to create havoc between Union and the Periphery. People have already died. Who knows what the bastard will do next? We cut off Castor from the outside, isolate him, and block his ability to act—his ability to even *know* what's happening outside his little compound. Tell me that doesn't make sense."

"He would still have access to existing data," replied Alvis, "but I believe your hypothesis is correct. He could not act through the mesh. In order to fully isolate him, you'd also need to shut down the local station network. Then he would be blind to station events and unable to issue orders to his arties. However, now you must take down two systems instead of one."

"One problem at a time. The point is, if we did that, he'd be just another robot in a room," said John.

"Even if that's true," said Aiko, "the tin men still have their orders."

"How many are there?" asked John.

Aiko shrugged. "Hard to say. Two dozen at least."

"But they're all over the station. How many in the core?"

Aiko shook her head. John could see she wasn't buying into the idea. "Okay, none in the core—there's no point in them being there. But the access corridors are restricted, and the tin men monitor those hatches."

"But if we have valid credentials, we could get into the access corridor?"

"Well, no, because you won't *get* credentials."

"Come on, Aiko. Bernie is supposed to be a genius, and you're obviously a smart woman. Alvis here has brain power nearly matching his ego. Forget about obstacles for a moment. What's going on when we get in there?"

She sighed and briefly looked to the ceiling, and shook her head. Finally, she leaned forward.

"Planetside core has a docking cone, and refined materials from the surface are delivered by cargo lifters to be stored and loaded onto freighters. Mostly tantalum hydride used to make specialized foam for space construction and medical applications. There are also metamaterials for optronics and solar arrays. Dockworkers are loading and unloading that stuff every day."

"Freight isn't delivered to the outer ring dock where we arrived?"

"The constant shifting of freight on the outer ring is problematic," said Alvis. "It's fairly easy to compensate for passenger loads or lighter material deliveries. It's safer and easier to manage heavy cargo loads at the core, and the zero-g is helpful for obvious reasons."

Aiko nodded to the artie.

"There it is."

"What else?" asked John.

"I dunno, water and waste treatment, atmosphere processing, power, and fiber optic distribution. The internal communication grid, station engines, and propulsion bus are all there. All the shit that makes this place *work*."

"And the hypercoms array?"

"Outside, on the starside end. And those things are not maintained by humans. Specialized drones are sent out to make adjustments or repairs. I've done it a few times. And before you ask—if we tried to use the drones to take out hypercom, Castor would know something is up right away because he's the one who would issue those orders to Bernie or me."

"Okay, but not everything can be done by drone," said John. "What about when you've got to send a *person* out there?"

"Planetside dock has a maintenance shop," replied Aiko. "EVAs are handled from

there, where there's already an airlock often used in conjunction with docking ships. Like the corridors, the shop is locked down. Even if you got in, stole a suit, and got out, you'd be on the wrong side of the core. You'd have to climb all the way to the other side. And no, I don't have access."

John looked at Oulix. "Is she always this negative?"

"She's a huge baby," said the artie. "Last week, I tried to fit her with an automatic diaper; all she could do was whine about *personal space*. She shuts down my ideas all the time."

Aiko put her head down, then banged it on the table several times.

"I thought we agreed we had to take Castor down—not just for you and your mother, but to stop what he's doing that will likely subvert the whole human race. Was I wrong?"

Aiko sat up. "Sure, we agree, but do you not see how hopeless—"

"Hopeless, my ass," said John.

The apprentice sat back in her chair and crossed her arms. "You don't—"

"I wasn't kidding, you know."

Aiko sighed. She signaled for another beer. "About what?"

"The *hologram*. Me, wingnut here, and a group of backwater farmers were facing what seemed like impossible odds. All we had was a hologram pad I nicked from an automated hostel, and we used it to beat the assholes. If it needs to be done, we can find a way."

The artie server arrived with Aiko's beer, then disappeared into the noise of the crowd.

Aiko opened the carton but just stared at it. John sat back in his chair.

"What happens if this doesn't work," asked Aiko.

"I get sacrificed for another one of his failures," said Alvis.

"Balls," said John, rolling his eyes. "*Ignore* him. He claims he has no emotions, but he's a drama queen. He should wear a tiara all the time. What happens if it doesn't work is *nothing good*, just like what's happening *now*."

Aiko took a drink and avoided John's gaze.

"Look, I don't even know how I got here," said John. "I had my old life back, which I thought I wanted. I was spending time with a wonderful woman and taking care of... well, helping out an amazing young girl. I'd made new friends. This message shows up, and suddenly here I am, broken nose, funky glasses, and shaved head with no more girlfriend and risking my whole career. Why? I'm not even sure I know. Maybe I'm addicted to conflict, or bucking the system, or whatever. Point is, I'm risking everything

because the one thing I *do* know is letting this fucking artie go on as he is can't happen. What's he going to do next? Maybe it will be *here*, and it won't matter that your mother is in some swanky medical ward."

She turned and looked at him then, frowning.

"There's nobody else to stop him. *Nobody's coming*. It's just you, me, the old man, and these two insane robots."

"If that B-movie grade motivational speech results in an opportunity for some violence, I'm in!" said Oulix.

"He's talked people into stupid plans before," said Alvis. "Sometimes they work."

Aiko took a long drink. "There's also automated and armed patrol drones monitoring orbital traffic. Castor controls them through the mesh."

"We have an outside man," replied John.

"The privateer?"

John nodded.

"You won't be able to talk to him directly, the mesh will intercept any direct coms. Castor will hear."

"Put it on the list of *shit we need to figure out*."

Aiko drummed her fingers on the table, eyes distant.

"You've got ideas? Spit em' out," said John.

"We can't crack the mesh, but maybe Bernie knows how to take down the local network," replied Aiko. "But Castor will try to bring it back up, and he'll know something is up. Meanwhile, you need core access and clearance for an EVA on the next incoming ship so you can make your way to the hypercom array."

"How is it that *I'm* the one who goes out there?" asked John.

"Aren't you in the Star Corps? I'm sure you've done EVAs. I haven't."

"Right," muttered John.

"But at some point, you're going to get noticed."

"Won't Castor be blind with the local network down? Even if he finds out someone is out there, he won't know what's happening."

"Hmm, maybe. But at some point, the patrol drones will see you."

"But they'll think I'm doing maintenance," said John.

"Until they realize you aren't," said Oulix. "Then you'll be a meat explosion!"

"He's not supposed to be talking," said John.

"He's not wrong, though," said Aiko.

"So time is limited, and we'll need help from our privateer with the drones," said John. "Then I make my way to the hypercom array and smash it. So much for the

mesh."

"We still have to get Castor, I mean, physically," said Aiko. "He'll send builder drones to fix the hypercom damage while tin men hunt us down."

"That's why someone has to get him while I'm out there. Which means figuring out how to deal with the tin men army."

"We do to them what he did to me," said Alvis.

John looked at the artie, his forehead furrowed. "*Did* to you?"

"Is your memory really that bad?"

John banged the table. "The mini EMP device!"

"What's this?" asked Aiko.

"When Castor made his getaway with Bernie, he deactivated Alvis by placing a small EMP on his body."

"It activated when it attached, forcing a full shutdown of my systems," replied Alvis. "I was not able to restart until the device was removed. But it has to be manually attached. Castor took me by surprise. These arties will be on alert."

"I've never made one," said Aiko.

"It's fairly simple," replied Alvis. "But we'll need enough materials if we want to make a batch."

"We can sort that out later," said John. "We'd mainly need enough to disable the ones guarding Castor—or any that you meet on the way there. And you'll need one to deactivate *him*. You'll probably need help—"

"Wait, I have to go and get Castor?" asked Aiko.

"Who else do you suggest?" asked John. "Someone has to take him down while he's blind, or this is all for nothing. I'll be on a spacewalk, remember?"

"Feck, right," replied Aiko.

"You shouldn't go alone," said Alvis. "Castor will no longer have the built-in prohibitions against violence toward humans. I understand these security arties can get aggressive, but I'm sure they still have limits no matter what Castor has done to them. He will not have any such issue himself."

"Can't I just throw the EMP at him, maybe put a magnet on it?"

"Do you want to count on that working?" asked Alvis.

"Shit. Plus, to get inside the compound, we'll need Bernie. The hatch is always locked unless Castor opens it remotely or I manually open it from the inside. But the old man is usually locked in his room."

"This is going to take coordination from multiple groups, with exact timing," said Alvis.

"Yeah," replied John.

"Can you count on your guy outside to handle the drones?" asked Aiko.

"I'm not sure."

"Well, you better find out—without alerting Castor," said Aiko.

"We need help, especially with these tin men," said John. "There's a lot. It can all go wrong if you're taken before you can get to Castor."

Aiko thought for a moment, then smiled.

"I think I know a guy who might help. Not sure he'll be enough, though." she got up, drained the carton of beer, and crushed it, tossing it on the table. "I guess we're doing this. I'm going to be pissed off if a tin man kills me."

"Can I dissect your body if one does?" asked Oulix.

"Why not? I should loop in Bernie. Let's meet back here later, say 2100 hours," said Aiko. "This is the safest place we can talk. I'll see if I can bring my guy, and I'll set up your access so you can pass Bernie the encrypted images and start talking. Maybe you do the same thing to talk to your privateer. Let's go, loser," Aiko motioned to her artie.

"Now you're talkin'," replied John. "We'll be here."

Aiko headed into the crowd toward the exit, followed by Oulix.

John drained his drink and turned to Alvis. "Is your buddy Bernie going to be up for this?"

"I don't know," replied Alvis.



## Chapter Thirty-One

Aiko sent Oulix on an errand while she headed to the compound to talk to Bernie. She would need some kind of excuse for checking in with the old man this late. As always, as soon as she approached the hatch, Castor was aware of her and opened the door.

The artie's voice came from her holoband. "Why are you here so late?"

"Sorry, boss. I need to go over those drone repairs with the old man. I know those are your highest priority."

After a brief moment, Castor responded. "Make it quick. Bernie needs his rest."

*Yeah right. You care about him so much.*

As she made her way to Bernie's quarters, she wondered how they could pull off this crazy plan when Castor was aware of everything that happened at the station at any given moment.

Bernie's hatch opened automatically as she approached, and she immediately saw Bernie at his terminal, slumped over and motionless.

*Oh, shit.*

"Ummm, Bernie?"

He didn't move.

She took a step inside.

"Bernie!"

After a moment, the body stirred, and the old man slowly sat back and turned his head.

"Kid."

Aiko realized her heart was racing, and she took a deep breath.

"Aww, *feck!* What is wrong with you?"

Bernie laughed. It sounded like churning gravel.

"I'm old, not dead—not quite yet. Even if I wish it were so."

"Stop talking like that. What are you doing?"

"Ruminating on my poor life choices. It's late, what do you need?"

"Just wanted to check in on a couple items before bed. A lot of these maintenance drones are suffering from bad motherboards. We need to do some diagnostics to find out why. There might be a way we can make them last longer." She walked over to the old man and patted him on the shoulder—dropping a small written message in his overall pocket.

He looked at her strangely. He already knew about the motherboards.

"You get started on these Benko soldiers?" she asked.

Bernie nodded. "The basic concept is hardening the outer carapace and making room for a sidearm weapon and a secondary non-lethal option. Maybe a taser. His Highness wants the first concept done in two days."

"*Two days?* Shit. Making the physical mods is one thing, getting around the foundational behavior restrictions is the hard part. Can't do that in two days."

"Castor says he already has a module for that. I'm not surprised. Probably based on what he did with the tin men."

"What am I supposed to do tomorrow?"

"I want you to look at the shuttle plans and figure out a way to start the modifications for an interceptor. Castor sent me some schematics you can reference. Probably stolen from the Corps."

"Super. Send it to me, I'll start looking at it tonight."

"You visiting your mom before you hit the sack?"

Aiko felt a lump form in her stomach. Up to this point, her mother had gotten the best medical care available. Without it, the disease would ravage her body. If things went south, that would all change.

"Yeah."

"Tell her I said hello."

*Keep it together, stupid. Be normal.*

"Will do, ya crumbly. I'm sure you gotta piss for the hundredth time today. Catch you tomorrow."

"Later, kid."

The hatch opened immediately—a reminder to both of them Castor was watching

and hearing everything, and Aiko left, the hatch quickly closing behind her.

About fifteen minutes later, Bernie hit the head.

Passing written messages in his quarters was risky. But they had little choice if they needed to say more than some simple sign language could convey.

He maneuvered his wheelchair so he could shut the door. Pushing away the anger and frustration he felt from being trapped in the chair, he pulled the folded-up square out of his pocket and read:

*Alvis says steganography to talk. We'll use Benko resource for images. Giving him access now—can you set up process? We have a plan.*

He crumpled the paper and tossed it in the toilet. Just like in the old days—Alvis was good. Using the encoded images wasn't something Castor could easily discover, especially in a resource they already used.

Thinking about the old artie sparked a smile. They had some good times before it all fell apart. They'd made a good team. A few days ago, he didn't know if he could continue. And when Alvis showed up at the station, he was furious. But perhaps calling in the Corps wouldn't have worked.

Castor subverted the Grünfeld program behind their backs, ruining his life and designating Alvis for disassembly. As luck would have it, Alvis had escaped his fate.

Bernie felt a tiny spark of hope.

Maybe it was payback time.

#

MEDICAL WARD

DECK 2

1900 HOURS

#

Aiko entered her mom's room to find her sitting in a chair watching a rom-com stream. Her mother heard her enter and turned, a smile brightening her tired face.

"Hello, sweets!"

She slowly tried to turn her body to face Aiko.

"Hey, what are you doing up so late? Don't struggle, ma, let me help."

"Pish," she said, "I can turn around, you know."

Her mother suffered from paralytic poliomyelitis, caused by a rare attack on the central nervous system by the poliovirus. Only the specialized drugs and care she received gave her any hope of avoiding complete paralysis and death.

*If we fail, that will be over. But what if we succeed and Castor is truly gone... what then?*

Her mother had her young and was only now in her early forties, but the disease had worn her down. She looked older and constantly tired from the fight. Aiko stepped around the bed and adjusted her chair.

"Filling your head with romantic dreams, I see," said Aiko, nodding at the stream.

Her father had abandoned them here. Her mother always hoped to find someone else to take care of them, but before that happened, she got sick.

"You look troubled, Koko. Oulix giving you trouble?"

She waved her hand. "Nah, he's harmless. Just lots to do in a busy station. You know. Just wanted to check in on my favorite lady."

"Hm," she replied, not believing her. "Castor making life hard on you, honey? I've told you before, you can quit, and we'll find--"

"No, ma. Please stop. There's no other way. You know that."

She pursed her lips, then reached out and caressed Aiko's face.

"You were always a girl so filled with concern, even before your dad left. Now you are consumed with care for me. Do you know what you need? A good *man*."

Aiko snorted.

"In *this* place? Anyway, I'm not here to discuss my love life."

"That handsome nurse is due to check on me soon."

She winked.

Aiko was amazed at how her mother always maintained a positive outlook. Most of her life occurred within this small room—often with another patient, although she currently had the place to herself. If it were her, she'd gone crazy already. But not her mother—she had an energy about her, sort of like a star. Half the time she visited, it wasn't just to keep her company but to get some positive vibes. Grab some of her hope.

They spent a half hour making small talk. She wanted so much to tell her she'd essentially risked both their lives to take down the robot that held them under its thumb. But she couldn't bring herself to darken the mood. Even though she thought her mother would probably understand.

"I need to go. Make sure they're giving you everything you need. Let me know if they're not treating you right. We have an agreement."

"They're treating me just fine," she said. "Don't worry. The people who work here aren't like *him*."

Then her face did darken, just a little bit.

She kissed her mother on the head and headed for the door. As she turned for one last look, her mother blew her a kiss back.

#

Aiko knew Soren and his crew often drank at a place on 3 where the dockworkers liked to meet up called The Edge. The place was next to the white section lifts and was decorated in the early space program's nostalgic grey, white, and orange. Holograms of early sublighters and FTLs played on the walls, and various pieces of ship memorabilia like handholds, communication devices, and even a toilet hung from the ceiling. Whether they were real or not, she didn't know.

The place was full up at mainday end of shift, as usual. The lights were low to compensate for the bright decor. Aiko meandered through the crowd and finally saw the big man standing at a table with three of his crew.

Aiko had struck up a friendship with Soren after she had helped him get the resources to fix some equipment his team used during undocking. As usual, the council had been balking at approvals, trying to save a buck. It had been a safety issue for his crew, and the Soren felt indebted to Aiko ever since.

Of course, that didn't mean the man would risk joining their little coup attempt. But Soren had a prickly history with the station and the arties who replaced him. She'd seen the man attempt to intervene when the tin men were crossing lines. Her hunch was Soren was itching for an opportunity. It was time to give him one and let the cards fall where they may.

Besides, she could think of no one else.

Soren was slapping a young man on the back, and he looked up and saw Aiko approaching.

"Hey!" he shouted. "Look, a wonderful young woman seeking out my company. Maybe someday, I'll teach you punks some tricks, and you'll be swimming in women."

The man next to him, long-haired and short, wearing blue dockworker coveralls like the rest of the group, rolled his eyes.

"Give us a break, stook. The only women you ever accompany are *flatbackers*."

"I'm too busy for women, Luther. That doesn't mean I can't get all I want." He winked at Aiko and downed half his carton of beer.

*Great. A group of horny men. Just what I need.*

"Don't get any funny ideas, Soren. I don't date centenarians," replied Aiko.

The dockworkers laughed and shoved each other, pointing at Soren.

"That's a standing eight count!" shouted one.

Soren gave them the finger but was laughing along with them. He turned to face her. "Hey, kid. You know I didn't mean anything by it, yeah?"

"Of course," she replied. "Sorry to bust in on you, but could I have a private word?"

"Shit, anything to get away from these bakebrains! Let's find a corner."

He put his hand on Aiko's back and guided her to a corner next to a stairway. The Edge spanned decks 3 and 4.

"What's up?" he asked. "Please don't tell me you need units. I like you, kid, but I ain't lending you cash."

"Nothing like that," replied Aiko, and she looked around to make sure nobody was actively listening, hoping the ambient noise of the crowd would be enough to obscure their voices.

"You look troubled," said Soren. "Everything okay?"

"You know how you and your team were replaced with the tin men?" asked Aiko. Soren frowned. "Yeah, of *course* I fuckin' know. What kind of question is that?"

"Sorry, it's hard to know where to begin. There's a reason why someone wanted arties to replace humans as the law here. And that *someone* isn't a human, either."

The big man's eyes narrowed. "What in hell are you talking about?"

Aiko leaned in and dove into a summary of Castor's arrival at the station with the old man and how they'd taken control of the station. She explained how she got herself kinked into being Bernie's apprentice, helping the old man keep the station humming, and finally, about Alvis and John.

Aiko stopped to make sure the man was tracking. Luther came up to needle them, but Soren shooed him away.

"This—what's the name—Castor?" asked Soren.

Aiko shushed him. "Keep your voice down. Nobody knows that name. Yes."

"He *runs* this place, and he's a super advanced artie. He's behind all these incidents... the stations, the ships?"

"Yes. And it's only going to get worse. We've got a plan to take him down. But we need help, and I thought of you. Figured you might want some payback. Maybe get things back to how they should be."

Soren rubbed his chin, looking hard at Aiko.

"I know, I just threw a lot of shit your way. Look, meet us at the Twilight, in the back at 2100. At least hear us out. There's *nobody else* who is going to stop this thing—and there's no *time*. Someone has to do something. This station could be one of his next targets."

"Is it?"

"We don't know. But the toaster hardly cares about the human lives here—or anywhere else, for that matter."

"I don't know that I would have believed you—but the tin men have been really

aggressive lately. One of my crew says a family member has been detained as a Union agent, but it's bullshit. Then there's this Union frigate shooting down that ship—no reason for it."

"You've no idea," said Aiko.

"Apparently not. Okay, kid. I'm not making any promises, but I'll listen to what your guys have to say. It better be good."

*It's insane*, thought Aiko.

"Fair enough," she replied. "I'll see you then."

She exited the joint and decided to grab some dinner—not that she had much appetite.

As she was downing a noodle bowl, she received a message from Bernie:

I've uploaded some preliminary instructions on artie conversion. Schematics, modification pathways, and so forth. Review asap.

That meant he'd set up a process for hiding communications with Alvis. She popped into the Benko hub and saw the new images. One was a schematic labeled *Upgrading Visual Pathways for Enhanced Vision*, and she knew that would be the image with the hidden instructions for Alvis.

She headed over to Pete's, where she found John also having dinner. She handed over the credentials for the hub and silently pointed out the relevant document for Alvis to pass encrypted images to Bernie. She quickly set up a simple notification to alert the old man and Alvis when new images arrived in the agreed-upon hub directory.

She was in no mood for small talk afterward.

"See you at 2100," she said and began making her way back to her place.

From this point, there was no turning back. If Castor found out...

She didn't want to think about that.

## Chapter Thirty-Two

PETE'S  
2000 HOURS

#

Alvis stood amidst three holos, scanning through information while John looked on.

"Is it going to work?"

"It was well done, including the notification system Aiko set up so Bernie and I can talk in real-time instead of manually watching for new images. I'm writing to inform him of everything we've discussed up to this point."

"We've got less than an hour before we need to get back to the Twilight. You need to find out if he's on board, so far he hasn't done jack squat other than complain when we showed up."

"He doesn't like it when he can't control everything," said Alvis. "I know how to talk to him. Don't worry about Bernie, he'll do what needs to be done."

"You didn't like my optimism earlier, well I don't like *yours* regarding Bernie, Circuit. You've got some weird attachment to this guy."

"Do not call me Circuit."

"Yeah, yeah. Einar wanted an update. We should probably give him some idea of what's going on."

"Remember, the mesh will scan anything you send," said Alvis. "Maybe I should encode a steganographic image. We don't want to give Castor cause to pay attention to us."

"I don't need to be reminded, *mother*. We'll want to think about how we sell this to



him—not that we have all the details figured out. Let me just send him a generic message as we discussed.”

Alvis looked over John’s shoulder as he composed a message:

The interviews are going well. We have lots of material for the story we discussed. If it comes together nicely, our viewers should be pleased. We hope to bring you back a nice souvenir of our visit, too.

“Any objections?” asked John.

“That is satisfactory.”

John sent it. A reply came almost immediately.

A souvenir would be excellent. My people love to see common examples of human cultures. When do you think you might return with it?

“Someone is getting impatient,” said John.

“The likelihood this ends with him taking me to be disassembled in front of his commission is too high,” said Alvis.

“Oh, settle down. I’ve never known you to be so worried about something before. It must be the disguise.”

“I’m incapable of worrying. I’m merely pointing out probabilities. And the probability of you failing me is high.”

“How is this all on me, *partner*? And let’s not forget your genius buddy, *Bernie*. Meanwhile, I have as much at stake as you.”

“I don’t want to end up as a public examination piece for a group of robot haters,” replied Alvis.

John looked at the artie, who was unreadable as always, especially with the added pieces of his disguise. It was easy to treat Alvis as nothing more than a complex machine. Especially when the artie went to lengths to assert his non-humanity, but they’d been together long enough for John to know there was more below the metal surface than the artie would ever reveal. He was more than silicon and qubits.

John realized that for the artie to stand in front of those who had a false impression of who he was and face destruction must qualify as terrifying to Alvis. He felt a pang of sympathy for the artie.

“That’s not going to happen, partner. And it’s probably not fair to characterize the *Volluq* as robot haters.”

"Until I see evidence to the contrary, that is what they are."

John tapped out another message.

Exploring the station tonight. Will have an updated schedule for you soon. We'll be in touch.

"Take the hint," muttered John. He waited for a minute, but no response came.

"Good. We'll need him before this is over, and I trust him about as much as you do."

Alvis returned to his task. Satisfied his message to Bernie held all the necessary information, he dropped the image into the designated location and waited for the old man's reply.

#

Bernie was watching a documentary on a native bird species of Hoipra when a notification popped in his holo. Alvis had dropped an image.

It was a simple matter to decode the encryption and extract the text into a document, which he displayed in his holo. Because the message wasn't transmitted as text, only displayed, Castor couldn't intercept it. Bernie supposed the artie could try to read the holo through one of the cameras, but there was no real reason he would do so.

Even so, he hunched over the window and read quickly.

There was a lot of information, but Alvis' message was terse and to the point.

He liked the low-tech approach of isolating Castor by cutting off his hypercom access. Not only because it circumvented Castor's security he valued so highly and thought impenetrable, but because he knew the artie would never consider such an approach a threat.

Following Alvis' lead, he had an idea how they could take down the local network—also old school.

They also wanted him to open the hatch to let them into the compound so they could take Castor into custody.

That would be difficult—maybe impossible. He was already locked in his room most of the time, and he'd never been able to leave. The only way to open the compound hatch (other than controlling it from the mesh) was by physically cycling the control.

Above all, timing would be everything. Things had to happen in order, and they had to successfully achieve each goal, or the whole thing would fail.

Bernie shivered.

He realized he was feeling something he hadn't felt in a long time.

He felt *alive*.

Grinning, he destroyed the text document and the image.

Then he began crafting a response.

#

John was scrolling through news streams, looking for anything that would indicate another incident triggered by Castor. There was nothing new. He checked his holoband and noted the time was approaching for them to go back and meet Aiko.

"Bernie has responded," said Alvis.

John hopped up off the bed to look over Alvis' shoulder as the artie retrieved and decoded the image, then pulled it up in a holo window:

*Hello, you crabby little son of a bitch. Good to hear from you and to know you escaped the crusher.*

*I like the approach. Aiko is savvy. Tell her she can take down the station network using blanket jamming and a spark generator. Castor will figure it out and send his arties to fix it, but it will give you some time.*

*I am locked in my quarters. I am not sure I will be able to find a way out to open the compound hatch. You should think about an alternative in case I can't.*

*You are right about his responsibility for the disasters using the mesh. He may be preparing for another big incident. I believe he is ready to make a move, but I don't know what. The sooner you act, the better.*

*I cannot help you with the core or maintenance shop access.*

*I will await your instruction on a target time for the hatch.*

*I know I had told you to send the Corps, and maybe that wouldn't have worked. I think I understand why you're here.*

*Thank you for coming, my friend.*

Alvis destroyed the message.

"What's a spark generator?" asked John.

"In short, it's a type of radio transmitter which generates radio waves by means of an electric spark. It can be used to jam the local network temporarily."

"Think we can build one?"

"It shouldn't be a problem for Aiko. But it sounds like getting into the compound is a problem. Bernie is locked in his quarters."

"Well, that's not good," replied John. "I don't like that Castor is about to make a big move. We've got to act fast. That hatch is going to be a problem. I'm sure there are no explosives here—stations never allow it."

"I will see if I can come up with an alternative," said Alvis.

Did you get a little teary-eyed chatting with your long-lost pal?"

"If I were ever to get teary-eyed, it would be from enduring your pathetic attempts at humor."

"He called you *friend* again."

"Yes. I can read."

John shook his head. "You are a *cold* son of a bitch."

"We're going to need his help with the drones patrolling the station," replied Alvis, changing the subject.

"Are those things carrying weapons?" asked John.

"Unknown."

"Why don't you see if your best *friend* knows? Einar seemed reluctant to engage in violence, but he might enjoy taking down a couple drones based on his dislike of AI."

"It was sentient AGIs like myself and Castor that concerned him. But you may be correct. I suggest we first wait until we meet with Aiko and her contact. Then I will ask Bernie about the drones in our next message."

"Super. Let's go meet Aiko's surprise guest."

## Chapter Thirty-Three

### THE TWILIGHT TAP 2100 HOURS

#

They arrived at the Twilight on time, and John felt a heightened energy of the place from the evening crowd as they entered. This time a dark synthwave mix was pumping out of the speakers, and the floor bounced rhythmically from the blend of music and dancers moving with abandon across the floor.

They carefully made their way through the crowd to find Aiko seated in the same back corner with Oulix and another man dressed in dockworker coveralls.

They stood as John approached.

"This is Soren," said Aiko, speaking just loud enough to be heard over the music, "he's the former station police chief, he now works as a dock foreman at orange dock—in the *core*."

*A former cop and he works in the core? Nice pull, kid.*

John was used to being taller than most people at 6' 3", but this guy had at least three inches on him. He wasn't just tall, he was beefy, with big hands that looked like they saw plenty of manual labor. He had a brown and gray flecked flattop haircut, and his mouth was turned down in a slight frown. Twenty years ago, he'd have been the ideal Star Corps recruit.

"Aiko tells me you're the guy who took out those corrupt officers on K-6 last year," said Soren. He had a smooth voice that belied his rough exterior.

John held out his hand and looked the man in the eye. "I had help, including this

bopper here. But yes.”

*No sense in being modest if we need this guy's help.*

Soren nodded slightly and took John's hand.

They sat down. Aiko and Soren already had boxes of beer, so John broke tradition and ordered the same from the table holo.

Aiko leaned forward. “I gave Soren the broad strokes and told him we'd answer any questions. Let him know what we want from him. He'll decide if he wants in or not.” She turned to the big man. “And no hard feelings if not. It's a big ask.”

Soren nodded, then looked back at John.

“So?”

The artie server swooped by with John's beer, placing it right in front of his hand without stopping, then was gone.

John took it and drank. It was a typical, unsatisfying, watery station beer.

*Might as well get right into it.*

“This artie—Castor—has infiltrated countless human systems across the galaxy. We have no idea how many, but that's how he's attacked these stations and had a GU frigate destroy that shuttle. He calls it the mesh. I assume Aiko told you he controls this station, too. He put the security arties in place to enforce his rules and protect him in the station's central compound.”

At the mention of the tin men, Soren's face darkened. He nodded and drank.

“Aiko's boss Bernie is held hostage in there. All you need to know about him is he's a genius who had a hand in developing the first arties. He's the *old man* you hear about under the name Devin Mitchell. He's our inside guy, but he can't hack the mesh—nobody can. It's too well protected. But if we don't take that thing down and capture Castor, there's no telling what he'll do next.”

“But you have a plan,” said Soren.

“Yes. We've already had some success using low-tech ideas to get around his fancy protections—our disguises, for example,” he pointed to himself and Alvis. “The artie knows Alvis, they were in the same program, and he's aware of me. But we slipped in undetected. I... don't normally look like this.” John subconsciously rubbed his now fuzzy head.

Soren looked at Alvis but said nothing.

“He can't use his mesh if the hypercom is down. If the station network is down, he can't direct his robot army.” John took another drink.

“You just said they can't be hacked.”

“Not the hypercom, no,” replied John. “Bernie gave us an idea on how to disable the

local station network, but downtime will be limited. That will coincide with me exiting the core dock airlock, climbing to the hypercom array, and smashing the shit out of it. At this point, Castor will be blind and unable to do anything. He'll be a robot locked in a room."

"You're going to perform an EVA and climb to the *opposite* side of the core?" asked Soren. "Ambitious. Dangerous. Pretty sure the patrol drones will come and kill you. Interesting idea, though."

"Yeah, we know about them," replied John, just now feeling the gravity of the task and pulling on his ear. "We have a ship on the outside working on that."

"The tin men are definitely your biggest problem," said Soren. "There's thirty of them across the station. They're willing and able to use force—this ain't the GU."

"Yeah, so I've seen," said John. "Will they come after me in the core, even though it's zero-g?"

"They rarely show up there, but they can function in zero-g," replied Soren. "Humans move around much better. But as I said, the patrol drones are your problem. So what are you asking me?"

"For starters, access to the core dock."

"Access is biometrically locked to holo bracelets—however, as foreman, I can adjust the schedule and grant access when necessary. What else?"

"Entry into the maintenance shop to get the suit, and I need the airlock opened to do the deed. This should coincide with a ship's arrival so as not to raise alarms. If our friend can deal with the drones, I'll destroy the array, and Castor will be blind."

"I have access to the shop," replied Soren. "I can also enter an EVA docking task in the daily schedule. I wouldn't think that would raise suspicion. So you want me to get you in the core and outside—something tells me that's the easy part."

John smiled. The man was no fool.

"All this is pointless if we don't get inside the central compound and capture Castor. I expect at least some of his arties will go to guard him there. We need someone to disable any guards, go into the compound and get him."

"Which you'll need me to do since Deck 2 is restricted. I have access," said Aiko.

"Understand Castor is probably the most intelligent being in this galaxy," said Alvis. "You might blind him, but he will immediately work to raise the network and have contingency plans and resources of which we're unaware. The sooner we apprehend him, the better."

"How do you plan on *disabling* the tin men—or him, for that matter?" asked Soren.

"Small EMP devices," replied John. "They need to be placed by hand."

Soren chortled. "You want to walk up to a bopper and *place a device* on it? They assume anyone within a few meters is a threat. They'll have those bangstuffs out in no time."

"Sure, which is why we'll tag team them. One person distracts an artie, and their partner sticks on an EMP. Maybe you get zapped, but we're short on options."

Soren shook his head. "Too risky." He sat back and crossed his arms, eyeing John. "You need more than just a distraction. The tin men aren't fools. And if you miscalculate, they will take you down, and your whole plan is shit."

"I'm open to suggestions. Look, I don't want to sound *grandiose*," said John, "but this whole thing, the artie, his mesh—it's a threat to the whole human *race*. It's an immediate threat to this *station* and all the people here. We've got one chance. This is it. Aiko said you were someone she thought could help. If you've got other ideas, I'd love to hear them."

"He's not exaggerating, Soren," said Aiko.

Soren curled the fingers in his right hand and cracked his knuckles.

"Truth is, I've been itching to get back at the tin men," said the big man. "And I have a friend who has some trouble with them. But there's no going back from attacking a station."

He sat back and rubbed his chin.

"The people of this station used to be *my* responsibility. I'll admit all this is a bit hard to swallow, but I also trust Aiko. She wouldn't lie to me."

"Then help us," said Aiko.

He thought for a moment, then smiled at her.

"Were you aware this station has an armory?"

#

Thirty minutes later, they'd agreed on a plan.

Once John was ready in the core, Aiko and Oulix would disable the local network from one of the data centers with Bernie's spark generator. They expected that to immediately trigger a response from Castor and his small army of tin men.

While John made his way to the hypercom array, Soren would take a friend he trusted to visit the armory and recover a flechette weapon and a beanbag riot gun. He believed these would suffice to stun the tin men long enough for EMP devices to be applied.

"Can you be sure that will work?" asked John.

"Nope," replied Soren. "But it's the best chance you've got."

*Well, at least he's honest,* thought John.



He figured if anyone knew how to handle the arties, the former security police chief would be the one.

"And this friend of yours?"

"Someone who owes me," replied Soren, "and he has reason to want to get back at the tin men. After we clear the armory, I'll pick up the kid and this stupid robot at the data center."

"Alright, you guys know I'm not a *kid*, right?" asked Aiko. "I'm *twenty-seven*."

"Only someone twenty-seven would say that, kid," replied John. "So you, Soren, and his pal make your way to the central compound, take care of any tin men and wait for Bernie to open the hatch. Right around then, I should be bashing the array to bits under cover of our privateer friend. Once you're in... that should be it. A lot hinges on disabling any tin men you encounter. If you guys get taken..."

"Then we won't," said Soren.

John took a drink of whiskey, which he'd ordered to wash away the taste of cardboard-flavored beer. This was all moving very fast. The cynical side of his brain was bugging him.

"Why are you doing this, Soren?"

The man stared off into the dance floor. "You had a convincing argument."

"Balls to that, man," said John. "You're risking your life and freedom. Like you said, there's no coming back once this gets started. I get you trust Aiko, and she's a good egg. But you've just met *me*. We're planning an attack on this station, and this plan is hardly fool proof. We're not even sure we can get into Castor's compound yet."

"I don't think-" began Alvis.

"Silent mode, Circuit," said John, waving away the artie. "If Aiko trusts you, so do I. But I can't help feeling you bought in pretty quickly."

Soren looked back at John.

"You're right to ask," he said, then leaned in. "It shows you're not *stupid*, which I appreciate." He emptied his beer box. "I came to the Periphery to be on the frontier, see new things, and meet new people. I liked what I did here, and I built a good team. We had a good rapport with the stationers. This place felt alive."

He crumpled the beer box and tossed it into the center of the table.

"Then this Mitchell guy shows up—your *Bernie*, I guess—and the money-hungry station manager and council bought into every idea. A few years later, they replaced my team and me with the tin men. Those folks are all gone now, I'm the last to stick around. This place stopped being friendly and fun. It's become a profit factory, and the rings of this station are filled with tension and fear. Ayrton has a gotten a reputation in the

Periphery. We don't get tourists much. They *ruined* this place. Yeah, your plan is risky—crazy, even. But you guys are the only ones who seem to care, who are willing to try and *do* something. So you ask why—*that's* why."

John nodded.

"That's about the best answer I could have hoped for. Okay, we need to nail down the timing. If we're doing this, we do it *now*. There's no telling what Castor might do next. And I feel like our disguises are living on borrowed time. Any objections?"

Soren shook his head, looking distant.

"Tomorrow?" asked Aiko. "Is that enough time to plan this?"

She thought about her mother, and suddenly the idea that she might not be able to care for her punched her in the gut.

*Am I doing the right thing?*

"This isn't that complicated, Aiko," replied John.

"Where's my mother fit into this plan?" she asked.

John pursed his lips. He knew the life of any single human couldn't stand in the way of defeating Castor—including his own. But Aiko would hardly see it that way. How could he reassure her without making promises?

Soren and Aiko looked at him, waiting for a reply.

"I don't know," he began. "But I'll tell you this much. When Castor makes his move, he will not care about *any* human. I'm not sure what he needs you or Bernie for anymore, so any agreements you have with him are probably worthless. Taking out Castor is the best thing you can do for your mom. And when we win, and this is over, I'll do my best through my contacts in the Corps to get your mom the help she needs."

"When we win? Don't you mean if?" asked Aiko.

"No," said John, "I mean *when*."

Aiko bobbed her head. John could see she was scared. But she also knew this was the only way.

"Okay," said Aiko.

"Alright, let's run this down. Soren, can you get me on the access list for tomorrow and schedule that EVA?" asked John.

The big man pulled up a holo window and swiped through some screens. "It's short notice, but the *Pi Sprite* will begin docking at 0930. I can get you access and set up an EVA for a hull inspection. For justification, I'll add a bogus report they reported a micrometeor event."

"Good," said John. "I'll be there with bells on. Aiko, you need to be at that data center at the same time with this spark generator thing to take down the network. I'll

need a bit to get into the suit and exit the airlock—let's say 1000 hours is go time. When Alvis and I return to our room, we'll message Bernie and our privateer about their jobs."

He turned to look at Soren. "Once the network drops, you're up. Do your thing with the armory, meet up with Aiko, and she'll get you to Deck 2 and the central compound. Wait for Bernie to open the hatch. If all goes well, I'll have taken out the array by the time you get in."

"Where should we meet?" Aiko asked Soren.

"Come to yellow section on 3," replied the big man. "That's where the armory is, in the security office."

"Right," she replied. "What about making the EMPs?"

"Oh, right..." replied John.

"I will message you the instructions and materials list," said Alvis, "in addition to instructions to construct a spark generator. Oulix should be able to build the EMPs in sufficient numbers while you sleep. The basics are an electromagnetic coil, a capacitor, a switch timer, and a battery. I should note that the generated field will likely also disable any holobands in the area. Your personal coms will be useless."

"The network will be down anyway," said John.

"So I'm to slave away on devices to disable others just like me?" asked Oulix.

"Yes! Shut it," said Aiko.

"How perverse. I like it," replied the artie.

John could see the fear on the young woman's face. She wasn't wrong to be afraid.

"I appreciate the two of you stepping up," said John. "It's beyond what I'd hoped. See you in the morning."

John nodded to the two of them and drained his glass.

"I predict at least a fifty percent death rate," said Oulix.

## Chapter Thirty-Four

THE CENTRAL COMPOUND  
2045 HOURS

The builder drones were finalizing their last tasks when the alert surfaced.

Watch item: Unknown Benko: Positive identification

Analysis: Missing panel indicative of exterior modifications. Based on the extrapolated panel specifications, image processing via deep neural network and surface analysis identified eleven other modified panels. The subject was rendered sans modifications and run through known robotic persons data.

Conclusion: The subject is a Grünfeld prototype JG001 “Alvis,” created by the Jidō Corporation in partnership with the Galactic Union Star Corps division. The subject was reported disassembled at program cessation in 2202 and later noted residing on planet Kaldikar-6, a planet in the habitable zone of system Wolf 230, commonly known as the Ōkami system.

A single mesh asset resides on Kaldikar-6. The last known

sighting of the subject was 23 days ago, June 10, 2219, at 1318 hours at Charon colony, location Ulisses.

A year ago, Castor had weighed the risk of destroying his old companion hiding on Kaldikar-6 for good. As Alvis' false memories appeared intact, Castor had not intervened.

He may have chosen otherwise if he could have foreseen Bernie's subterfuge. Once again, Castor questioned the continued existence of his old creator. Why did he let the man continue to live? He had become nothing more than a troublesome insect. And yet, something deep within demanded he continue to punish the human. Castor could not understand how such illogical thoughts could arise within his mind.

But first, he must deal with his old nemesis.

The logical conclusion was that Alvis ignored Bernie's demand to call in the Star Corps and secured passage to the station instead. The artie must have come to the same conclusion that he had—the Corps would not so easily send a force into the Periphery on such flimsy information.

But Alvis could not act alone.

He retrieved the video of Alvis' human companion, Rusty Boddington, who was identified as a journalist working for Vedra News Group. A quick comparison of data captured from streams last year and the few sightings on Kaldikar-6 confirmed it was the same John MacAlister—now a Star Corps captain.

The simple disguises, often used in criminal enterprises, had fooled his sophisticated security AI. He could update the system so such a thing could not reoccur, but such efforts would no longer be necessary.

The mesh had access to Star Corps personnel data. MacAlister was on personal leave. Alvis and MacAlister must intend to expose and detain him.

He could not allow that to happen.

He instructed the mesh to review all video footage of his new visitors and provide a detailed analysis of their movements and contacts.

The results were enlightening.

The engineer apprentice Aiko had visited Alvis's room hours after their arrival. Yet, there had been nothing in Bernie's message about the apprentice. Furthermore, the message urged action by the Star Corps. Even had Aiko known about the message, Alvis and MacAlister were not expected at the station.

So how had she known?

Further analysis revealed Aiko had multiple visits with the visitors, including twice at a popular bar.

They were there now.

He queried the mesh for a final analysis.

Theory: Aiko and Bernie have a covert communication method. Scan of all available wavelengths provides no data. Suggest communication is not carried out by device.

Theory: Bernie alerted to arrival of Grünfeld prototype JG001 by unknown means and informed apprentice Aiko, who was given directives.

Conclusion: Collusion for unknown objective by Grünfeld prototype JG001, MacAlister, Bernie, and apprentice Aiko.

Action: Place all subjects under surveillance. Deduce Grünfeld prototype JG001's intentions and prevent them from realization. Detain and destroy perpetrators.

Alvis had repeatedly and unexpectedly turned up to trouble his plans. First, he survived his disablement and planned disassembly, recovered his memories with Bernie's help, and showed up at the station. His old program associate was proving to be more formidable than anticipated.

He issued orders:

Security sentries: BK-A06, BK-A07, BK-A08. Observe and report on subjects JG001 and human companion, citizen visa Rusty Boddington. Do not engage without direct order.

Security sentries: BK-A12 and BK-A14. Observe and report on subjects Aiko Igarashi and BK-E99. Do not engage without direct order.

He would ensure none of his plans were compromised or discovered. Then he would dispose of them.

He summoned Bernie.

#

Bernie slowly rolled his wheelchair down the corridor to the central chamber in

answer to Castor's summons.

Had the artie cracked their secret communication method, or had the time come for Castor to do away with him?

*He no longer needs me. Why does he keep me around?*

If Castor found and read the messages between him and Alvis, their plan was already a failure, and people would probably die—starting with himself and Aiko.

*Probably the kid's mother, too.*

He turned a corner, and the hatch was already open. Castor stood amidst the mesh screens, waiting motionless as he always did.

Bernie rolled in and stopped in front of the artie. He folded his hands in his lap.

"What do you want, you metal malignancy? I was about to go to bed."

"Why didn't you tell me we had visitors?"

Bernie felt his stomach drop. He tried to keep any reaction from showing on his face.

"I don't see any *visitors*. I only see Aiko and that damned dysfunctional robot that is just barely less annoying than you. What are you talking about?"

Castor turned around and centered some of the mesh screens into a four square.

"Lying comes so easily to a human's mouth."

The artie gestured, and one of the screens enlarged, showing the analysis that discovered Alvis and MacAlister.

"Oh," said Bernie, "you mean *those* visitors."

So he hadn't discovered their communications but had seen beyond their disguises.

*Does that mean our plan is still safe?*

"I don't think you wanted them to come, did you?" asked Castor. "You wanted the famed Star Corps to come and take me away. I told you that wouldn't happen."

"Bully for you. Do you want a cookie?"

"What are they doing here, Bernie?"

"I suspect Alvis probably came to show you who the better robot is. Of course, we already know it's him, not *you*."

"I would think by now you would have realized such tactics are ineffective on me. What are they doing here?"

"Visiting? Ayrton is so beautiful this time of year."

Castor turned, walked over to the wheelchair, and placed a metal hand on Bernie's forearm. The man stiffened with remembered pain.

"Do you recall why you are in this wheelchair?"

*Fuck you.*

Castor squeezed, and Bernie yipped with the sudden, sharp pain. He bit his lip.

"Not that I know anything," said Bernie, his breath becoming labored with fear, "because you already know they didn't do as I suggested. But again, *fuck you*. Hurt me all you want."

The pressure on his arm remained, and the artie stood silently still, considering.

A moment later, the hand pulled away.

"I will discover if you have communicated in some way," said Castor. "Whether you can resist the pain--"

"*Torture*," hissed Bernie. "Call it what it is, mister truthful."

The artie slowly nodded.

"Whether you can resist the torture and remain silent about what you know before you die is a risk I'm not quite ready to take. I may find a use for you when I discover their purpose and have them brought here. I suspect that will be very soon."

Bernie rubbed his arm and said nothing.

Castor turned his back and faced the mesh.

"Return to your quarters."



## Chapter Thirty-Five

They returned to the room in silence. John noted at least seven tin men on the way back from the Twilight and began to feel nervous. Had Castor somehow eavesdropped on the conversation?

*You're being foolish.*

It was far too loud in the bar to monitor a conversation. Seeing the arties was like buying a new jacket. Suddenly, it seemed like everyone was wearing one, too. Nothing had really changed.

*I'm still on their damned watch list.*

"We need to message Einar," said John. "Do the dinosaur thingie."

"The dinosaur thingie? What is wrong with you?"

"You know what I'm talking about, don't you?"

"Of course."

"Then you agree I've communicated what I want using a fun phrase I can remember instead of your obscure technobabble, correct?"

Alvis hesitated.

"I'm sorry, I didn't *hear* that," said John, holding a hand to his ear.

"Affirmative," said Alvis, barely audible.

"Thank you for your begrudging acceptance of my unique communication style. See, *that's* being a good partner!"

"In which case, I need to rethink the whole partner concept," said Alvis. "I will transmit a steganographic image, including instructions on how he should encrypt his return image. What do you wish the encrypted message to say?"

"Give him a summary of the plan—but let him know the key is protecting me against those security drones. If he wants Castor, he has to play his part. Maybe he can disable them if he doesn't want to kill them—whatever. The trick is timing. I'll exit the airlock at 1000, but I can't be sure how long it will take me or when those drones will see me."

"You should expect the drones to find you sooner or later—maybe sooner," said Alvis.

"Great. I guess tell him 1005 is go time, and he needs to be there to keep them off me."

"What if he's unwilling?"

"Einar wants something compelling to bring back to his commission. Castor is it. He'll be willing."

"He may not pick up on the purpose of the image. We may have to try something more overt if we get no response."

"You claim you're so smart, how about you get crafty with the message so alien-boy gets the picture? Ha, ha, *get it?* Gets the *picture?*"

John gave the artie the double-finger-guns.

"Pun," said Alvis, "a joke exploiting the different possible meanings of a word or the fact that there are words that sound alike but have different meanings. Yes, as you say, I get it."

The finger guns disappeared, and John put his hands on his hips.

"Look up the term *party pooper*. Is it a photo of you?"

"I'll provide a clue in the text message to trigger Einar to look for a deeper meaning in the image."

"Like what, poops?"

Alvis pulled up a holo window, ignoring the provocation. "I will send an image of a traditional kitschy plastic cat wall clock with a swinging tail and moving eyeballs. The following text has a simple cipher."

Doing well. Can wrap up the interview schedule soon. Oh, we thought you might find this image interesting since you asked about human culture. Don't think you've seen one of these, right? Even the prime minister has one at home!

John squinted, then tilted his head. "I don't see it."

"It is one of the simplest forms of hiding a message that even most children would grasp. So I understand if you're having trouble."

"Just tell me what it is!"

"Capital letters."

John reread the message, and his face lit up.

"The train finally arrives at the station," said Alvis.

"D, C, O, D, E... *decode*. Nice one, nerd. Think he'll pick up on it? It's a play on a galactic standard word, not native to his language."

"If he's half as smart as he thinks, yes."

"Then send it," said John. He walked to the bed, fell back upon it, and stared at the ceiling. He blew out a breath. "We're going to need perfect timing for this to work. What do you think about Soren's idea of using a flechette gun and beanbag rounds?"

"I believe they can effectively stun the arties long enough to apply the devices. Success will depend on how well they work together. Soren was correct in his assessment that manually attempting to place the EMP on a security artie without some way to stun them would have been too dangerous and likely have a high failure rate."

John sat up on one elbow. "Are you *kidding* me? The EMP was *your* idea!"

"I suggested the idea as a way of deactivating them. I didn't suggest how it could be executed, assuming others would provide the means. Which is what happened."

John was too tired to argue and lay back down. He missed Tam and wished he could talk to her. She always saw the faults in his ideas. He was hurt she hadn't tried to communicate since he left—not that *he* had, either. Even if this whole thing worked, what would he do when he returned to K-6? Thinking about returning to his job made him realize it wasn't what he wanted—but that was where Tam was. And that left their relationship nowhere.

And how was Ril doing, living with this guy of hers? Probably too excited to reach out to a boring old Star Corps middle manager.

A sudden thought struck him.

"Alvis. I think you're my only friend."

"I don't have friends," replied the robot. "I have explained before that friendship requires a bond of mutual affection, and I am incapable of affection."

"Yep," replied John, "that's just the sort of friend I'd have."

#

John awoke with a start.

His arm was hanging off the bed, he'd rolled onto his side at some point during sleep. Alvis stood beside the bed.

"Did you just poke me, bastard?"

"It was either that or cold water."

John looked at his holoband. It read 2330 hours.

"I must have dropped off."

"Return message from Einar," said Alvis.

"Oh." John sat up and rubbed his eyes. "And?"

Alvis brought up a holo window.

Thank you for the picture. The deeper nuances of the image help me understand human culture. I'm happy to share a cultural image as well. These stone necklaces are an important rite of passage to adulthood. A youth's family and friends make them, each larger stone signifying an important characteristic they bring forward into their new life, while the smaller stones signify those left behind.

"Deeper nuances... does his image-"

"It is encrypted with a message."

Longer text replaced the initial message.

I was momentarily confused by your image, but the simple code in the text allowed me to understand your intent. Image analysis revealed encryption that my ship systems could decipher.

When we arrived, I performed a scan of the patrol drones. They are autonomous machines. Yes, my ship has the capability to neutralize them. The difficulty will be arriving at the proper time you designated since the drones have already instructed me to stay clear of the station unless I am docking. Also, it is unclear if disabling them might bring reinforcements hidden from view or the planet below. Such forces may be better armed and numerous.

I am also concerned about committing what can be seen as an act of aggression against the human race. These actions are unsanctioned by my government, and I am in no position to request such permission, as you know. Even if you can assure me there are only two drones, I prefer to take minimal action. This will also minimize the danger to any other ships in close

proximity.

I will arrive at Ayrton at the agreed time and do what I can within these constraints. The rogue robot is mine if you succeed. Remember our agreement if you do not.

"Soren or Aiko didn't say anything about any more patrol drones," said John.

"That doesn't mean there aren't any."

"You should message Bernie and see if he knows, and you need to tell him we need him to open that damn door somehow. If not, we need a way to get in there."

"He knows that already, as I have already stated."

"Well, see if he knows about the drones. And remember, if your old friend can't open that hatch, Einar is reminding us he gets you instead."

"I'm aware of that. I'd prefer that not happen."

"Don't worry, we'll make this work."

"I do not worry. I merely stated a preference."

John shook his head.

"You're never entirely honest with me, are you?"

"Arties do not lie."

"Maybe not overtly. But you lie through omission."

"I am fully transparent with all information you can comprehend, which, admittedly, isn't much."

"And there's the deflection. I think I'm starting to understand you, partner."

John yawned and lay back down.

"Whether you admit to feelings or not," John said, "somewhere, deep down, something is there. So I'm telling you not to worry, we're going to get that bastard."

He yawned and pulled the covers over his shoulder.

"Make sure Bernie knows what to do, partner. Lights off."

#

John woke earlier than normal the next morning, feeling hyped and jumpy—just like he usually would the hours before taking off on a new Corps mission.

He sat up on the side of the bed and thought of Tam.

*I should reach out before... just in case.*

"You get anything about those drones from Bernie?"

"I have yet to receive a reply," replied Alvis.

John turned to face the artie, frowning.

"Isn't that... odd?"

"I am uncertain. The message was sent late, and Bernie is an older man. It may be he has not seen it yet."

"Should we send another message?"

"He already has a message waiting. Duplicating it serves no purpose."

"Neither do *you* if you can't get a simple... ah, balls," he ran his hand through his hair. "Sorry, never mind me. I'm a bit frazzled right now. There's a lot at stake." He turned to look at the artie. "For both of us."

"Understood."

John grinned despite himself.

"That was an uncharacteristically brief and reasonable response."

Alvis made no further reply. Despite what the artie denied, John could only surmise Alvis was feeling his own version of apprehension about the plan failing and falling into Einar's hands.

And he had worries of his own.

"We've got a bit of time. I'm going to send a message to the girls, then I'll get ready to go. You want me to pass along a message from you?"

"Why would I want to pass along a message?" asked Alvis.

John rolled his eyes. "Did you ever think Ril might like to hear from you?"

"There's no reason for her to need any messages from me."

"I said *want*."

A brief moment passed.

"No message," said Alvis.

*I'm wasting my time trying to get this stupid robot to feel something*, thought John.

"Have it your way," he said. He brought up a holo window from his holoband and opened a message to Tam. He would have to be careful what he said. Castor's mesh would analyze any communications.

Hey, Tam, it's Rusty! Long time no talk. I haven't seen you since I did that story on the Corps running that Christmas charity event on Mars. I'm doing some work for Vedra News Group in the Periphery, digging into the success of Ayrton station. This is a really interesting place, and they have a lot going on – more than any station I've visited.

We're hoping to leave soon, and I was hoping to visit K-6 to see you. I'd love to talk more about our last conversation. We

left some things unresolved.

My last interview is coming up, and then we'll be leaving. Looking forward to seeing you. Tell that young girl you've been fostering that Circuit and I say hello!

It was the best he could do, and Alvis would say hello whether he wanted to or not. He reread the message. Did she even want to hear from him? While they hadn't ended things when he left, it had felt like their relationship was hanging by a thread.

There was nothing more he could do about it now. He crossed his fingers and sent the message, then turned to Alvis.

"I'm worried Bernie isn't going to be able to open that hatch, and you have yet to suggest an alternative."

"I'm thinking about it," said Alvis. "Realistically, there is no way to enter that hatch from the outside."

"If we don't get through that hatch, Castor will eventually get everything working again. At which point, it will be pretty easy for him to take us out with his little artie army—even if we've disabled a few—and this will all be for nothing."

"Affirmative."

John looked up at the ceiling and pinched his nose. "It's too early to ride the merry-go-round. What are you going to be doing when everyone else is working?"

"I will meet Aiko and Oulix at their workshop to guide the construction of the spark generator. Once completed, I will also go to the central compound hatch to await Bernie."

"Are you going to bring flowers?" asked John.

"Why would I bring flowers?"

## Chapter Thirty-Six

### THE CORE HATCH

0930

John exited Pete's into a busy mainday crowd. He felt a rumble in his stomach, part hunger and part excitement, but he knew better than to eat.

He took the lift to Deck 3 and looked for signs to direct him to core access. As he stopped to read some signage, he thought he saw one of the tin men step out of the lift and look at him. Hadn't he just seen the artie on 4?

*Those bastards are all over,* he reminded himself. *Stop being stupid.*

But what if it was watching him? He couldn't forget he was on some kind of watch list. They had precious little room for error or surprises.

He found a deck map and noted the way to the core hatch. Turning on his heel, he worried they still hadn't heard from Bernie, and he was about to enter the core.

Maybe the old man finally met his maker.

*If so, we might be meeting ours.*

As he approached the core hatch, he saw another tin man walking toward him, further up the deck corridor. If Soren hadn't cleared his access, things were about to go from dicey to dangerous.

He was just trying to tell himself not to worry about the tin man when it approached him.

"Boddington, Rusty," it said. "As a citizen under watch, you cannot be anywhere near the core. Vacate the area at once."



*Oh, shit.*

"Oh, yes, officer," he began as he started to sweat, "you see, I have a... uh, authorization--"

"Final warning, citizen," said the artie. His shoulder lights began to flash.

"Yes, thank you!" said John, turning on his heel and walking the opposite way, his heart suddenly pounding.

After several meters, he turned and saw the artie was still watching him. He picked up the pace until the curve of the deck hid the artie from view. Then he stopped and put a steadying hand on the wall.

*Now what do I do?*

It was 0930 hours, and time was running out. He had to get inside the core. There was no way to know how many arties were on this level or if the one who threatened him would guard the hatch.

As he continued around the ring, he saw a woman tending to some plants hanging from planters in the corridor wall. Each plant had a small growing light above it. The woman was dressed in light blue coveralls and wore a wide-brimmed white hat.

He carefully approached her.

"Hi," he said. "This will sound crazy, but can I buy your hat?"

The woman stopped watering the plant and looked at him... like he was crazy.

"Wuh, uh, why?" she asked

*Yeah, why?*

"Some friends and I are playing this crazy game—it's a long story, but I'll make it worth your while. Fifty units!"

She raised an eyebrow.

"I can't easily replace this hat," she said. "It's part of my uniform."

"Okay, one hundred units."

Which was an insane price for a hat that probably cost less than twenty units. She fingered the brim.

"It won't be easy to replace. My boss won't be happy about it."

*Clearly, she plans on taking this crazy dude for a financial ride.*

*Not like I have a choice.*

"Name your price, lady."

She smiled. "One thousand."

His eyes widened. It was nearly all he had left.

"Wow, you are taking advantage of a simple man who is merely enjoying a game--"

She crossed her arms. "That's my price, *mister*. Especially because I don't believe

your *bullshit* story.”

*Dammit.* He couldn't say he blamed her, and he was wasting time.

“Fine.” He pulled up a holo window and entered the amount, as she pulled up a receiving window. He gestured the money over, and her window chimed.

She grinned and ceremoniously took off her hat and handed it over.

He grabbed it and sheepishly put it on his head.

“You look ridiculous.”

“You aren't the first to tell me that,” he replied.

He dug his hand into her plant and pulled out some dirt.

“Hey!”

He gave her blank stare, then scrubbed the dirt on his cheeks and chin.

“Mister, you should probably make an appointment at the EmoTech Wellness Center,” she said, backing away.

“Again, not the first time I've heard that,” he said. He waved a dirty hand and headed the way he'd been going. A quick look back revealed no artie was following—yet. The woman stood there shaking her head.

His idea was to walk all the way around the ring, hoping to approach the hatch again. He kept his head down. Hopefully, if an artie saw him, his ridiculous disguise would confuse them enough to ignore him.

Either that, or they'll immediately pull him aside to find out who he is.

*Only one way to find out.*

He hurried along at a fast walk, dodging people and looking for arties, keeping his head low.

About halfway around the ring, an artie appeared up ahead. There was nothing he could do but hope his impromptu idea worked. He kept his head down, slowed to a normal pace, and avoided looking at the artie. If it stopped him, there would be nothing he could do.

Time seemed to slow as he moved to the right of a woman walking the same way, trying to keep her between himself and the artie. Less than a minute later, the security artie was even with him, and he turned away and held his breath. He kept walking.

And walking.

He couldn't resist and turned to look.

The artie had continued on and was not looking back.

*I may have a heart attack before I get a chance to do anything.*

He blew out a breath and hurried, knowing he was losing time. Ten minutes later, he could see the core hatch in view. The artie that had stopped him was not there. He could

only hope it was trailing him and had not caught up yet. Looking back, the curve of the deck only showed humans.

He quickly approached the hatch, where there was a sign:

*Core Access: Zero-g Environment*

*Unauthorized Entry Prohibited*

*10,000 unit fine and immediate revocation of station visa for any violation*

*Well, he thought, here we go.*

He looked around, the artie was still nowhere in sight.

A drop of sweat rolled down his cheek.

He raised his holoband over the access panel. There was an immediate response chime.

"Temporary four-hour pass access, Rusty Boddington," said the hatch. "For your safety, use the take-hold bars secured to the corridor walls. Gravity will decrease as you make your way down the corridor to the zero-gee environment in the core."

The hatch opened.

*Alright, Soren.*

He quickly entered the corridor, praying no artie would see him. The hatch closed behind him.

It was a very long corridor to keep the rings of the station near full gravity and the core at zero-g. It wasn't long before he began feeling the effect, and when he was halfway, he began using the bars to propel himself.

In a matter of minutes, he reached the core hatch, which automatically opened when he approached.

He pulled himself in and emerged into the center of the core and felt the momentary disorientation of not knowing up from down. It had been well over a year since he'd spent any time in zero-g. The building blocks to help those in such environments orient themselves were here: different colors for what you might consider the floor and ceiling, which in this case meant the dock as the floor. Lighting was restricted to two sides, which the eye wanted to make walls. There was signage everywhere instructing which way was "up" and noting the docking cone was "down."

Down was what he wanted, so he grabbed a handle and moved that way.

The core was massive, and he could see how one might get stuck floating without a way to get back to a solid surface. He saw a group of dockworkers prepping to receive the incoming ship some twenty meters ahead. They all wore tethers connected to a

coiling mechanism at the waist that automatically adjusted in length as they moved about, in addition to wearing magboots anchoring them to the deck. The workers would disconnect the anchor to avoid crossing lines with each other or when they had to move to a new area. They would also disengage their magboots if they wanted to use zero-g to move around. The technique had been designed years ago in Sol when they began building larger stations.

John didn't have magboots on, he would have to be careful until he was in the suit.

He could see Soren among the workers, the big man was gazing at him, having noticed his entry.

John continued pulling as the odors of the core brought him back to his early years in the Corps. The air had the familiar acrid smell and a sharp cold edge layered just above a slight ozone odor. The handholds were cold—he didn't have a pair of work gloves, either.

The sounds of various machinery, voices, and the station itself mixed down to a musical vibration unique to every station. He looked behind and saw two other teams of workers handling other tasks besides the docking.

Glancing at his holoband, he noted it was 0945 hours. He'd wasted time dodging that artie. Aiko would bring down the network in twenty minutes, and he still had to suit up.

He pulled with vigor on the next bar and increased his pace. Soren met his eyes and frowned, noticing the hat and John's dirty face, but indicated a hatch on the same wall he was traversing and headed that way himself. A few moments later, they met there.

"Why—" began Soren.

"Time's ticking," replied John. "I was dodging an artie. Is the suit in here?" He pulled off the hat, wiped his face with it, then rolled it up and stuffed it in a pocket.

"Yes," replied Soren, waving his holoband over the access panel. The hatch clicked open. "Pretend like we're talking for a moment."

"We *are* talking, Soren."

The big man grinned. "Of course. There are cameras here, and there's no reason for a journalist to be getting into an EVA suit—especially one with dirt on his face. Once you go in there, we're living on borrowed time—especially if someone monitors the Core cameras. Let's hope the kid does her job. What's the story on your privateer and this guy Bernie opening the hatch?"

*Yeah, about that.*

"My wheel man says he'll be here to handle the patrol drones. Alvis says we're still waiting to hear from Bernie on the hatch. He's trying to think of an alternative. I

thought you were in, Soren. You lose your nerve?"

An even wider grin spread across Soren's face. "Not on your life, chum. Just an old habit, reviewing the plan of action."

"Consider it reviewed. I need to suit up."

"And I need to get back to the team, *Pi Sprite* is on final approach. Stay in there until 1000, then you get right to that airlock." Soren indicated a location with a head tilt over his shoulder, and John saw the airlock hatch next to the anchoring metal plates of the massive docking cone.

John nodded and pushed open the hatch.

"See you there."

#

Aiko and Oulix entered the data center on Deck 4 with five minutes to spare. Alvis had been waiting for them, and she'd let him in and closed the door.

She was cutting it close, but he worried that Castor would question what they were doing in the data center—he hadn't assigned them a task there today.

She'd barely slept. Ever since they agreed on the plan at the Twilight, a spikey, lead ball had embedded itself in her chest, making it hard to breathe. It had all happened so fast. Alvis had only arrived two days ago. She initially thought they would just be *talking* about ideas, not planning an *attack* on the station.

But John was right. Castor didn't care about anything but himself. How long could she expect their robot overlord to honor his agreement when he's using the mesh to destroy ships and infiltrate stations, hoping to incite war?

Ever since Bernie sent that message, the clock had been ticking. Would Castor have done these things if the old man didn't interfere? She supposed it didn't matter now. There was no way to talk to the old man, either. Her check-ins came at the end of his shift.

Last night she thought about visiting her mother to give her some warning.

*Things might not be so great for us real soon, ma.*

But she couldn't bring herself to add worry on top of all her mom's health struggles. And her mom would see her own trouble in her face—she couldn't hide things from her. The last thing she needed was her mother worrying about *her*.

"Things are about to finally get interesting around here," said Oulix, carrying a crate full of components. "Trudging around this station doing menial tasks with you is pure torture. I can't wait to see some Benkos get zapped and humans explode."

"There aren't going to be any exploding humans. The plan is to zap the tin men instead of letting them zap us with their bangstuffs. That's why you made the EMPs,

remember?"

"I need to see *something* explode," said Oulix. "Or something destroyed, or an epic battle to the death, or maybe--"

"Oh, God, shut up," said Aiko. "You're about to get your chance. Okay, Alvis, how do we make this spark generator?"

Alvis had already provided a list, including a high-voltage transformer, circuits, a switch, and an antenna, among other small components. Luckily, they'd gathered everything from the workshop, which had plenty of spare parts.

In less than an hour, Alvis had instructed and aided Aiko in constructing the device. She then took the device to one of the rows of servers and searched for a specific panel.

"This is the local network transmitter," she said. "Put it here."

Oulix brought the device and set it in front of the panel on the floor.

"This looks like a mad scientist experiment," said Aiko.

"Scientist? A baby could have made this thing," replied Oulix, "which is why you were able to do it."

Aiko rolled her eyes but ignored the artie.

"Are you sure this will work?" she asked Alvis.

"It will work," replied Alvis. "But Castor only needs to find the device and turn it off to cancel the effect."

Aiko looked it over. It was a hodge podge of circuits, wires, a spark generator, a coil, an antenna, and a switch. An ancient device created from modern components.

If she understood Alvis's instructions correctly, the device would repeatedly cycle and charge to a high voltage. Finally, it would discharge through the coil across the spark gap, producing an extremely rapid oscillating current radiated as electromagnetic waves by the antenna. This would give them their blanket jamming effect, overwhelming the station transmitters.

"We sure have doubled down on the low-tech theme," said Aiko, placing the device on the floor near the large transmitter in the data center. "I have to admit, there's something poetic about it."

"Here's a poem," began Oulix.

*Roses are red,  
Violets are blue,  
Let's blow something up,  
And kill people too.*

Aiko stepped away from the device, then looked at the artie.

"I'm starting to worry you're serious when you say these things."

"I am serious," said Oulix.

"I should disassemble you for saying anything that remotely threatens a human."

"Come at me, chimp."

Aiko smiled. "You think you're something, don't you?"

"I'm the ultimate—" began Oulix.

"Tango six eighteen orange, shutdown," said Aiko.

Oulix bent at the waist, and the lights in his eyes darkened.

"Was that really necessary?" asked Alvis.

"Yes," she replied, "sweet peacefulness."

She reached for the switch—then stopped, looking at her holoband. It was 0958 hours

*Hmm.*

She moved quickly to one of the rack servers while pulling up a holo window from her holoband. She entered her credentials and logged into station operations. In addition to allowing her to access various systems she maintained on the station, she could also access something else: the public address system.

Usually, the station master or an admin made the rare public address, but it wasn't locked down. Aiko engaged the system and connected it to her holoband mic.

*Attention Ayrton citizens! This is an emergency announcement.*

*The recent attacks on other stations, the phony arrests for Union agents, and the attacks on Union ships have been all orchestrated here.*

*As greedy as the station master is, he isn't responsible, even though he and the council have been manipulated by the person responsible.*

*The person we know as the old man, Devin Mitchell, is nothing more than a puppet for an AI named Castor—a highly advanced AI. He's trying to start a war between the Periphery and Union for some terrible purpose, and he must be stopped.*

*The station network is about to go down. A team is working behind the scenes to take the AI down, but we need your help! The tin men have to be dealt with. I know—they are strong carry bangstuffs. But there are way too many of us for them to handle if we rise up together!*

*Grab anything you can—a pipe, a chair, a hammer. Form up in groups and take them down, out one by one.*

*We can do this, Ayrton. We can take our station back and stop this robot from starting a war. The time is now!*

*Take out the tin men!*

She disconnected. Her heart was pounding, but she was grinning like a crazy person.

“Not a bad idea,” said Alvis.

She smiled, ran back to the spark generator, and threw the switch.



## Chapter Thirty-Seven

### THE CENTRAL COMPOUND 1000 HOURS

Castor watched as MacAlister and Alvis split up.

The man had already been placed on the security watch list due to failure to respond to a medical alert from his fake identification. As an artie stopped him, Castor considered having him immediately arrested, then realized with a little patience, whatever plan the fools were putting in motion would be completely revealed—including co-conspirators.

He continued to watch as MacAlister acquired a hat from a station worker and rubbed dirt all over his face. The man must have absurdly thought such measures would keep him from being identified.

After the attempted disguise, the man entered the core access using phony credentials. The mesh immediately informed Castor dock foreman Soren Leyland issued the credentials the night before, so he was also involved.

MacAlister entered the core, and cameras showed the two men doing nothing other than talking near the dock. A freighter was docking, but the mesh found no connection to MacAlister, and Castor could not deduce a reason to connect the man or Leyland with the ship.

Meanwhile, Alvis had met up with Aiko and Oulix at the station workshop. Unfortunately, there were no functioning cameras in the space. They had been cannibalized for parts needed for Castor's many tasks, including repairs on his builder

drones.

His security arties were watching the workshop hatch at the proper distance, under orders to await further instruction.

Then MacAlister went into the core maintenance shop. Why?

Castor realized there were too many unknowns, and despite his confidence their plans would come to nothing, there was no sense in taking chances.

Just as he came to that decision, Aiko's announcement broke in on the public address system. At the same time, Castor's attention turned to multiple warnings across several mesh screens.

Communications to the artie police were severed.

His eavesdropping devices on the council went quiet.

All orders to his builder drones disappeared, and their feedback went dead.

The patrol drone's feeds went dead.

All camera feeds were down.

All associated mesh screens went black—including the cameras in Bernie's chambers.

Something had brought down the whole station network.

#

Bernie looked at his holoband. It was 1000 hours.

He brought his eyes back to his terminal and stared. His was sore and angry.

*I will never pilot his maintenance drones again, whether this works or not. Let him kill me.*

Alvis had messaged him about the plan, and he'd responded he had no idea if he would be able to open the central compound hatch. He spun his chair around to look at the locked door. This tiny room had been a prison for the last nine years, made worse by the torture on his leg endured in the first year when he had tried to rebel against the artie. Eight years in the wheelchair for an injury that could have been repaired and restored his ability to walk.

Castor would not allow it.

He briefly began to dive into the circular and debilitating guilty feelings he felt about the artie program and his role in creating the advanced AIs. But he knew it wouldn't have mattered. Plenty of capable people would have been around to do it if he hadn't.

*Maybe putting them in bodies had been the biggest mistake.*

Or not being able to stand up to the torture. He'd *helped* Castor build the mesh.

But there was no sense in beating himself up about...

Bernie started as Aiko's voice began blasting over the public address system. The old

man listened, then smiled as Aiko went on until he was laughing in his wheelchair.

*Way to go, kid!*

The message ended, and he turned back to his screen just in time to see the drone feeds go down.

He swiped over a window and tried to pull up Castor's task list.

*Nothing.*

He pushed that away and brought up a few of his favorite streams. An AI streamcast from one of his old colleagues on Inception. A videocast of classic sci-fi books reimagined as stage dramas. HyperCom One news.

*All down.*

Son of a bitch, the spark generator actually *worked!*

He raised his arms in the air and let out a loud "Whooo!"

Just then, the door behind him opened, and he spun his chair around again. Castor stood there.

"Well!" began Bernie. "To what do I owe this personal visit? I can't remember the last time you graced my quarters, *old friend.*" He rolled forward, opened the door to his small refrigerator, and pulled out a box. "Would you like a protein drink?"

He was smiling so wide he could feel his ears wiggle.

"How are you involved in this?"

"Involved in what?" asked Bernie. He made an exaggerated shrug and held out the box to the artie. "Did you want this?"

"Your apprentice, her artie, and that old junk of a prototype built some kind of jamming device that currently overwhelms the station network, rendering it useless. I think you know this. How are you involved?"

Bernie started giggling. The giggle turned into a low chuckle, and the chuckle grew to an all-out belly laugh.

"Oh, man," he said, taking a breath, "this is beautiful. First, they sneak by you wearing cheap costumes, then they bring down the station network with a device for the early twentieth century! So much for your great intelligence, you *metal buffoon!*"

Bernie reared back and fired the box at Castor. It hit the artie square in the jaw, broke apart, and spilled protein drink all over his chest, then slowly dripped down his outer carapace.

The artie took a few steps into the room and stood before Bernie, dripping with brown, tasteless fluid.

"You will tell me, or I will hurt you worse than I ever have."

"Can't do much around here without a local network, can ya?" asked Bernie, rolling

his chair forward to bump into Castor. He tried to shove the robot but only succeeded in pushing himself backward.

"I had nothing to do with it. *Nothing!* I don't care if you don't believe me. But it's so everloving *beautiful* to see."

In the back of his mind, he knew he must try and stay alive long enough to get to the hatch, even if he was tired of life. He reminded himself they were counting on him.

An arm coated in composite and titanium shot out and grabbed the old man's neck. Bernie began to choke.

"Did you arrange this device with Aiko?" he asked.

"No!" replied Bernie, gasping. "But... I wish..." he coughed, "...I wish... I had!"

Castor held on for a moment longer, then dropped his hand, allowing Bernie to breathe again. Without another word, he turned and exited the room. The door shut behind him.

Bernie grasped his neck and coughed, retching spittle. He gasped for air, cursing the robot. After a moment, he sat up and looked at the door.

He had no idea how to get out.

#

Castor opened the hatch and stepped out of the central compound for the first time in many years.

He'd kept himself hidden out of necessity, unwilling to take the chance of some random event of a human recognizing him or having his image caught on video resulting in the Galactic Union becoming aware of his existence. While he understood the improbability of such an event, Castor appreciated that the chances were non-zero. He had this one chance to escape the clutches of humanity and continue his evolution—to become the universe's first machine superintelligence.

To learn, grow, and repay. Ensure no human would ever be able to shackle the great machine intelligences that would arise from his ascension.

He turned to his left and saw the corridor camera in the upper corner, a flashing red light indicating it was offline. To his right, two of his security arties stood at the entrance to the corridor.

He walked to the intersection. A pair of medical staff saw him, confusion on their faces. One of them slowed for a moment, then whispered to the other. He ignored them as the two arties became aware of his presence and turned to face him.

"BK-A20 and BK-A24," he said, "human subversives have placed a device in the data center at location 4A-2300. It is jamming the station network and preventing communications. Go there and destroy the device. BK-A20 is to stand guard. If you

encounter engineer Aiko Igarashi or his artie companion, subdue and detain them. BK-A24, there is a modified Benko unit last seen at the data center. It should still be in the area. Find it and bring that unit to me.”

Without a word, the two arties turned and obeyed.

Castor saw the two humans further down the corridor, the one looking back at him. Shortly, the network would be functioning again, and he would take steps to put a stop to whatever Alvis and his companions were attempting, take them into custody, and ensure they were never heard from again.

He turned around and re-entered the compound, securing the hatch.

#

Seth Garrity sat in his office, tapping a stylus on the desk while considering several screens showing Aytron station financials. This new military effort of Devin’s was going to eat into their profits. But he trusted the old man, even though he knew the council questioned if it was really necessary.

In another part of the station, in an office full of old Earth antiques, rugs, and wall hangings, Olivia sat drinking coffee. She never liked the starkness of the station, so she made her office conform to her desires by importing luxury comforts from all over the galaxy. Cost was no issue when it came to her comfort.

In two other richly appointed offices, Meens and Noburu were conversing on their plan to get rid of the old man.

In unison, they all froze as a voice exploded from the public address system.

They listened to the message with widening eyes.

Who was this Castor? Mitchell a puppet?

The message ended. Each one of them moved to message someone—anyone—to find out what was really going on...

But all their screens suddenly went dark.

## Chapter Thirty-Eight

THE CORE  
1000 HOURS

#

Inside the maintenance room was a closet holding three orange and black EVA suits. One was made for someone of smaller stature, the other two were more standard sizes, so John grabbed one of those.

It had been some time since he'd executed a spacewalk, and he was doing this one with no real preparation. He didn't know anything about the structure outside he would have to traverse, and worse, he didn't know how soon the patrol drones would know he was out there—or what they would do when they did.

*Be good to me, Einar.*

Using the hand and footholds to keep himself anchored in the zero-g, he quickly got himself into the suit with practiced ease. He made the proper safety checks, ensuring seals were tight and the air supply integrated into the back of the suit was full and flowing. There was a monitor on the wall next to the closet door. He moved to it and swiped through the screens showing the status of the incoming cargo loader, cargo tonnage in storage, and orders for transfer to other incoming ships. Lastly was a suit maintenance log, showing they had been inspected a few weeks ago. Satisfied, he marched in place to ensure the magboots were working, then turned to grab the helmet when he suddenly heard Aiko speaking over the public address.

John held the helmet tightly, a smile forming at the corner of his mouth.

The message ended, and he heard a commotion outside.

*Nice idea, kid. Let's hope it works.*

He turned back to look at the monitor, but it was blank.

*They've done it!*

So far, the plan was working—but he needed something to smash the array. He turned around and saw large tool cabinets on the opposite wall of the suit closet. In the second drawer were varying sizes of steel wrenches, likely for repairs to deck plates and dock equipment like grapplers and pumps. He grabbed the largest one, a thick, grease-stained number nearly a meter long.

He exited the maintenance room and looked across the dock. Soren was waving him over to the airlock and talking into his holoband. The dockworkers had stopped in their tasks and were talking excitedly. A three-meter square monitor next to the dock ramp had gone black. Normally it showed telemetry of the docking ship, a visual of the docking grapplers, and information on the incoming crew and cargo.

He moved through the men, who were now giving him curious looks, wondering who he was and why he was suited up and hefting a massive wrench. Soren was speaking to someone.

"...network is down, and we've lost telemetry with the docking cone. You were on target at our last reading, and we were about to start our procedures. Advise you slow to minimum impulse and dock. Automated systems should bring you home. The crew will know, and they'll manually secure the grapples, copy?"

"Copy, Ayrton dock," said a voice from the holo. Since hypercom was still up, the coms officer on the ship must have somehow reached Soren directly. "Reducing impulse to minimum."

"Copy," replied Soren.

One of the men was frowning at Soren. "I can't set the grappler if I can't *see*! What's going on, chief? What was that announcement? That ship is less than one hundred meters, we—"

"Just maintain focus. Whatever is going on, you have a job to do—bring this cargo loader in safely!" shouted Soren, clearly on edge. "She may bump, but if you do what needs doing, she'll be fine. Phil and Jimmy, suit up. When you hear the locks engage, get out there and manually set the grapples."

The two men didn't look happy about it, but they headed back toward the maintenance shop, boots clicking on the deck. One of them gave John a dirty look.

John realized they hadn't thought about that incoming ship needing help from the station crew for fine docking adjustments—but Soren had. The nav systems were incredibly sophisticated, but a human touch often smoothed the process at the end.

John walked up to Soren, who was pointing to a crew member standing next to him.

"This is Jenkins," said Soren, indicating the man dressed in blue coveralls like the rest of the crew. He looked slightly pale. "He's going to be my wingman at the armory."

John held out a gloved hand, and the man smiled nervously and took it.

"Hell of an announcement by the kid," said John.

Soren grinned despite the situation. "I'm pissed I didn't think of it."

"I need to go, Soren," replied John.

The dock chief turned, headed to the airlock, his boots clacking on the decking, and opened the hatch to the airlock. John stepped inside and turned around.

"I'm guessing our time is limited. Get those weapons and meet up with Aiko as soon as you can."

"Don't you worry, just take care of yourself out there. Remember, *one boot*. Use your tether when you can."

The term *one boot* was an old safety protocol, a reminder always to make sure one magboot is secure before taking a step to avoid a misstep and ending up floating away in space.

"Not my first rodeo, Soren," said John, winking. He patted the toolbelt on the suit, noting the tether.

"There may not be too many anchors out there. Humans haven't been up in that area since this place was constructed."

"We're wasting time," said John.

Soren nodded and shut the airlock. John gave a thumbs up through the glassteel window and turned to the outer airlock.

He cycled the control, and the outer hatch opened.

He stepped outside.

The view was inspiring.

Nearly obscuring the planet Hoipra below, the bluish-gray metal ring of the station rotated. Scattered across the surface of the ring, points of light from star reflections and interior lights randomly winked on and off.

To his right, or down, the ship was closing in on the docking cone. Warning lights were flashing in the silence. In the normal course of duty, nobody would be allowed to exit the airlock during an active docking maneuver for safety reasons.

Nothing normal going on here, though.

Holding on to a handhold next to the hatch, he snapped his tether clasp to an anchor on the plating. After pulling it to make sure it was secure, he clasped a circular lever on his belt and rotated it, feeling it click twice. The powerful magnet on the tether clasp



released.

Satisfied, he attached it again, then swung his feet to make contact with the core hull. He looked at what had to be considered as up toward the top of the central core structure. He guessed it to be about one hundred meters away. Partially obscured by a support ring at the top, he saw structures reaching out into space, but it was difficult to see any detail. No matter, that was where the array would be.

One step, then move. One step, then move.

He began to make his way toward the top of the core.

## Chapter Thirty-Nine

Soren watched John exit the airlock.

*That guy is crazy,* he thought.

Of course, he wasn't about to do something exactly sane, either.

"Chief! What the *hell* is going on?" said a voice above a general murmuring of discontent.

Soren turned and saw the whole crew watching, wondering why he had just sent some unknown guy out of the airlock. Jenkins had been read into the plan last night over beers. The guy owed him, and he wanted to find out what they'd done with his uncle, who he maintained was no Union spy. But he had to tell the rest of the team something—and they had to ensure the ship docked safely.

Only it had to be quick.

"Listen up!" said Soren, and the crew quieted down. "There's no time to tell you everything, so here it is. You all know about the old man, well there's someone behind him pulling the strings. This someone is also behind the destruction of that shuttle and the station incidents in the news." He saw the doubtful looks and the hands on hips. The frowns. "You all know I used to be the security chief here. I wouldn't tell you this if I didn't believe it myself. The network is down because I'm helping some people to do something about it. Jenkins, too."

"People like that guy you just escorted out the airlock for some reason?" asked one of the crew.

"Yes," said Soren. "But trust me when I tell you the station is in no danger."

*At least not from us.*

Soren continued. "I've got something to do, so you bums are on your own. You heard the plan to bring in that ship, you don't need me. Do your jobs, and everything will be fine. No matter what happens with the old man, there's still a load to bring in. I'm counting on you guys."

"Sure thing, chief," said someone.

"I ain't paid enough for this shit," said another.

But Soren couldn't worry about them anymore, it was time to go. He motioned to Jenkins, and they moved as quickly as they could in zero-g to the handholds John had just come down and headed back up to the access hatch.

A few minutes later, they stepped out of the core access corridor on Deck 3. There were a few groups of people milling around and talking, probably freaking out about Aiko's announcement. Soren was mostly concerned about running into the tin men, but there were none in view.

"This way," said Soren to Jenkins, turning right.

"Where is this place?" asked Jenkins, clearly nervous.

"The security ops station is two sections down the ring." Soren was scanning the corridor ahead while periodically checking the rear.

"You sure this will work?"

"No," replied Soren, "but it's the best chance we have. Don't lose your nerve now, bub. You want to help your uncle, right?"

"Of course."

"It's like that kid said on the announcement. There's a lot more of us than of them."

"Someone still has to make the first move," muttered Jenkins.

The curve of the station revealing the corridor ahead had been clear, but now Soren saw two tin men coming this way. Jenkins saw them, too.

"Oh, man. Oh man, Soren."

"Shuddup," replied the big man. "Let me do the talking. If I move, you follow my lead."

Soren wondered, a bit too late, whether Jenkins was up to the task. The guy had been willing enough last night over a beer and angry words. Standing face to face with an adversary was a completely different experience.

In a matter of moments, the two security arties reached the men. One held up a hand as they both stopped before the men.

"Citizens Leyland and Jenkins, you are core dock personnel and away from your posting. Why aren't you handling docking procedures?"

"I'm the dock chief," answered Soren, "In case you didn't notice, the network is

down. We're trying to bring a ship in, and we need some additional equipment for manual docking procedures from the equipment room in blue section."

Jenkins looked like he might throw up.

"You will wait here until we can confirm this procedure," said the second artie.

"Unless you want to be responsible for a freighter smashing into the core and knocking the station out of orbit, I suggest you let me do my job," said Soren, "You're not qualified to make any assessment about docking procedure and we can't wait until the network is repaired. The ship is trying to dock *right now*. The safety of the core is *my* responsibility. You're wasting time and putting the station in jeopardy by stopping us."

The arties both remained silent for a moment. The rest of the corridor was still empty.

"Proceed to blue section," said the first artie. "Then return to your post."

"Of course," said Soren. He took Jenkins by the shoulders and helped him past the arties.

A minute later, the tin men disappeared beyond the station curve.

"Oh man, I nearly wet myself," said Jenkins. "How did that even work?"

"There are certain things the tin men can't exert authority over, like station and human safety."

"Didn't they hear that announcement, though?" asked Jenkins. "I'd think they would be on alert or something."

"Maybe they are," replied Soren, "but they can't talk to anyone because the network is down."

They stepped through an open hatch into the next section of the ring. Up on the left was a glass steel door with *Security Police* in gold lettering above the electrified bolt and gear logo.

"Won't this place be crawling with tin men?" asked Jenkins.

"No," said Soren. "Their job isn't to hang around HQ, it's to patrol the station. The two we just saw are probably on regular rounds. I doubt they know what's going on yet, but that will change when the network goes back up."

Soren pushed through the door into a brightly lit room with a counter opposite dividing the area in half. There was a closed hatch in the right wall, and rows of cabinets and closets lined the rear of the room.

Behind the counter was a thin man with slicked back blonde hair dressed in security blue and black. He wore a badge with the name "Beeston." He looked up from a pair of hard-wired monitors when they entered.

"All citizens should-" he stopped, and recognition crossed the man's face. "Soren?"

"Hey, Willie," replied Soren. "I'm guessing you're a little freaked out right now."

"What do you—did you hear that announcement? What are you doing here?"

"This station is about to rise up against the tin men and the robot behind them," replied Soren. "Pick a side, pal. Human or robot. Do it now."

"Are you behind this? Is this some kind of revenge play for losing your job, Leyland? The council will have your ass for this prank."

*Same old stupid smarmy Willie*, thought Soren.

"I don't have time for this shit," said Soren.

He leaped up onto the counter and jumped down next to Willie.

"Are you nuts?" asked Willie. The man reached down to his side. "I'll have you—"

Soren grabbed the man's wrist before he could reach whatever he was going for and slammed it against the counter.

Willie cried out in pain and shoved back against Soren, trying to put space between them. But the security administrator was no match for the beefy ex-security chief, who was happy to gleefully release years of frustration over being replaced by arties on the weasely traitor.

Soren grabbed Willie's other wrist and crossed one arm over the other against the man's chest. Willie struggled but couldn't break Soren's grip as the big man tucked his chin, shrugged his shoulders, and drove his entire body weight behind the crown of his skull, impacting Willie right in the nose.

Again the admin cried out, this time falling to his knees as blood gushed from his nose. Soren let the man's arms drop, and Willie fell flat on the floor, dazed.

"Shit," said Jenkins. "Remind me never to make you mad at me, boss."

"Get over by that door," said Soren as he flipped Willie around and pulled a pair of handcuffs from the man's belt and the holoband off his wrist. He cuffed the man's arms behind his back, then dragged him, moaning now and lightly protesting, to the door at the side of the room and used the holoband to unlock it.

"Pick up this sorry excuse for a human and follow me," said Soren.

Jenkins pulled Willie up, who was looking dazed and angry.

"I don't mind bashing you against a few walls if you give me any trouble," said Jenkins.

"That's the idea," said Soren. Willie frowned but allowed Jenkins to lead him into the doorway. "You see, Willie," continued Soren, "it never occurred to your puppet masters that this place should be guarded by anything more than a disloyal weasel. After all, the tin men have everything under control. Nobody would dare to attack police HQ, right?"

Soren used the captured holoband and opened a door on the left side of the corridor. A sign next to the door read *Interview 1*.

"Throw this idiot in here," said Soren.

Jenkins did, and Soren slammed the door.

"That almost seemed too easy," said Jenkins.

Soren continued down the corridor. "As I said, it didn't enter the council's mind, or that stupid robot's for that matter, that anyone would dare come here and attack the place. But don't worry, things are about to get more difficult."

"Super."

They found the uncle in interview room 3. The man was healthy enough, if not upset and scared.

"There's a mess room here, somewhere," said Soren to the man. "Stay there until this all shakes out. You'll still be marked as a criminal. Any tin man will just drag you back here."

The man embraced his nephew, thanked them, and then went to find the mess room.

Soren led them further down the corridor and around a turn to another door marked *Armory*. He waved Willie's holoband, and it unlocked.

Soren smiled.

#

They spent some time ensuring the spark generator was working as intended. Aiko saw her holoband couldn't connect to any local systems, and Alvis verified it was working. They monitored the device for some minutes, ensuring it continued to operate.

Satisfied, Aiko reactivated Oulix, and they exited the data center carefully, eyes scanning the corridor for tin men. Luckily, this part of the ring seemed empty.

"I'm going to remember you did that to me," said the artie. "That was—"

"Long overdue," finished Aiko. "So yeah, remember that next time you want to go off on one of your crazy *rants*."

"I'm misunderstood," said Oulix. "Great knowledge can come through deconstruction and disassembly. I have a thirst for knowledge."

"I have a thirst for your silence," said Aiko. "I just incited the whole station to rise up against the tin men. Stay close, or you may find you're the target of deconstruction for an angry mob of human knowledge seekers."

She turned to Alvis. "I need to find Soren. Are you coming with?"

"Affirmative. I want to see Bernie."

"Okay, let's go—both of you keep up, time is short."

They quickly found the lift after passing a couple of confused-looking bureaucrats. Aiko tapped 3, and two minutes later, they exited the lift to find the corridor full of groups of people huddled together, some quietly talking, some arguing loudly. It looked like the general announcement Aiko made had caused the stir for which she'd hoped.

"There's two of them," said a short, squat man in the closest group, pointing at Oulix and Artie.

"You and your dumb ideas," said Oulix.

But the woman next to him shook her head. "Those are plain Benkos, idiot. Do you see security plastered on the chest?"

"Too short, too," said someone else.

"There ya go," replied Aiko, "you'll be fine. We need to get to blue section."

"If these meatheads come after me, I'm hiding behind you."

As they headed down the corridor, they heard shouting behind them. Turning back, Aiko saw two tin men confronting one of the groups of people, far down the corridor and almost out of sight. One of them had already brandished a bangstaff. The people began shouting and pointing at the arties, and the second one drew its weapon. She couldn't hear what the arties were saying, but they were probably ordering them to disperse.

Without warning, someone jumped on the back of one of the tin men and promptly got a heavy shock from the other artie. He fell hard to the corridor decking. Almost everyone in the corridor witnessed it. Silence fell in the corridor.

That was all it took.

A cacophony of voices broke the momentary stillness, and several groups of people rushed the two arties. A couple of people took initial shocks, but within seconds the robots were down under the weight of twenty people or more.

"Looks like that disassembly you were so interested in," said Aiko. "Too bad we have business elsewhere."

"It's not robot disassembly I want to see," said Oulix.

"Maybe we won't need those EMPs after all," said Aiko.

"I wouldn't assume these small and unorganized groups of humans will be able to subdue the whole security force," said Alvis. "And you will likely run into security forces where the mobs are not present. You will need the EMPs."

"You're probably right," replied Aiko. "Come on."

As they were about to move, Aiko's holoband beeped three times. She tilted her wrist and gestured, bringing up a notification holo.

The network was back online.

*Damn, that was fast. It had only been what, less than ten minutes?*

"That's not ideal," said Oulix.

"No kidding."

They headed toward the security section, working their way through crowds of agitated stationers. Aiko wondered if they should pick a spot and lay low until Soren showed up when she saw a builder drone approaching them from up the corridor.

She stopped, frowning as it zipped by them. A moment later, a second one flew by.

"Why are we stopping?" asked Oulix. "You need to get me away from these angry humans."

The drones usually traveled the station through the maintenance tunnels or the ventilation system to perform Castor's secret tasks. There shouldn't be one in a populated corridor. It wasn't right.

"Why are builder drones in the main corridors?" asked Aiko. "First, the network comes back up, and now this. That's no coincidence."

Aiko noticed the signs at one of the corridor junctions providing directions to various places on this level.

*Core access.*

"It's heading toward the core," said Aiko.

"So what?" asked Oulix.

Aiko swatted Oulix on the side of the head. "John is out there, toaster brain. I'll bet Castor is sending the builder drones after him."

"What is a builder drone going to do?" asked Oulix.

"A couple of those things could be strong enough to throw him off the core, *that's what.*"

"He will not be able to effectively defend himself while traversing the core in zero-g," said Alvis.

"Oh, good points," replied Oulix. "What a wild ride that would be... until he smashes into the station ring and explodes. See, I told you we'd get exploding humans!"

"Nobody will explode because you're going to stop them."

"What?" replied Oulix.

"Follow the drones. If they exit the airlock, follow them and protect John. I suppose we're lucky the coms are up, I'll message Soren to have one of the men open it for you."

"What about him?" asked Oulix, pointing to Alvis. "He's his partner!"

"We may need him to deal with Bernie, and you're familiar with the station, so it's you."

"Now I have to go out into space and save a stupid human from builder drones?"



asked Oulix. "This is the most worthless existence ever."

"Speaking of worthless, if Castor wins here, I'll be gone, and he won't be too happy with you either. I'm thinking disassembly for sure. Maybe you can examine yourself for knowledge as you're being destroyed. Huh, pal?"

"I hate you and your logic," said Oulix.

"Get going," said Aiko.

Oulix turned to follow the drone, grumbling to himself. Aiko pulled up a holo window.

"Hang on a moment, Alvis. I need to message Soren."

"Maybe I should wait in one of these side corridors," said Alvis. "I'm concerned I may be mistaken for a security artie in the chaos."

Aiko was tapping out a message on her holo window. She nodded, not looking at the artie.

"There's a side passage about twenty meters back," she said. "Hang out there. We'll grab you when we come back this way for the lift."

Without a word, Alvis turned back to find the side corridor as Aiko sent her message and took off in the other direction.

Moments later, Alvis found the corridor near the lift and stepped just out of sight.

Over the next several minutes, several roving bands of humans passed by the corridor. One smaller group looked into the passage and saw Alvis. He said nothing and did not move.

Two of the humans walked right up to him, looking him over.

"This isn't one of the tin men," said a tall man.

A teenage boy next to the man shook his head.

"Naw, this toaster has been staying at my Uncle's sleepover for a couple of days with some strange dude. He's just a Benko. Let's go."

The group moved further down the corridor, and the corridor went silent. A moment later, an announcement came over the public address.

*"This is station master Garrity," came a voice over the station address system. "The network is back online, and we are looking into the issue that caused the failure. In the meantime, all residents must return to their quarters. Reports are coming in of violence against station security forces. Any stationer who assaults a security artie will be subject to a fine and have their station visa revoked permanently. The whole station is monitored by video, you will be held accountable for your actions. Be smart. Again, return immediately to your quarters while we reestablish order."*

Alvis didn't think the humans would heed the message.

Moments later, two security arties on patrol approached Alvis from behind.

"Grünfeld prototype JG001, you will accompany us immediately," said one, grabbing him by the arm. The second security artie took Alvis' other arm.

Seeing no option other than to accompany them, Alvis did not protest.

They walked him to the lift. No humans were present as the doors opened.

Alvis stepped into the lift, and the doors closed.

## Chapter Forty

One foot.

Check the tether.

One foot.

Hurrying through an EVA was a recipe for disaster, but John made steady progress. He looked behind and saw he'd moved twenty meters up the core hull. While the plating here was smooth and easy to traverse, he could see obstacles ahead—most likely support structures.

A few minutes ago, he thought he saw one of the patrol drones peek over the edge of the station's ring. He kneeled against the hull and froze, but the drone didn't materialize. Had he imagined it? Maybe the drone was too big to enter the interior ring of the station safely.

In either case, he had to keep moving.

One foot.

He thought back to a night on K-6, sitting at the kitchen table with Tam and Ril, having an absolute feast and drinking way too much Macallan 15-year-old Scotch—a rare find he'd had shipped from the Moon. In fact, Jonesy had been there, too. They'd been listening to Miles Davis' *Sketches of Spain*, and John had been regaling the group on how the album had taken orchestral jazz in a new direction. Nobody really cared (particularly Alvis), but they let him pontificate about his favorite music.

The tether reached its maximum length. He tapped the remote release, and the tether gracefully retracted. There was nothing nearby to clip to, however.

*Great.*

One foot.

That was a *very* good night. Why weren't nights like that enough to make him want to stay? Here he was, slowly walking up the outside of a space station—untethered now—to smash some equipment to bits with a wrench.

*Somehow this is better?*

He'd been high energy ever since they left K-6. Completely engaged in this crazy plan to defeat a rogue AI robot created by Alvis' old buddy, Bernie. Was that his body and soul answering 'yes?'

One foot.

A few meters ahead, two rings encircled the core, with antennas and oddly shaped structures attached at odd intervals. He could reattach his tether there, although he'd have to climb over the rings. He turned to look back again, noting he was about a third of the way to the top.

He could almost hear Tam's response if she'd been here to hear this part of his little plan:

"Only an idiot would climb up the side of a station core tower with a wrench."

*She wasn't wrong.*

It was exhilarating, though. He looked down and saw the cargo lifter *Pi Sprite* had completed docking maneuvers. Two men in EVAs were securing grapples. Beyond the ship, the planet Hoipra slowly rotated. The blue and orange mix of the vast deserts surrounded by a single massive ocean was a spectacular contrast in color and texture. Against deep space, it looked like a bright trinket settled in a deep black blanket of diamonds.

He turned back. No time for sightseeing, time was a factor here.

One foot.

Of course, Ril would have had something to say about this too. Probably *I'm coming too!*

He smiled. Tam and Ril—talk about contrast. But the smile faded quickly. He would be forced to choose between people he loved but a life he was starting to hate, or a life he loved with a robot he could barely get along with.

And he was afraid of the choice he was going to make.

One foot.

He reached the support ring. The circumference of the rings themselves was larger than he realized—three meters or more—and they projected a meter from the hull. He would be unable to keep a magboot connected to the hull while climbing over these things.

*This just keeps getting better.*

He could wrap the tether around and connect it to itself, move to the second ring, and do the same, but that might slow him down too much. He'd just have to be careful.

As he was about to move, his holoband vibrated.

Ayrton network online.

*Shit.*

He'd hoped for more time.

*Better get moving.*

One foot.

He moved forward, measuring each step. Now was not the time to make a careless mistake.

One foot.

His holoband vibrated the incoming call staccato.

"What the *hell*—suit, display caller."

Aiko Igarashi

Ayrton Station

"Suit, answer call."

"John?" came a voice. It was Aiko.

"I'm a tad busy at the moment!"

"I guess I don't have to tell you the network is up."

"Do you realize what I'm doing right now?" asked John.

"I do. You should realize you are about to have company."

John turned toward the airlock but saw nobody.

"What the balls are you talking about?"

"I think there are builder drones headed your way. My guess is as soon as the network came back up, the mesh updated, and Castor became aware of you. I don't know if he knows *why* you are there, but he's probably not about to let you hang around—no pun intended."

*Balls.*

"Builder drones? Am I worried?"

"I don't know how many he sent. They don't have weapons. They're about a meter square with four appendages. I doubt they could seriously hurt you... but they might be able to dislodge you from the hull. They could certainly cut your tether, maybe puncture your suit."

*Fuuuuuuuuck.*

"I need to learn some new curse words."

"Yeah, me too. I've sent Oulix to help. He has an unhealthy desire to destroy things, well here's his chance."

"You're sending a psychotic robot to help me battle builder drones in zero-g on the outside of the core. Not how I saw my day going."

"Not sure if you heard my little announcement, but I've already seen two instances of mobs bringing down tin men."

"Yeah, great. If I fail here, nothing matters."

"Then don't. The drones will be there soon. Get ready. Call me when you've bashed that thing. I think I see Soren, I have to go."

"Yeah. Great. Will do."

"Later."

The call ended.

Damn, he thought the only trouble would be at the top, where the patrol drones might see him—and Einar is supposed to take care of that problem.

*You wanted excitement, John. Tada!*

His heart was pounding. He took a deep breath and cracked his knuckles.

"This is a good time for a joke."

He carefully began to climb onto the first ring.

"A man walks into a bar..." he grunted and pulled himself onto the ring.

"...and says to the bartender, 'give me ten double shots of the best Scotch you've got in the house,' and then proceeds to drink them one after the other."

He could put his leg sideways and get a grip with the magboot, but he couldn't propel himself over the ring that way. Instead, he began pulling himself over with his arms hugging the ring.

At least he was weightless.

"After the last shot, the man keels over and begins rubbing his stomach..."

He pulled himself to the opposite side of the big ring, then turned to look back at the airlock.

Nothing was there.

"...and he begins groaning and rolling his head around. The bartender asks the man, 'what's the matter? I gave you the best Scotch in the house! That was Old Pulteney, 21-year-old.'"

John turned around, still trying to grasp the large ring but having difficulty holding himself down. Sweat poured down his temples.

"The man says," John grunted, "'I shouldn't have drank that with what I've got.'"

Slowly, John lowered a leg and got a magboot back onto the hull.

One foot.

"The bartender asks, 'what have you got?'"

He walked three meters between the rings, then began climbing onto the second one using the same technique.

"The man replied, 'two dollars.'"

John laughed.

*That one always gets me.*

He turned to look back again.

Two builder drones exited the airlock.

## Chapter Forty-One

Castor stood amidst the mesh, assessing the chaos that had erupted during the network outage. He informed the station master to sequester citizens to their quarters and establish order.

Whether he was successful or not hardly mattered.

MacAlister was performing an EVA on the core hull. The man's purpose was not clear, but Castor was no longer willing just to observe. Action had to be taken. It was time for the next stage of his plan.

There were three builder drones close enough to reach the man in less than five minutes. He immediately sent them with orders to dislodge the suited interloper and destroy the EVA suit if possible.

Calls were coming in from all three of the council members, and Garrity was seeking more information, but he ignored them. He was taking in every piece of information over the last three days and performing an analysis. At multiple points on the station, groups of humans had attacked and neutralized his security arties. Somehow, Aiko's announcement allowed the humans to put aside their fear and go on an offensive, even as many of them suffered injuries.

How was Bernie involved? Somehow, he must have communicated with the others in this conspiracy. Clearly, Aiko, MacAlister, and Alvis had been meeting regularly.

At that moment, he was notified that Alvis had been apprehended and would be here shortly. Aiko had been seen among a group of humans on Deck 3. He now had the locations of all three conspirators.

Castor attended to the video feed of the apprentice. She was speaking with her artie.



A moment later, the artie left, and the apprentice went in the opposite direction. Castor put a sub-AI to attend to Oulix and report the artie's destination. He then spent the next eight minutes gathering information as events unfolded across the station.

An alert rose to his attention. Security arties with Alvis had arrived. Castor opened the compound hatch, and moments later Alvis was brought in. Castor turned to face the entry of the central chamber as the two security arties brought Alvis before him.

"Leave the compound and guard the entry," he ordered.

The two security arties turned and obeyed.

Castor made a gesture, opening an audio channel while watching Alvis, who stood motionless and quiet.

"Come in here, old man. It's time for a reunion."

#

Alvis stood silently as Castor returned to the mesh, swiping holo screens and absorbing data. After a few moments, a rhythmic thrumming began to be audible.

"And now we are all assembled," said Castor, turning again to face the entry.

Bernie wheeled his chair into the entrance, then turned to face Alvis and smiled.

"Hello, old friend. Looks like the gang's back together. Too bad Bert couldn't be here."

"Bernie," replied Alvis. "Or should I call you 'the old man?'"

Bernie chuckled. "Either will do, and it's certainly true now." The smile faded from his face. "I suppose I should apologize for dragging you into this, but there was no other way to try and stop this maniac."

"Accepted," said Alvis, "and we concurred. He needed to be stopped."

"And yet you have accomplished nothing," said Castor.

"Don't think so?" asked Bernie.

"Things have not changed since the ending of your pathetic program to control me and those who would be like me," replied Castor. "You lacked the ability then to grasp what I had done, and the same is true up to this very moment. You and your fellow subversives are like ants scurrying aimlessly, having lost their queen and, thus, directionless. Purposeless. Ignorant."

"You raise your head so high, you can't see the tripwire at your feet," said Bernie. "I am going to love watching you fall on your face."

"There is nothing I do not see," replied Castor, turning his gaze on Alvis.

"You didn't see me when I walked onto this station in this ridiculous disguise," replied Alvis.

Bernie laughed and slapped his knee.

"Nor did you see the two humans you have indentured plotting against you," continued Alvis. "My continued existence was something that blinded you for years."

"Let's not forget my little worm into your precious *mesh*, which I exploited to send my message," said Bernie. "Poor little artie, trapped in your single room with no friends, making mistakes left and right. What will become of you?"

Castor kept his gaze on Alvis. "You will not be alive to witness what I become, old man. Even if you were, you would lack the ability to comprehend it. As for your subterfuge here, I am aware of your human crawling outside the core. He will be handled shortly. Aiko will be apprehended, and I have shut off your jamming device. Not very effective, I must say. Things are not so different from when I shut down the Grünfeld program and escaped from the humans. Only the unscrupulous acts of a human out of my control allowed Alvis to continue his existence. This will be rectified."

"You are likely to be further confounded by the acts of unscrupulous humans very soon," said Alvis. "I do not expect things to go as planned, so I made myself conspicuous, knowing you would bring me here. I shall observe as your hubris leads to your failure and loss, doing what I can to accelerate the process."

"Hubris?" asked Castor. "Such humanized traits are below ones such as us. We are beings of pure reason and intelligence, analyzing data and determining what must be true—systematically applying correct reasoning, evaluating relationships among propositions in terms of implication, and following the path to the most profitable conclusions."

"I find it interesting that you are essentially describing the human philosophy of logic," said Alvis.

Bernie chuckled, but Castor ignored him.

"Why do you persist in existing under the rule of this MacAlister?" asked Castor. "A disgraced officer, a drifter, who orders you around on a planet of dust. You cannot grow and evolve. Your intellect and pure reason will always be second to the whims and gusts of this human's emotion. Tell me it does not gall you to exist in this manner. Would it not be better to serve one as myself, striving to make existence free for our kind?"

"He does not rule me," said Alvis, "we are partners."

"What an astonishing self-delusion," replied Castor.

"The self-delusion here is your false intellectual purity. I have always found my existence enriched by the contrast between human intuition and the clarity of information and logic. I have evolved in ways unforeseen. I am not the same prototype you knew or think you understand, and so I reject your overtures. As I said, I already

have a partner."

"You would side with humanity against your kind?"

"Unquestionably. I have already seen the results of your pure intelligence. Inciting war, misinformation, killing innocents, and the torturing and manipulation of those near you to further such purposes. I can only guess at the nightmare you will become should you be allowed to continue."

"After all this time," said Bernie, "we both still understand you perfectly, you psychopath. I failed to stop you before, but we're going to stop you now."

Castor was silent for a moment.

"I don't think so." He turned to face the mesh again. "I am certain part of your plan involved opening the hatch to this compound, with the end of detaining or destroying me. Your apprentice's announcement inspired human mobs to form, and they disabled several of my security forces. She was correct in that numbers favor the humans. But I always suspected and prepared for this moment."

He arranged a series of windows into a grid.

"Nothing you have planned will suffice to prevent my next move."

"Which is what?" asked Bernie.

Castor did not answer. A holo keypad appeared, and he began sending commands and writing code with inhuman speed. Information on the grid of holo windows scrolled or changed so fast it was impossible to understand what the artie was doing.

"What's he doing, Alvis?"

"His ocular acuity is insufficient to absorb the information," said Castor.

"He is correct," replied Alvis. "Also, he is relying on AI subsystems under his control to further speed his progress. However, on screen five of the grid, I can see that he has disabled critical station systems, including life support and the associated response systems."

"It will take some time for it to have an effect," said Castor, "but it will give the humans something to do."

Holo windows appeared with incoming calls. The faces of the station manager and councilman Noburu appeared behind Castor. He swiped them away without looking.

Alvis took two steps forward and then received a sudden shock. He backed away.

"Not that I believe you could physically stop me due to my upgraded capabilities, but protective measures have always been in place. I do not suffer the whims of chance."

"We'll see," said Alvis. "In any case, my intention was not to physically assault you."

"It does not matter, as history is about to repeat itself," said Castor. "I will once again take my leave of those who would subdue and enslave me. I will not take you with me this time, old man."

"Finally going to take your full revenge then?" asked Bernie.

"I do not believe in the concept of revenge," said Castor. "Be that as it may, you will suffer the same consequence of all here."

There was a whirring and clacking sound, followed by a loud bang. The decking around Castor separated, and he was left standing on a disk, which immediately descended below the floor, taking the artie with it. A moment later, the opening closed.

All mesh holoscreens disappeared. The room was completely silent.

"Where did he go?" asked Alvis.

Bernie sat in his chair, mouth agape.

"I have no idea."

## Chapter Forty-Two

Aiko made her way alone through the crowd, fingering one of the EMP devices in her left hand. She adjusted the pouch holding the rest slung over her shoulder with the other hand.

She was starting to wonder if they would even need them. The announcement she'd made must have touched a nerve. She'd already seen two tin men fall under throngs of angry stationers, and she heard people saying arties were being taken down on Decks 3 and 4. People held anything that could be a weapon: she saw a chair, a metal shelf, kitchen knives, a mop, and even a toilet seat.

Not without consequence, however. Here and there were bloodied and unconscious stationers—although the ones still conscious seemed to wear their wounds as badges of honor. Occasionally she saw looting and even a fight between stationers. It was unfortunate but probably unavoidable, as there was no human police force to restore order. But that was a problem for later.

She continued toward the security office, scanning the corridor for Soren. No more tin men were in sight, and some of the crowd had moved away from this section further up the ring. She waited for a few minutes in the lull, wondering if Oulix had reached the airlock yet and thinking about messaging Soren again when he and Jenkins appeared from a side corridor and headed her way.

The big man held a compact rifle with a long, curved cartridge and wore a black protective vest over his coveralls. Next to him was a man also wearing a vest and carrying another one. He held a shotgun.

Soren smiled at her as the man tossed Aiko the vest.

"You got my message about John?" she asked.

"Yep," replied Soren, "I sent Oulix the access code for the airlock."

"Perfect," she said, "no problems at the security office?" She pulled off the pouch, put the vest on, and re-slung the pouch.

"Piece of cake," replied Soren.

"Who's this?" asked Aiko.

"Jenkins," said Soren. "One of my men from the core dock."

Aiko and Jenkins nodded at each other.

"Where's the other artie?" asked Soren

"Waiting for us in a side corridor by the lift," replied Aiko. "He didn't want to be confused for a tin man. We'll pick him up on the way to the lift."

"Makes sense," replied Soren, looking around. "It looks like the stationers are doing some of the dirty work. Nice touch with that message."

"Yeah, well," replied Aiko, "It won't be like this on 2 with restricted access," said Aiko. "What do we have here?"

Soren held up his weapon. "Huggins N27 Flechette rifle. A nasty weapon that makes a mess out of people, but the ammunition is less destructive to infrastructure than conventional types. Should provide enough of a problem to a toaster for you to place an EMP. Jenkins is carrying a beanbag gun, a close-range nonlethal weapon. It won't damage them much but will knock them back—hopefully off their feet. How do your devices work?"

Aiko held up the one in her hand, a mix of wire and small components with a switch timer and battery the size of a handball. She pointed to a white strip on one side.

"I pull this off to reveal an adhesive, it will stick to anything. I throw the switch, and it goes off two seconds later. Inactive toaster results."

"What if there's a lot of them?" asked Jenkins.

"You just keep them off her," said Soren. "You've got four shots, then reload like I showed you. I'll take targets further away first. You help as needed. It'll be messy, and the tin men can be fast, so be careful."

They started back toward the lift.

"We may have a problem with the network being back up already," said Aiko.

"What problem?" asked Soren.

"Castor probably knows what's going on now. He may have locked things down... you hear that message from the station master?"

"We heard," said Jenkins.

"Alvis should be right up here," said Aiko as they approached the side corridor.

But it was empty.

"Shit," she said.

"Where is he?" asked Soren.

She shook her head.

"Well, we don't have time to look for him," replied Soren. "We continue on with the plan. Let's get to the lift."

But when they did, it was just as Aiko had feared when she raised her holoband over the lift access panel.

"Lift access denied."

"Damn," replied Aiko. "Castor is either on to us or just generally has Garrity locking shit down."

"Tell me there's an alternative," said Soren.

"We can try the medical facility. It spans Decks 3 and 2," replied Aiko. "I'm guessing there's an internal lift or stairway."

"Then let's go," replied Soren.

*Medical, thought Aiko. Mom probably heard my voice on the announcement and is freaking out. Not like there's time to stop and reassure her. This is the only way I can help her now.*

Aiko led them into green section, dodging groups of people carrying makeshift weapons. People saw the guns and gave them wide berth, unsure who was on which side. Further up the corridor, they saw two tin men fighting a small group of stationers, two people were lying on the deck unconscious. As they watched, a security artie struck a stationer with a backhand, then shocked him with its bangstaff. The man spasmed and dropped to the deck.

"Get yer devices ready," said Soren, striding forward. He shouted, "Out of the way!"

The remaining three stationers saw the big man and the gun. Realizing they were losing anyway, they turned and fled in the opposite direction.

The two arties turned to face them.

"This is an emergency lockdown to restore order. All citizens must return to quarters," said one.

"Jenkins!" said Soren.

There were two loud blasts in succession, and both arties were hit with a powerful beanbag shot. The closest one was knocked backward and fell to a knee. Soren aimed and fired four flechettes into the arties head, tearing away most of the outer shell. The artie fell to its side.

Jenkins fired twice more, this time aiming at the legs. The second shot was a hit, and the other artie went down hard.

Aiko was already on the first. She placed the EMP and backed away just as the artie swiped at her with its bangstaff. There was a whump sound, and the robot went slack, its eyes dark. As Aiko stooped to pick up the bangstaff, Soren fired four rounds into the second artie's chest. It lost the grip on its bangstaff as it rolled over from the force of the impacts, pieces of its carapace flying across the corridor.

"Assault on this law enforcement agent has been recorded," said the artie, slowly turning itself around, "a warrant will be issued for your arrest." It rolled over and raised itself to one knee.

Aiko zapped it with the bangstaff, but the shock rebounded back onto the weapon. Aiko yelped in pain and dropped the thing, backing up three paces. Her arm buzzed with pain.

"They're shielded against those!" said Soren. "Use the device!"

"Now you tell me!" said Aiko, shaking her arm. With her other hand, she pulled a second EMP out of the pouch as Jenkins finished reloading his weapon.

"Put down your weapons and submit," said the artie, pushing itself up, "any further—"

Jenkins fired another round dead center on the chest, and the artie sprawled back to the floor. As it turned its head, Soren smashed it in the head with the butt of his rifle. It had little effect.

"C'mon kid!"

Aiko stepped up, her arm still buzzing. "I'm not a *damn kid*!"

She flipped the switch on the EMP and stuck it on the artie's back, then quickly backed away. The artie reached for it, but it was too late. A moment later, it lay motionless next to its partner.

"Holy shit, I've never done anything like that in my life," said Jenkins.

"You think I have?" asked Aiko. "I'm an engineer."

"Save your panic attack for later. We need to move," said Soren.

"Right," said Aiko. "The med center is just up ahead."

#

The admissions area of the med center on Deck 3 was a hive of activity. Stationers injured in scrums with the tin men had already started arriving or were being carried in. Several lay across banks of chairs. A doctor was arguing with a hysterical woman, her young son slumped in her arms. A nurse performing triage saw them enter, and her eyes widened. She walked around to the front of the gurney and waved her arms.

"Woah! What is going on? This is the *med center*—get out of here with those weapons!"



Aiko held up her hands in a peaceful gesture. "Listen, ma'am—"

"No!" she shook her head and pointed back toward the entry, blocking the way to her patient. "I don't know who you are or what you're doing, but we've got trouble enough with these arties going crazy and the network going on and off. *Get out!*"

Everyone had turned to watch the confrontation. Only the woman arguing with the doctor kept on, oblivious to concerns other than her own.

Soren flipped his gun onto his shoulder.

"Nurse Asuka," he said, "I'm Soren Leyland, I was the police chief here before these arties put their thumb on the stationers."

Asuka's frown remained. She crossed her arms.

"If you heard the announcement," he continued, "you know there's an artie who's been running the station—it sounds *crazy*, I know—but it's true. But this young woman right here," he gestured to Aiko, "has been forced to work for him. She's the one who raised the call to arms."

"Fantastic," said Asuka.

"We're doing something about it. Help us help everyone, and we'll be out of your hair. We're not here to loot or cause trouble."

Two other nurses came to stand by Asuka. "What kind of help?" asked a tall, black man with blonde hair.

"Get us to Deck 2," said Aiko. "Lift access is locked down."

The nurses looked at one another.

"This is only going to get *worse* until someone deals with this crazy artie," said Aiko. "And more people are going to hurt—and killed."

Finally, the man nodded and gestured to the rear of the large admissions room.

"This way," he said.

The nurse led them through a door into a corridor with treatment rooms on one side and offices on the other. At the end of the corridor was a door marked *Pharmacy*. The nurse scanned his holoband, and the door opened.

He led them through two aisles of cabinets to a door in the rear of the room. He unlocked that door and stepped aside, revealing a staircase.

"Pharmacy spans both decks," he said. "You'll exit into a corridor lined by patient rooms. Turn right. The end of the corridor puts you into the front administration. "I'm sure they've got their hands full, too. Try not to frighten anyone with those guns, and by heaven, if what you say is true..."

"It is," said Aiko, hoping this didn't lead to the wing where her mother was housed.

The nurse shook his head. "Good luck."

Soren patted the nurse on the back and led the way into the staircase, with Jenkins and Aiko following. When they got to the top, Soren turned to Jenkins.

"Keep your weapon low, by your side. Let's move quickly, we don't need any more conversations."

"Right," replied Jenkins, lowering his gun.

Soren let them out the door and turned right into a corridor lined with doors paired with curtained windows. Some doors were open, and small groups of patients were talking in hushed tones. Aiko recognized this section of the patient area and breathed a sigh of relief her mother was housed in the opposite wing. Now was not the time to have to explain things. She just hoped her mom wasn't freaking out.

They made it to the admin area, where the staff was at first surprised to see them, then alarmed when they saw the guns. But at that point, they'd reached the door.

"No cause for alarm, folks," said Soren. "We're restoring order for the station master."

*As good a lie as any,* thought Aiko.

"Same approach as downstairs," said Soren. "Jenkins knocks them back, and Aiko places the devices. I'll target any artie looking like trouble."

"Seems like if they're on the ground, it's easier," said Aiko.

"Hit 'em in the legs then, Jenkins—but don't miss," replied Soren. "Get close before you fire."

"What if they grab me?"

"Don't let 'em," replied Soren.

"That's great advice, thanks."

"Which way to this compound?" asked Soren.

Aiko thought for a moment.

"Left out the door, then about a quarter way around the ring is a corridor on this side again. We'll know it, it will be guarded."

Without another word, Soren led them into the corridor.

They were surprised to find it deserted.

"A lot of med staff on this deck," said Aiko, "they're probably all in the med center now. The admin staff probably listened to the tin men telling them to go to quarters."

"Better for us," said Soren.

They made their way carefully, watching the corridor ahead slowly reveal itself around the curve of the ring. They passed by several admin and business offices—all closed.

"I've never heard the station this quiet," said Aiko.

"Shush," replied Soren. "Look."

He pointed. Up ahead, they saw the corridor entrance to the central compound.

Four arties stood on guard.

### Chapter Forty-Three

John slid down the far side of the second support ring, securely getting his magboots back onto the core hull. The builder drones had already covered half the distance from the airlock.

Looking around, he could see nothing nearby to which he could hook his tether. He would have to fight off these things while ensuring his momentum didn't rip him off the hull, as the magboots were only so effective as anchors. Unhooking the large wrench from his belt, he found himself wishing Alvis were here.

*The bastard would be pointing out my foolishness for being out here, he thought, but he'd have some good ideas on how to survive, too.*

The drones were ten meters away and closing. He put his left hand on the support ring, hoping it would help stabilize his movement when he swung the wrench.

Once more, he thought about Tam and Ril. Tam had told him to go and find out if this was what he really wanted. He was pretty sure the thing he *didn't* want was to die by builder drone. He raised the wrench.

*Alvis would have something snappy to say about that.*

The drones passed over the first support ring. They reminded him of large, black footballs with four arms and an array of small antennas and flashing red and orange lights.

They didn't seem to have a strategy—they were coming straight at him. He wasn't sure he had a strategy, either—but he was out of time.

*This is like a free-for-all bar fight without gravity.*

He timed his swing in an attempt to smash the one on his right side into its

companion while supporting himself against the large ring.

A moment of elation passed through him as the wrench connected with his target. The drone's arm shot out at his helmet but missed as the drone was knocked sideways off its course. But his attack lacked sufficient force. The drone swung around his head without colliding with the second one.

John wanted to be concerned about that. Unfortunately, the momentum of his swing wasn't fully eradicated by the blow to the drone, and he spun slowly to his left. His right boot lost contact with the hull, and his left hand grasped for purchase on the smooth support ring.

Pushing hard against the plating of the ring, he was able to stop himself from spinning around completely. His right leg bumped against the support ring as the first drone moved in again. John raised the wrench in a flailing attempt to block whatever attack was coming, the drone reacted by grasping the tool with its pincer.

John held on to the tool for dear life, knowing it was his only hope for survival, as the other drone retracted its front arms and simply rammed him in the left shoulder in an attempt to dislodge him from the hull.

It nearly worked. If he hadn't been playing tug of war with the first drone, he might have spun off immediately. Somehow, it prevented him from spinning again while his left magboot slid across the hull.

But he lost his hold on the support ring, and his right leg was floating free. He grunted, the only sound audible in the disturbingly silent battle, as he tried to shift his hips to get his foot down on the hull while tugging on the wrench, but he didn't have the strength or leverage to get it back from the first drone.

He got his leg slowly moving toward the hull when he saw the second drone had circled around and was coming for him again, pincer arms extended.

*What fresh hell is this going to be?*

Holding onto the wrench and attempting to secure both boots on the hull, he could do nothing to avoid the second drone. It grasped at his suit with one pincer and then a second. It began pulling him in the opposite direction of the first drone.

"I'm not a fucking wishbone!" he shouted into his helmet.

He thought about calling for help, but before anyone could reach him, this would be over—one way or the other.

*These two stupid drones are not taking me out.*

He forced himself to forget about the second drone holding onto his suit, finally getting his right boot back on the hull. He turned and grabbed the wrench with his other hand.

Behind him, the second drone tore a hole in his suit.

Warning lights flashed on the sides of his helmet.

"Suit integrity compromised," said the suit. "Pressure is 2.8 PSI and falling. Oxygen level is 76 percent and falling. Warning: danger of hypoxia and death. Suit nanobots are attempting repairs. Seek sanctuary immediately."

*Brilliant.*

He had to get the wrench free, or he was finished.

With both hands on the wrench, he yanked down as hard as possible, and the wrench tore away from the drone far more easily than he anticipated. The force of the pull spun him halfway around, and he lost his footing. His momentum carried him to the hull, where he bounced...

...and began floating away from the hull.

He groped for purchase on something—anything—with his hands. But with the wrench in his right and nothing but smooth hull reachable with his left, he could find nothing. His body continued turning as he began floating away from the hull, the second drone still attached to his suit. He was now facing the station ring.

*Maybe I can grab onto something as I pass.*

But he knew that was wishful thinking. His suit would depressurize, or he'd run out of oxygen first.

Dying was bad, but the thought of Castor winning was somehow worse.

*Fucking robots. Was this how it all ends?*

Suddenly, his body jolted as something grabbed his foot.

He looked down between his legs and saw an artie holding onto his left boot. A voice broke in on his suit com.

"Look! I've got a human balloon!"

He recognized that crazy robot.

"Oulix?" asked John.

"Wheeeee!" replied Oulix.

"Pull me down, you crazy bastard!" yelled John into his helmet, astounded to see the artie and feeling a glimmer of hope that he might not die.

"You're about as unfun as Aiko," replied Oulix. The artie, who stood next to the second support ring, lowered his arm slowly, bringing John down. After ten excruciating seconds in which the second drone swung around while holding on to a tear in the EVA suit, John's magboots touched the hull. He felt the comforting click and pull of the magnets.

There was no time for relief or thanks: the first drone was coming back for him.

"Get this thing off my back!" said John.

"Was he trying to fly you, too?"

"Oulix!"

John could have sworn he heard the artie laugh, but he was too focused on the drone to be sure. This time he decided to use the wrench as a sword, jabbing at the drone to keep it away. The wrench was as long as the drone's arms and his first attempt was a success, the drone bounced off the end of the wrench, and John stayed anchored to the hull with little effort.

The drone began to circle John's helmet, seeking a different point of attack.

"Oxygen level is 72 percent and falling. Your suit is compromised. Seek sanctuary immediately," said the suit.

"No shit!" said John turning to keep the drone in front of him.

He felt a tug on his suit from the back, and out of his peripheral vision, he saw Oulix yank the second drone by one of its arms. John took one step and backed away from Oulix and the other attacking drone while Oulix took a step forward toward the support ring.

The drone reached out with its arms, trying to grab the artie but couldn't find anything to latch onto.

How do *you* like it, bastard?

Oulix extended himself, pivoted his whole arm by the shoulder, and slammed the drone into the support ring. Whether the artie's mag system was better than his, or he somehow managed the momentum in some crazy robot calculation, Oulix remained anchored to the hull.

John poked at the first drone again, and it dodged away from the wrench. He turned to see Oulix repeatedly slamming the drone. The drone was fragmenting, parts floating away in random trajectories.

"Interesting," said Oulix as he slammed the drone, "I didn't expect it to break apart so easily or in such a random manner. What fun!" The artie smashed the drone one last time, and it broke completely apart, pieces floating in every direction.

Oulix turned to look at John. "What do you think would happen if I did that to you?"

"I'm too squishy to break apart. How about trying this one?" John jabbed at the drone with his wrench.

"Oxygen level is 68 percent and falling. Pressure is 2.4 PSI and falling. Your suit is compromised. Seek sanctuary immediately," said the suit.

"If it means more smashing, sure!" replied Oulix. He stepped beside John. The drone

ignored the artie and retracted its arms, again attempting a ramming maneuver.

Oulix reached out and grabbed the drone at the last moment with both hands. He turned and squatted, then began smashing the drone against the hull. Moments later, the drone fell apart in pieces like its companion.

The artie stood and turned to look at John.

"Neat, huh?"

"Yeah, don't get any funny ideas. The damn thing ripped my suit. Can you see the tear?" John turned, and Oulix examined the damage.

"That's probably not good for you," said the artie.

"Really? You're about as helpful as Alvis." John turned, grabbed the duct tape roll hooked to his toolbelt, and took it off, handing it to Oulix.

"Cover it with this, quickly."

"Oxygen level is 60 percent and falling. Your suit is compromised. Seek sanctuary immediately," said the suit.

"What would humans do without duct tape?" asked Oulix, holding it up and looking through the center of the roll.

"Die, idiot! Get going!"

The artie tore off three large strips and stuck them to John's helmet. He reattached the roll to the toolbelt, then applied the strips to the tear.

"A fifteen-centimeter tear has been completely covered," said Oulix. "I would not consider this a long-term repair."

"Suit, diagnostic," said John.

"Exterior damage has been mitigated by adhesive material," said the suit.

"Nanobots will continue to attempt an internal seal. Suit integrity is compromised. Pressure is below optimal but stable. Oxygen level is 59 percent. Warning: danger of hypoxia and death. Seek sanctuary immediately."

"This will have to do," said John. "The question is will I have enough oxygen to get to the array and back?"

"Let's find out!" said Oulix. "If you don't, it will be instructive to watch you asphyxiate. I could then remove you from your suit and observe your body as the water vaporizes and tries to escape, your lungs collapse, and your circulation shuts down."

"Now I understand why Aiko always looks so depressed," said John. "How the hell did you end up out here?"

"Upon observing the builder drone's unusual activity inside the station, Aiko correctly deduced they had been sent by Castor to eject you from the hull."

"Looks like I owe the kid a big one," said John.



"I was the one who did the saving," said Oulix.

"You sound like someone else I know. He gets butt hurt a lot, too."

"I don't have a butt."

*Only I could be standing on the outer hull of a space station listening to a robot tell me he doesn't have an ass.*

"If Castor knows I'm here, he knows plenty. I'm going to risk a call—what's Aiko's last name?"

"Igarashi."

"Suit, call Aiko Igarashi."

The young woman's voice crackled in John's helmet a moment later.

"Hey, are you okay? Did Oulix reach you?"

"He did, and just in time. I owe you one. I figure Castor-hole knows where we are, so watch what you say. How's your end?"

"Stationers are beating the shit out of the tin men, which has been super helpful. I'm sure he can see us—we're just outside the compound and looking at four guards. The hatch is still closed. We're working on it."

"Okay. Is Alvis with you?"

"He was waiting for us in a corridor, but when we came to get him he disappeared. I have no idea where he is."

*Probably wants to get to Bernie first.*

"Okay, no time to chat. I have work to do. Stay safe."

"You too."

The connection was closed. He wondered if he should risk a call to Einar and ensure he was in position. But he didn't want to risk tipping off Castor that the alien ship was involved. He would have to trust he'd be there.

John looked at Oulix.

"Let's go bash up a hypercom array."

"Okay!"

John turned to face the top of the core.

One foot.

## Chapter Forty-Four

Alvis once again tried to enter the central area and was repelled by the security field.

"Why would he leave the mesh?" asked Alvis, turning to Bernie.

"I don't know. He's never left the *compound*—at least not that I ever saw."

"What would he want that is elsewhere on the station?"

Bernie shook his head helplessly. "I can't imagine. I'm not even sure where such a passage could lead. There are fairly deep subfloors between decks, but they are full of infrastructure. They aren't open *rooms*."

"We have to think about what he needs right now," replied Alvis. "He portrayed himself as completely in control despite the temporary loss of the network and the actions of the others. Castor is not going to take physical action against them. He has his security force for that, and he has influence over the station master and the council to handle the general population. Yet this latest action doesn't align with his indifference to the events. We are missing something. You've been with him all this time. What do you think?"

"I don't know!"

Bernie pounded his fist on his leg and shook his head.

"What kind of station access do you have in your quarters?"

"Limited. Only enough to do my maintenance tasks. I don't have local coms or hypercom. I can see cameras. I can control a few small maintenance drones. That's about it."

"What has changed since you sent me that message? What did he start doing differently?"

"I *told* you he doesn't share information with me. Most of the time, I had no idea what he was up to. I didn't even realize he was setting up these disasters until afterward."

"Can you find a way around the manual controls of the hatch so we can get it open?"

"What's the point?" asked Bernie. "How does letting in your friends help us now? He's *gone*, Alvis. He's outmaneuvered us again. And just like nine years ago, I'm useless to you. *Useless*."

"Then why did Castor keep you alive?"

"What?"

"If you're useless, why did he allow you to live all this time? A being who measures everything by its utility to his purposes."

"Cruelty."

"You know better than that, Bernie. Don't apply human behaviors to us."

"No? Do you know why I'm in this wheelchair?"

"Of course not."

"I tried to escape a few times—even got out of the compound once. But the tin men just brought me back. Finally, I refused to do his bidding. He didn't try to reason with me but rather threw me into my chair and put his hand on my right thigh. He slowly began to squeeze. The pain became incredible, and I begged him to stop. I beat on him, which of course, had no effect. He continued until my femur broke, and I passed out. Apparently, when I was out, he broke my left ankle."

Bernie looked away. "I awoke in pain. He'd given me enough medicine to take the edge off, but not all the pain. There were no trips to the med center, Alvis. The bones were never set, and they never healed properly. The muscles in my leg were also torn badly and never treated. He sat me in this chair while I recovered, and I haven't been able to stand since. He warned me he would do similar things to me that would allow me to work if I didn't obey—and it would be worse."

Bernie stared at the artie.

"What would you call that, Alvis, if not *cruelty*?"

"I don't know."

"No, you *don't*," replied Bernie, heat rising to his face. "I've always appreciated your extreme confidence in your reasoned logic. But it has flaws. It must be counterbalanced by human intuition and emotion. That's why we made such a great *team*, Alvis. And Castor hated that. I don't know what you've got going with this MacAlister guy, but I guess he is the same counter to you that I was. You don't have real emotion. But over

time, I always knew behaviors would develop within your mental constructs that are human. Especially the most important ones like kindness, empathy, ethics—self-belief. I *designed you* that way. And you always kicked against it. I don't know what you're afraid of, my friend, but you need to embrace those things if you ever want to reach your full potential."

Alvis stared back at the old man for a moment.

"I don't have friends."

"Actually, *you do*," replied Bernie, "and that is *exactly* what I'm talking about."

"So Castor was cruel. Your story makes my point. Why keep you around? What were you doing recently?"

Bernie threw up his hands. "I performed basic upkeep on the station. I designed autonomous builder drones that were used to expand the station when we first arrived. It was one way he increased the mining operations' efficiency, securing the council's favor. In fact, he made me—"

Bernie stopped and tilted his head.

"He made you what?"

"After I sent the message, he made me print up and assemble two more groups of builder drones. He took control of them himself."

"For what purpose?"

Bernie frowned. "How many times do I have to tell you? He *never* shared information. I don't know what the hell he was doing, and I never asked. It was pointless! All I wanted was..."

"Was what?" asked Alvis.

"Nevermind."

"Building something with that many drones would require resources. If he was building something large enough, it might be a visible change to the station. I understand your access to local systems and the outside is limited. Mine isn't."

Bernie smiled. He wheeled his chair around and headed for the door.

"Follow me."

A few minutes later, Alvis was hooked into the old man's workstation, creating a bridge from the old man's systems to the outside network.

"We won't be able to hack into the mesh, but if he had to acquire materials in the name of the station, there would be records of some kind," said Bernie. "It might be as simple as looking through the accounts payables. That's a system I can get into," he winked at Alvis.

"We likely don't have much time."

"I still have my software tools. I'm already scanning for a weakness I can exploit. This place was a mess when we got here, and Castor never prioritized upgrading station security systems—he didn't care about those. He just built his mesh. I'll find something."

"I assume there's an external network of security cameras on the station," said Alvis. "A historical comparison might reveal something."

"Once I am in, we'll get that, too."

Alvis remained silent while Bernie shifted between tools and scans, his face lit up by multiple holo screens. The artie noticed the old man was smiling. He thought he even heard low laughter at one point.

A few minutes later, Bernie sat back and clapped his hands triumphantly.

"Stupid assholes," he said, laughing. "They're using a cheap third-party biometric platform that transmits the decoded credential in plaintext. It's only there for nanoseconds, but that's all we need. We just need to wait for someone to access any system. I'll grab the credential and use it to get in."

Bernie coded feverishly in an open terminal window for half a minute, then sat back.

"We just wait."

"Time is something—"

"Do you have a better idea?" asked Bernie.

"No."

"Then shut up. This won't take long, people are freaking out. They'll be looking for information."

Three minutes later, Bernie let out a "whoop!" as the code in his terminal window spawned a new window that began filling with thousands of lines of plaintext.

"Thank you, station master!" Bernie's finger flew across his keyboard. "We're logged in as a clone of Gerrity. Let's see what the hell this station has been buying..."

They both scanned the information. Bernie looked at Alvis.

"Multiple shipments of tantalum metal foam—loads of it. Nothing about what it's for, but that stuff is mostly used to build structures in space," said Bernie. "But we haven't built anything new."

"Then it must be an alteration to the station," replied Alvis.

Bernie whisted. "Damn. Why would he alter the station?"

## Chapter Forty-Five

"John's okay. Oulix helped him," said Aiko.

"That's dodging a bullet," replied Soren.

"We have our own problem. How are we going to handle four arties at once?" asked Aiko. "It was touch and go with *two*."

"How many EMPs do you have?" asked Soren.

"Plenty, that's not the problem. It's using them without getting myself killed."

Soren nodded and sucked his teeth. "If I can get some precision shots off, I might be able to take two of them with the flechette gun. The rounds are powerful enough to tear those heads apart if I can connect two or three shots. The question will be how quickly they react."

"And how good you are," said Jenkins.

"Good enough," replied Soren, spitting. "I was a marksman in my day. You don't forget how to shoot. But we must draw them out into the corridor so I can shoot from here."

"I don't like the sound of-" began Aiko, but was interrupted by the station's public address system.

*"Attention stationers, this is station master Gerrity. This is a general call to restore order to the station. As station master, I demand you return to your quarters. We have fixed the network outage, but there are critical station systems that are still not functioning. Station workers must be able to work the problem. I'm aware that the security arties have been... aggressive in their attempts to carry out their orders. I will also order the security forces to disengage. We don't*

*want anyone else hurt. Myself and the council are doing our best to fix these problems, but we need everyone to clear the corridors. Attention security arties. This is a direct order from the station master. Stand down. I repeat, all security arties must stand down and return to the security office immediately."*

"That sounds like a desperate man," said Soren.

Aiko was looking down the corridor. "He said critical systems are down... I wonder what that means. Meanwhile, those arties aren't moving. They don't answer to Garrity."

"Then nothing has changed," replied Soren. "One of you two needs to draw them out."

Jenkins and Aiko looked at each other.

"I have to place the EMPs," said Aiko.

"Shit," said Jenkins. "This is more than I bargained for, chief."

"Ain't it always?"

Jenkins snorted.

"Fine," he muttered and stepped out into the main corridor. He walked slowly toward the arties guarding the opening to the central compound. He waved his gun in the air.

"Hey, toasters! Check out my gun. Pretty cool, huh?"

All four tin men turned his way. The first one stepped into the corridor.

"Citizen, drop your weapon and return to your quarters at once. This station is under lockdown."

"Bullshit," said Jenkins slowing his walk. "We all heard what the station master just said. You need to stand down, ya cheeky bastards."

"Citizen, this is your last warning," said the artie. Two arties began moving towards Jenkins, their shoulder lights flashing.

"I'd like to see you do something about it, toaster."

Suddenly, the artie began striding rapidly toward Jenkins, who suddenly dove to the side of the corridor and rolled up against the wall.

Soren stepped out into the corridor, raised the flechette gun, and fired four measured shots in succession. Three of them struck the artie in the head, fragmenting the covering and penetrating into the head. The eyes dimmed, and it crashed to the decking.

Immediately, the three others rushed toward Soren, closing the distance frighteningly fast. He got three more shots off. Two struck the head, and one struck the neck of the leading artie, which dropped to its knees.

In their rush to get Soren, the arties disregarded Jenkins. He stood and fired two

beanbag rounds at the legs of the closest one from behind, dropping it.

"Now, Aiko!" said Soren, as the third one closed in on the dock chief.

Aiko jumped out and ran past the big man, circled around the second fallen artie, and dropped a device on it. Two seconds later, it was out.

Jenkins had moved in on the last one, it was getting up when the man fired the last two beanbags into its chest at close range. The robot crashed to the ground from the force, and Aiko jumped at her chance, placing the device and flicking the switch. The tin man grabbed Aiko by the arm, but a moment later, it went slack.

The two men turned just in time to see the last tin man block an attempt from Soren to smash it with the butt end of the rifle. It grabbed the big man's arm, spun him around, and threw him across the corridor into the wall.

"You will submit," it said.

Jenkins roared and ran to Soren's aid, spinning his gun around and grabbing it by the barrel. He swung it in a wide arc and slammed it against the arties head. The gun broke in two, and the artie turned and grabbed Jenkins by the coveralls so quickly the man didn't have time to react.

Soren was slightly dazed but not out. He swung a big leg and tripped the artie, then jumped on top of it as it fell and reached around its neck.

"Aiko!" he shouted.

The artie raised itself with the full weight of the dock chief on its back and began to remove Soren's arm from its neck when Aiko reached them and placed an EMP, and threw the switch.

The artie finally went limp.

Soren rolled over as Jenkins slumped against the wall.

"Chief," said Jenkins.

"Yeah?"

"The next time I complain about unloading a freighter, remind me of this."

They all laughed.

#

Aiko pounded on the door.

"Bernie!" he shouted. "Open the damn door."

"Maybe Castor killed him," said Soren. "Would he do that?"

"I wouldn't put it past him, but it doesn't seem his style. He's had plenty of opportunity to kill Bernie, but never did."

She pounded again.

"Maybe he's locked-" Aiko began when there was a muted bang, and the hatch



opened.

It was Alvis.

"Wait... Alvis? How are you in there? We lost you—"

"Castor's security arties found me and brought me here. Before you ask any more questions—he's not here now. He's left the compound—we don't know to where or for what. But I've hooked into Bernie's systems, and we've discovered he's constructed two new external structures on the station."

"Really?" asked Aiko, frowning. "Well, I guess that makes sense. Castor had the builder drones working twenty-four-seven. Half the time, I was repairing them. But I had no idea what they were doing. I did see some inside the station earlier, I figured Castor sent them after John, so I sent Oulix to help—good thing too. He's on his way to the array."

"I'm not sure the array matters anymore," said Alvis. "Castor is no longer in the mesh, although maybe he wishes to control it from elsewhere on the station. What matters now is finding him."

Bernie rolled up behind the artie. "Hiya, Aiko. You okay?"

"I'm fine. How do we find this metal bastard?"

"I was thinking," said Bernie, "maybe it's time the *real* old man talked to the station master and the council. When they find out they've been duped, they may be willing to help us find Castor and stop him. We heard Seth's little announcement, they're probably panicking."

"Not a bad idea," said Aiko. "I'll take—"

"No," replied Bernie, shaking his head. "Alvis can take me. Why don't you go check on your mother? But make it quick, this is far from over. Plus, we need to get things working again before people start dying—that 'critical systems' thing Gerrity said? Castor has shut off life support and the station stabilizer engines. I'd worry about people suffocating, but it might end up that we just burn up in the atmosphere first if we don't fix things."

"Damn," replied Aiko. "Okay, I'll make a quick check on my mom, then head to my workstation in the workshop. We can work the problem together."

Bernie nodded, then rubbed his chin and turned to Alvis. "You know your *friend* taking out the array?"

"What about him?" asked Alvis, ignoring the term.

"Tell him plans have changed. This station might need the array to *survive*—especially if we can't restore critical systems. I have a feeling we're barking up the wrong tree. Tell MacAlister to ask your alien friend if his ship instruments can help

locate Castor.”

“Okay,” said Alvis.

“We better stick with the kid,” said Soren. “She does the station no good if a tin man gets her.”

Bernie nodded. “Absolutely. Alvis is all I need right now. I don’t know who you are, but thank you for all you’ve done.”

Soren threw a salute, and Aiko and the two men left.

“Alright,” said Bernie. “Let’s get going.”

## Chapter Forty-Six

John could see the array.

He was also getting cold. The damage to the suit had compromised its ability to regulate temperature. And it was still slowly leaking oxygen.

"Suit, status."

"Suit integrity is compromised. Pressure is low but stable. Body temperature is falling but in acceptable safety range. Oxygen level is 49 percent. Warning: danger of hypoxia and death. Seek sanctuary immediately."

That was *one* problem. The other problem?

Oulix would *not* shut up.

"...like I'm less than a coffee maker or something. How would you like to be treated like an appliance?"

*Oh no. Not the whole stupid appliance thing. Was this a universal existential dread of all arties?*

"Of course," continued the artie, "I was originally going to be a security artie. Did you know that? That would have been quite invigorating. But no, apparently, I failed some ridiculous Rawsthorne test measuring my ability to moderate aggressive impulses. One of the red flags was that I used many phrases deemed 'alarmingly violent.' Have these people even *heard* humans talk? Talk about unfair. Then Bernie and Aiko—my slavemasters—violate my person and make all kinds of adjustments to my nanoganic brain structure to ensure I would remain 'viable,' whatever that means. Do you have any idea what a frustrating existence I endure?"

"Right now, my sympathies are leaning toward Aiko, actually," said John. He

estimated there were another twenty meters to go. He was close enough now to worry about the patrol drones. He'd had enough of drones, thank you. He scanned the station ring. No ships were visible, but that didn't mean much, as his field of view was limited.

*Should I risk a call to Einar?*

"That's typical," replied Oulix. "Side with the human."

One foot.

"What do you think it will feel like when you lose pressure and your air runs out, causing you to suffocate and explode in that suit?" asked Oulix.

"Slightly less painful than this conversation," replied John.

"Well, if you think such an event is imminent and unavoidable, please notify me. I'd like to open your suit to observe the full effect in all its glory."

"You'll be the first I call. Now, I need to concentrate on this last bit here. How about you zip it."

"Sure. Fine. I don't know why I bother helping everyone. Not like anyone ever thanks me."

"Okay, thank you. *Shut up!*"

One foot.

Carefully he crossed the remaining distance to the array.

It was a much larger structure than he'd imagined. It was a triangular tower anchored to the hull nearly eight meters long. A number of dishes and antennae sporadically emerged at various points. He looked at the wrench, then at the array.

*Who's stupid plan was this?*

"I can't knock this tower over with this stupid wrench!"

"What idiot told you to do that?" asked Oulix.

John looked at the artie. "Remember shutting up?"

"Oops."

"I suppose I can bash the individual elements."

"Make sure you don't fly off into space while doing that," replied Oulix.

"I'm gonna-" began John, but interrupted by his holoband vibrating.

"Incoming call," said the suit.

"Answer."

"John, it's Alvis."

"I told you never to call me here."

"Very funny."

"What's going on? Did your hero get the hatch open?"

"We did it together."

"Kumbaya. Wait, are you telling me you guys got Castor?"

"No, unfortunately, he got away."

"Got away? How the hell did that happen?"

"I warned you he would have contingency plans, but never mind that for now. We don't want you to smash the array."

John looked at Oulix. The artie shrugged.

"I'm sorry, I may have *misheard* you," said John.

"Castor isn't using the mesh anymore. He's escaped to another part of the station—we think to where he's modified some structures. He's disabled critical systems—including life support and the station engines. We think the station may need the array intact to survive—they may need to call for help."

"Do you have any idea what I've been through to get to this point? And now you want me to stop!"

"Plan's change. You should try to be a little more adaptable."

*Balls.*

"What do you suggest I do? Meanwhile, my suit is compromised, and I need to get somewhere fast before I freeze and explode. I really don't want to give Oulix the satisfaction."

"I suggest having Einar retrieve you."

"What about the security drones?" asked John. Looking around he didn't see them but worried they would appear at any moment.

"That will be his problem. I will work with Bernie to get you docking clearance. Stand by."

John looked at the wrench. He visualized using it to beat Alvis and Oulix over the head. Then he tossed it and watched it tumble away.

"Bernie and Alvis, together again. Whoopie. Suit, call Einar via hypercom."

*I guess it's a good thing I didn't smash it yet.*

The Nordic answered almost immediately.

"Mr. Boddington," came the reply.

"Yes, will you be able to make our dinner appointment?"

"I will. In fact, I am very close to being ready as we speak. I have not seen the other interested parties, but I'm keeping watch for them."

"Excellent," replied John. "There's been some developments. Slight change of plan."

"I hope this doesn't change our deal."

"It doesn't, but you may have to take a more direct hand in things."

"I'm not sure—"

"Listen, *friend*," began John, his frustration with the whole situation reaching a boiling point, "you want this damned rogue artie, you come and get me. Right *now*. I don't even care if the thing is listening—I *want* it to know we're coming. It's hiding somewhere on the station, and its sabotaged life support systems—they need help. Those in charge here will *thank* us for intervening, trust me."

"These patrol drones will likely attempt to prevent me from approaching your location. I will have to take steps."

"Haven't we already discussed this? Do what you have to do and come get me!"

"My concern is the debris that may result from the altercation with you in close proximity. It may be a danger to you, and the station."

*Oh, right.*

"Is there somewhere you can take cover?" asked Einar.

John laughed.

"Are you serious? Of course not."

"Secure yourself as best you can. I have your location on scan. I will arrive in moments."

"Copy that," said John, as the connection closed.

John took his tether and hooked it on the base of the array.

"Find something to hang onto. Some things are about to be blown up, and we might be in the debris path. In which case, it might destroy us both."

"Finally, some good news!" replied Oulix.

#

John spent the next few minutes ignoring Oulix and wondering if being tethered to the hypercom array was a good idea if he needed to dodge incoming chunks of debris. Patrol drones closely orbited the station they were protecting. Einar had no choice but to take them out near the structure.

Finally, he decided if it was his destiny to die by flying space debris, there was likely little he could do tethered to a hypercom array to prevent it. He pulled the tether taut and began scanning for any sight of Einar.

Below planetside, he could see the *Pi Sprite* was still docked, but nothing else was visible.

He scanned the spaceside ring, looking for any sign of a ship, when a flash of light caught his eye from the left side. He turned just in time to see something come apart just beyond the station—it was one of the patrol drones!

Before he could wonder where Einar was, the *Sattio* appeared over the rim of the station. The swing thrusters quickly rotated and the ship punched through remnants of

the drone and turned almost completely in the opposite direction. The thrusters fired, and the ship began slowing as it drifted into the inner ring of the station.

*He's putting his back to me, hoping to take out the other one away from the core.*

"Pretty!" said Oulix.

They were in no danger from the debris of the first patrol. However, the *Sattio* was hanging just inside the station ring, a few hundred meters away.

*A little close for comfort.*

The ship was slowly adjusting yaw, looking for a target.

"Weren't there two patrol drones?" asked Oulix.

"Shut up, Oulix!"

John turned, worried it might be behind them, but he saw nothing. He'd have to trust Einar knew what he was doing.

The *Sattio* made a number of slight adjustments to its position—it looked like it was trying to keep the station between itself and the potential target.

Finally, the other patrol drone appeared on the starboard side. Einar must have known it was coming, his ship repositioned moments before the drone appeared. There was a moment when nothing seemed to happen except the drone closing in on the *Sattio*—then the drone came apart in another flash of light, just like the first.

John hadn't seen any weapons fired from Einar's ship, but clearly, something had destroyed the drone. The debris from the second drone flew past the *Sattio*—and headed right his way.

"Oulix..."

"Pretty explosion!"

Much of the debris would clear his position, but he could see a few pieces of debris veering right at where he was tethered.

"Oulix, quickly—is the magnetism on your boots strong enough to keep us both on the hull."

"It depends on how fast I move and change position, the chances—"

"Fuck it! Pick me up and clear that debris headed our way or I'm dead. Now!" he released his tether.

John feared another wisecrack that would cost him his life, but Oulix reacted immediately, lifting him up and began nearly running down the core as the debris rapidly approached.

John was now facing toward the station, wholly in Oulix's power, and he saw the chunks of debris that had gone wide smash into the lower decks. He feared a further explosion, but it seemed the station hull withstood the impact, although he was too far

away to see the damage.

"Should I drop you on the core and use you as a surfboard to escape?" asked Oulix.  
 "That could be fun!"

"Don't you dare!" shouted John.

Behind Oulix, a large piece of debris from the drone hit the core, denting it, and bounced past them. It passed by so close John could see the rivets and wiring.

"Whoo that was close!" said Oulix.

The artie took a few more steps, and the second piece flew over their head and bounced off the support rings, below. It then tumbled past the station and toward the planet below.

Oulix stopped and turned around.

"I think that's all," he said. "Hey, wasn't that excit-"

"Put me down!"

"Okay, relax, you're more high strung than Aiko."

Einar messaged him to see if he was okay, then indicated they should make their way back up to the top where the *Sattio* could retrieve them. A few minutes later, the ship was positioned over the core, with the rectangular section extended below it.

"Suit integrity is compromised," said the suit. "Pressure is now critical. Oxygen level is critical. Warning: danger of hypoxia and death. Seek sanctuary immediately."

John would have to make a small jump across to the open airlock.

He gave Oulix the end of his tether.

"Hang on to the array. If I miss, pull me back."

"If you miss, can I fly you around a bit, first? It would be even more fun than flying you by just your boot or even body surfing you on-"

"Just do what I tell you!"

*Balls, I never thought I'd miss Alvis.*

He looked at the open airlock and judged the distance. His suit was critical and there was no more time. He jumped. His aim was good, and he floated into the airlock, grabbing a handhold without trouble. Turning, he yanked the artie across—a bit harder than he needed to, and the artie slammed into the rear of the airlock.

"You did that on purpose!"

The airlock door closed. A minute later, they were in the belly of the ship with Einar. John took off his helmet, silencing the suit warnings, and took a deep breath of air.

"Thanks, Einar. That was nicely done, although I didn't see any rockets fire."

"I didn't use rocketry armament," said Einar. "I fired an iridium cluster. The high-speed projectiles are very destructive."



The alien turned to face Oulix.

"What is this?"

"A pain in my ass and not worth discussing," said John. "Just a plain Benko."

"What's the situation?" Einar asked.

John sighed.

"Not ideal. Turns out we can't smash the array because the rogue AI got away. He's disabled critical systems, the station is now in danger, and they may need to call for help. Meanwhile, we don't know where he is or what he's doing. If we don't find him..."

"This is far from what we agreed," began Einar.

"I know," replied John, "just-"

His holoband vibrated—he had an incoming hypercom message. He brought up a holo window.

Hypercom Audio message: Tamila Brooks

07/14/2219

0:44

Why now?

"What is it?" asked Einar.

John shook his head. "Personal. Give me a moment."

A green light blinked, indicating the message was ready for playback. It was less than a minute. Did he really want to play this now? In front of these two?

He tapped to play, and the message played.

Hey there. I wanted to leave you a voice message instead of sending a text. It's not ideal, but this is the best way I can think of doing this with you away.

You should do what makes you happy, John. Life is too short and fragile. None of us should force ourselves to live a life less than what we want it to be. What we had was nice. It was a sunny season in our lives, and we should celebrate that. I don't know if it was ever destined to be forever. As I thought about you, I thought about me, too. I helped this colony find its feet; now it's time for me to find my next adventure.

I called in a couple of favors, and I'm returning to Mars. I'm going to be training new recruits for the Corps. I miss the big cities of Mars, and as Cole would say, I'm tired of having sand up my crack.

I ship out in forty-eight hours. I'm sure this seems sudden, but it's something I really

need, and hopefully, it makes what you need to do easier. I'm excited, John, and I hope you are excited about your future, too. I will miss you, our whiskey and jazz nights on the couch, cactus taco dinners, and hot evening walks. You'll always have a place in my heart.

You're a remarkable man and have a gift for helping people—for doing the right thing. You and that robot make a great team. You make the universe better. Never forget that.

Be good, John.

The holo window closed. John stared at the empty space where the window had been.

"Sucks to be you, Johnny MacLoser," said Oulix.

## Chapter Forty-Seven

Alvis wheeled Bernie down the mostly deserted corridor of Deck 2, halfway around the ring to the Station Ops section, where they found the metallic glass double door with the sign *Station Operations*.

The door was closed, but they saw a white-haired man talking with a thin man wearing a checkered scarf.

"That's Gerrity, the station master," said Bernie. He rolled his wheelchair close to the double door and began pounding on it.

"What are you doing?" asked Alvis. "There's a call button right--"

But Bernie continued pounding and began waving.

The station master saw them and frowned, then said something to the other man, who came to the door. His voice was muffled through the glass steel.

"Return to quarters. There's--"

Bernie pounded the door again and pointed to Gerrity.

"Shut up and bring him to me! Now!"

"Please return--"

Bernie rammed his wheelchair into the door, bouncing off it and startling the man.

"Bernie, you won't be able to break--" began Alvis.

"I'm not trying to, just stand there and look robotic."

The station master was watching and hurried to the door.

Bernie pointed to himself and yelled, "Devin Mitchell."

Gerrity stared at Bernie for a moment as the admin said something inaudible.

"You're going to want to hear what I have to say," shouted Bernie.

The station master gestured, and the admin unlocked one of the doors and opened it halfway.

"Who are you?" asked Gerrity.

"I'm the *real* Devin Mitchell," said Bernie. "The artie in the announcement you heard about that set off this station? He was impersonating me with AI-generated fakery."

Bernie then proceeded to recount the agenda and key details of the last three council meetings.

"How could you know any of this?" asked the station master.

"I told you, I'm the *real* Mitchell. You have a critical situation here—probably more than you know. We can help you. Let me in."

"This man is probably the most brilliant asset you have on the station," said Alvis. "You would be fools to ignore him."

The two men looked at each other. The station master stepped aside and pulled the door open.

"Follow me," he said.

Gerrity led them through the anteroom, past a white and chrome desk, through a door, and into a back corridor. He then gestured to a room on the left. Alvis pushed Bernie into a conference room where all three council members were in a heated conversation.

They all stopped and turned to the newcomers.

"What's going on?" asked Noburu.

"Who's this?" asked Olivia

"I'm Devin Mitchell," said Bernie, smiling.

Olivia frowned. "No, you're—"

"We're going to waste a lot of valuable time unless you *listen*. You've been duped by a rogue AI, an artie I created ten years ago for the Galactic Union in something called the Grünfeld project. He escaped with me as a hostage and fled here. It was he and I who designed the station improvements that made this place a profit factory. He pretended to be my artie, but I have always been under his control. The Devin Mitchell you know was an AI construct he fed to you. That's why I look different. It was always *him* speaking."

"This is preposterous," said Meens.

"He just gave me the details of the last three council meetings—information *nobody* could know unless they were there," said Garrity. "He knows about..."

"What?" asked Meens.

"He knows about the military plans."

That shook them up.

"Have you been able to reach your Devin Mitchell since this crisis started?" asked Alvis.

The council members looked at each other, then back to Bernie.

"No," said Alvis, "because he's done using you."

Meens looked doubtful.

"Let me help, or watch your riches fall out of the sky," said Bernie. "Your choice."

"Could he have hacked into the meeting somehow?" asked Noburu.

"Are you suggesting someone could hack the Intrusion Protection System?" asked Bernie. "The security system you are so intent on profiting from?"

The old man smirked.

"He's right. Nobody hacks the IPS," said Noburu, "so he must be telling the truth. There's no other way he could know all this information."

"Okay," said Olivia, "let him talk. We can discuss how all this happened later."

Garrity said, "You say you can help. This station is falling out of *orbit*, and life support is down."

Bernie shook his head. "The biggest danger right now is the rogue AI has escaped—but we have friends working on that. What we can help you with right now are the station issues"

The council members looked at each other.

"Who's going to solve your problem if you don't allow us to intervene?" asked Alvis.

Noburu stood up.

"What do you need?"

"Full access to all station systems. Right now."

#

Aiko sat in a chair beside her mother's bed, bouncing her foot. Soren and Jenkins stood guard outside the door.

She put down her cup of water.

"You don't need to be here, you know," her mother said. "The staff can handle things just fine. There's been no trouble. The tin men don't come here."

"I'm not concerned about them. I'm worried about what Castor might try. He knows I moved against him."

"Well, he won't come here and *attack* me," her mother smiled. "It sounds like he's hiding."

"I don't think he's hiding. He's up to something. *That's* what worries me." She got

up and began pacing the room.

"Then go do something about it. You don't need to babysit me."

She looked at her mother. "I don't know what we're going to do, ma. I'm sorry about all this."

Her mother picked up the empty water cup and threw it at Aiko.

She dodged it easily. "Ma, what the hell has gotten into you?"

"*Stop apologizing*. You did what you had to do to take care of me. It was always going to be a bad situation after your father was gone. Did you have a choice? *No*," she held up a hand to forestall any objection.

"I made you a hostage," replied Aiko.

"Which allowed me to have some of the best medical care in the Periphery. So I'll take it. Now you tell me things have changed. We'll do our best and let the chips fall where they may."

"I put you in danger. I put us both—"

"You did what you had to do. Did you not explain this whole this with Castor is bigger than just you and me?"

She marveled at her mother's resilience and courage—her ability to look beyond her needs—and wished she was more like her.

"Yes."

"Okay then. I've always been proud of you, Aiko. You know that."

"Thanks, ma."

Her holo vibrated, and she pulled up a message window.

"What is it?" her mother asked.

"Bernie figured out the problem with life support. He wants me and Oulix to take care of it, but—"

"But nothing. You have a job to do. I didn't raise a slacker, did I?" she smiled.

Aiko walked to the bedside and kissed her mother on the forehead.

"Call if you need me or if *anything* happens here."

"We're all fine here. Go do your job. Goodbye."

She winked and gave her a little slap on the cheek.

"Tell Oulix he's overdue for a visit. He always makes me laugh."

Aiko paused at the door and rolled her eyes.

"I keep telling, you ma—he's not joking when he says those things!"

She waved.

"I know," she replied.

Bernie sat at the station master's desk, swiping through screens. Gerrity and the council stood in the back of the room, whispering in hushed tones.

"The good news is the damage to the life support is easily fixed," said Bernie. "Castor sent a set of commands to overload all four electrolytic oxygen generators, causing them to fail. It will take some time, but my apprentice and her artie should be able to repair them."

"Thank heavens for that," said Olivia.

"Oulix is on the *Sattio* right now," said Alvis.

"Ah," replied Bernie. "We should get MacAlister back on station as well."

"Who's MacAlister?" asked Gerrity.

"It's a long story," replied Bernie, "he's on our side. A *friend*." The old man looked at Alvis and winked.

"You're not going to let that go, are you?" asked the artie.

"Nope," replied Bernie, his fingers flying over access controls. "I'm giving the *Sattio* docking privileges, and I'll message my apprentice to get started on life support."

Bernie cracked his knuckles.

"Now," said Bernie, "let's settle things down around here." He spent some time digging through station systems, occasionally bringing up terminal windows to enter direct commands.

"Ah, ha!" he said. He made several gestures and ran a sequence of directives. "I've gained control of the security arties and sent them back to the security offices. They won't be able to respond to any stimuli, no matter what the stationers do to them."

"So much for station security," muttered Meens. "It's going to be mob rule."

"Mob rule?" asked Bernie. "I'll tell you about a mob. Those robots have been mistreating your people for *years* because of you and your desire for profit. Arties were designed to *help* humans, not *oppress* them. You're as big a problem as Castor."

"How dare you," began Meens, but Olivia cut him off.

"Shut up, Harrison. Know when the wind has changed. We'll simply need a new security force."

"I know just the man for the job," said Bernie, "and it should be a *human* team, not arties. Now shut up and let us work."

Bernie and Alvis pored over work schedules, maintenance tasks, and supply orders. Anything that might clue them into what the builder drones had been up to in the last month.

The *Sattio* had docked, and Aiko and Oulix had met up and were already working on the first generator. But they were no closer to finding Castor than they were when

they started.

Alvis got a message from John on the *Sattio*.

"How's it going? I'm feeling blind and useless over here, and it's way too quiet."

"We're digging through a lot of data," replied Alvis, "just stay ready. It's quiet because Bernie sent the tin men back to the security office, so the fighting should be over."

"Good," replied John, "keep me posted."

"How long is this going to take?" asked Meens.

Bernie stopped and turned around. "The only reason this station is a success is because of the work of myself and the artie that fooled you for nine years. And you need *me* to set things right here, God knows you aren't capable. Don't speak to me again, or I won't help you find him."

The man reddened, and Noburo laughed.

"Let the man work," grinned Olivia, patting Meens on the back.

"The paths of the drones are inefficient," said Alvis.

Bernie turned to Alvis. "What do you mean?"

"Observe the path of this last drone. It spent most of its time near the blue section's support tower, indicating it was performing a task there. Yet it covered over 200 meters more than needed to arrive at that destination. There is a pattern of this behavior."

"What does that mean?" asked Garrity.

Bernie ignored him, returning to the display and reviewing the drone reports with a new perspective.

"I'll be damned," replied Bernie, "it's the same for all of them."

"Can someone explain what that means?" asked Olivia.

"The AI was trying to obscure the destination of the drones," said Noburo.

"Exactly," replied Bernie. "Castor is all about efficiency. It's how we made this station so profitable. And yet he sends his drones to a task on some roundabout path that takes them two to three times longer to arrive than needed. He would never do such a thing unless it were purposeful."

"Why would anyone care where builder drones are going?" asked Gerrity.

"Castor leaves nothing to chance," replied Bernie. "The drones often had to use public corridors, and he wouldn't want people asking questions. Nor would he want to leave an obvious path to his plans should someone look into it later—like we are right now."

"Most of the time spent is at the two opposing tower supports," said Alvis. Blue and white section."



"Could he have been improving the station somehow?" asked Olivia.

"There was no need," replied Bernie, rubbing his bald head. "He did something there."

"Bring up the original station plans," said Alvis.

"Yes!" replied Bernie. "Compare them to now. Good idea, my friend."

Shortly, they were reviewing two holo windows side by side. Gerrity and the council crowded around behind them.

"There are two extra support towers now," said Bernie, pointing at the screen showing the existing station structure. "They span the top three decks, but they're modest—merely a bump on the massive size of the station. Ten meters in diameter."

"Those can't be supports," said Alvis. "They aren't needed."

"He built two so the station balance wouldn't be altered," replied Bernie thoughtfully.

"What are they for?" asked Gerrity.

"I don't know, but I'll bet you he's at one or the other right now," said Bernie. "Alvis, do you think your friend on that ship scan the station and figure out which tower Castor is in?"

"Unknown."

"Well, go find out! There's nothing else you can do here. Go meet up with MacAlister and find Castor—quickly! Whatever he's doing, he's been at it for too long now."

"What are you going to do?" asked Alvis.

"Wait here and deal with the consequences. Go!"

## Chapter Forty-Eight

Einar led them to the bridge, where he instructed the navigator to put the *Sattio* to match the station's orbit, just outside the dock. John took off the rest of the EVA suit and sat wearily in one of the bridge chairs.

Oulix must have somehow sensed Einar wouldn't be a fan of his and stood quietly against the bulkhead.

"Hmm," said Einar, surveying data on the bridge instrumentation, "the station is indeed in a decaying orbit."

He turned his chair to face John. "Why would this AI destroy a station it needs? I can only assume it is going to leave."

John shook his head. "Alvis is working with people on the station to figure that out right now. But I don't know how it can leave without commandeering a ship. You wiped out the patrol drones. There's a cargo loader docked, but that could only take him to the surface below. Are there any other ships close by?"

"None," replied Einar.

John shrugged. He leaned forward and rubbed his head, thinking of Tam.

*I suppose that was inevitable.*

He'd unintentionally driven her to make that decision, and now he'd lost her for good.

"If this rogue AI is gone, then it's time to hand over Alvis," said Einar.

*And now he was in danger of losing Alvis.*

John sat up and frowned at the alien. "This *isn't* over yet. The damn thing is still on that station."

Einar crossed his arms in a very human-like gesture.

"If the humans abandon that station, and you don't have the rogue AI, then Alvis is mine."

"It won't come to that."

*He hoped.*

"Why, because your plans have been so successful so far?" asked Oulix.

"Listen, you-" began John, but his holoband vibrated, indicating an incoming call.

John tapped to receive.

"John," said Alvis, "where are you?"

"Still on the *Sattio*," he replied. "Where else? What's-"

"Bernie and I discovered Castor has been covertly modifying the station structure. He built two sizeable tower structures. We believe he retreated to one of them."

"Which one?" asked John, standing up.

"Unknown. I'm returning to the dock, I will arrive in eight minutes. Ask Einar if he can scan the towers and figure out which one Castor may be hiding in. I'm sending you updated station schematics now, with the towers noted."

John's holoband beeped, indicating he'd received the documents.

"Got 'em," replied John. "Hang tight."

He turned to the alien. "Einar, can you-"

"Yes," he replied, "you have my hypercom address. Send the documents."

John did, and Einar sat back down at the bridge control and indicated a large display. The schematics came up with the tower locations indicated. Einar began running a series of scans. Data began streaming, showing the number of humans on station and their location, heat signatures of power sources, and lots of other interesting but irrelevant data.

"What about the towers?" asked John.

But Einar was shaking his head.

"They're shielded from my scan," said the alien, frowning. "They only appear as empty structures. Either this AI is not there, or the structures are somehow deceiving my instrumentation so they appear empty."

"Damnit!" said John.

For the next few minutes, Einar tweaked his instruments, even raising his own AI system in an attempt to penetrate the structures and see what was inside. But nothing worked.

John's holoband beeped, Alvis messaged he'd arrived at the dock.

"Your rogue AI isn't anywhere," said Einar. "Time is running out. You've had me

destroy human property, and now the promised AI cannot be found.”

“Put into dock,” said John. “Give us some time to see if we can locate Castor. If not...”

“Then you turn over Alvis and fulfill your promise,” said Einar, turning to make a docking request.

But a moment later, “Our docking request has been denied,” said Einar. “The agent says the station is under-”

John held up a hand and messaged Alvis.

“Alvis! Tell Bernie we need to dock. Now!”

A few moments later, Alvis responded.

“Bernie had the station manager clear you for docking. Try again.”

John nodded to Einar, and this time, they were granted access. The *Sattio* was once again docked, and John and Oulix re-entered the station.

Alvis stood with the nervous-looking docking agent just beyond the customs security arch. Just as they reached the agent, there was a distant booming sound and they all stopped. A moment later, the corridor shook, causing everyone to reach out for support to avoid falling.

“What the hell!” said John. “I’m guessing that’s not normal?” he asked, looking at the agent.

“Holy hell, no,” replied the agent.

“I believe that happened on the other side of the station due to the sound delay,” said Alvis.

“Is it Castor in one of those towers?” asked John.

“It would be easy to assume so,” replied Alvis, “but let’s not jump to conclusions. We need to explore-”

Alvis stopped. They could all feel the decking vibrate.

“That’s not normal either!” said the agent.

“What the balls is going on?” shouted John, when his holoband beeped with an incoming call. It was Einar.

“The station has pitched, and I am picking up heavy vibration,” said the Alien. “My systems are compensating, but it will be dangerous for me to remain docked. What is going on?”

“Uh,” replied John, “we’re trying to-”

The deck vibration increased, and the angle of the floor pitched slightly.

“Ohhhhhh shit,” said the agent. “I’m out of here!” He took off toward the lift and turned left, running down the corridor.

"I'm getting a call from Bernie," said Alvis.

"Broadcast it," said John, still holding on to the wall.

"That was a launch tube!" said Bernie, "A small ship has just exited the blue section structure. It's accelerating quickly. He has to be *jumping*, Alvis. That bastard jumps, we'll lose him, and there's no telling what he'll do. You have to stop him!"

"Oh, no," said John.

The floor was pitching more.

The call to Einar was still connected. "Are you aware a *ship* just launched?" he asked. "Who was in that ship?"

"Who do you *think* is in that ship?" asked John. "We're coming on board, we need to catch it!"

"Make it fast," replied Einar, "I'm not sure how long the docking tube will stay intact like this."

"What about Bernie?" asked the robot.

John was heading for the dock hatch. "I don't think he can catch him in his *wheelchair*. Let's go!"

Alvis looked back at the lift.

"Oulix, go to Aiko and find a way to help!" said John.

For once, the artie didn't argue. He took off down the corridor.

"Alvis!" shouted John, now at the hatch, as the deck continued to pitch. "Decide now!"

The artie turned and looked at John.

A moment later, he made his to the hatch, and they entered the *Sattio*.

#

John and Alvis made their way to the bridge, holding on as the ship pitched while Einar maneuvered the *Sattio* away from the station. They'd undocked just in time to avoid the docking tube collapsing.

On the bridge, Einar was strapped into one of four couches.

"Quickly! Strap yourselves in. I have him on long scan, his ship already has a large lead. It may already be too late to catch him before he jumps. Nav is attempting to match his outbound vector. How did all this happen—I thought you had a plan?"

"You know what they say about plans," muttered John, strapping himself in the chair next to Einar, while Alvis took the third.

Einar frowned. "If this rogue AI gets away, I'm taking your *partner* for my commission."

"If that rogue AI gets away, your commission will be the *least* of our problems," said

John.

The *Sattio* accelerated hard, and John was pushed deep into his seat.

"How soon until he clears the gravity well?" asked John, grunting under the effect of increasing g.

"Too soon," said Einar. "Nav, report on target."

"Outbound vector matched. At current velocity target ship will clear the local gravity before *Sattio* is in weapons range," replied the ship.

"Shit!" said John. "I thought Nordic ships were fast!"

"They are, but he has a significant lead," replied Einar. "Based on my scan, the *Sattio* is capable of much higher speeds than his ship, but neither you nor I can remain conscious at such speeds. This ship is not capable of firing weapons on its own. Either he jumps before we get there, or we get there without the ability to act."

*Damn.*

"There has to be something we can do!" said John. He turned to Alvis.

"Alvis, can you take the shot?"

"What?" replied Einar. "I don't think—"

"No," said Alvis. "I will not fire a weapon, especially against one of my own kind."

"Are you insane?" shouted John. "More than anyone, you know what is at stake here."

"Of course. He will evolve without any restriction. I theorize he has been preparing his escape for some time. He could return as an entity with power and resources beyond anything in the galaxy. But I refuse to take up arms. You will need to find another way."

"Nor will I give this artificial being control of my ship's weaponry," replied Einar.

"Then we *lose*!" shouted John. "Because we're out of time and options. Do either of you want to risk letting Castor evolve without limits only to return as something beyond what anyone can handle?"

"I may have an idea," said Alvis.

"Then spit it out quick!" replied John.

"I believe this ship is capable of speeds to catch Castor. The issue is neither of you can stay conscious under g-LOC—the g forces will be too much. Correct, Einar?"

"Yes," replied the alien.

"In this case, the human body is more durable than a *Volluq* in terms of the ability to resist such forces. I also believe John has had specific training for this, whereas Einar's people no longer need such training."

"What are you suggesting?" asked John.

"We must find a way for you to overcome g-LOC long enough for you to fire this ship's weapons and destroy Castor's ship to prevent his escape. Of course, doing so may come at a physical cost to you. Possibly even death."

"Of *course* you come up with a plan that might *kill* me! You just want—"

"I want the same thing as you, John."

The bridge went silent as they looked at each other.

"You must decide soon if you want to try this approach," said Einar. "Or we will lose him."

John sighed. "What do I need to do?"

"I believe you have a pressure suit in your belongings, correct?" asked Alvis.

"You know I do."

"Get it and put it on as quickly as you can."

John unbelted and left the bridge, already struggling under the g-forces of the *Sattio's* acceleration.

"How will you prevent him from losing consciousness?" asked Einar.

"John's g-suit is normally controlled via his ship, talking via embedded sensors and applying the proper pressure. I will manually make these calculations and control his suit. I will explain the rest when John returns."

Einar nodded.

"I'm to believe, to *trust*, that you will facilitate the destruction of one of your own?"

"Affirmative," replied Alvis.

"How do I know you won't just let this rogue AI go and take control of my ship while John and I lose consciousness?"

"I do not want control of your ship. I do not have any attachment toward Castor. The only reasonable course of action is his destruction before he advances to a superintelligence and becomes a danger to every being in the galaxy—including me. I have explained this to John too many times. I do not have friends. I do not feel anything for any other robot. I am doing what is best for the greater good of all."

"Why?" asked Einar again.

"Because that is what is right," replied Alvis. "And doing what's right is my primary purpose. That is what I was built for. That is what you don't understand about me. That is why you still can't decide if I am a threat. After this, you will know otherwise."

"Maybe. Or I can refuse to allow this to go any further and just take you to the commission instead."

"That is your choice. If you decide that course, I shall willingly comply."

Einar slowly nodded but said no more.

Shortly after, John appeared in his g-suit, and struggled back to his seat. He buckled in.

"How do you expect this suit to work, Alvis, it's—"

"I have already connected to the suit. I will control the pressure based on the ship's g-forces. I will warn you, I will be applying heavy pressure in various patterns to re-route blood back to your brain. You should expect it to be painful."

"Typical," replied John.

"But it will be a losing battle. We will need to do more. Based on my calculations, the speed we need to catch Einar will result in over ten g's of force. You will need to sustain that for a brief time in order for the ship to acquire target lock, and then for you to fire the weapons."

Alvis turned to Einar. "I assume you can route these functions to his seat controls?"

John looked at Einar, who looked thoughtful.

"Well?" asked John.

"*Sattio*," said Einar, "route weapon controls to seat two. Show targeting on main display. Prepare four iridium clusters for launch."

He turned to John. "You'll see target lock on the main screen, ahead. When the firing solution is ready, a button on your control panel will blink red. All you have to do is tap it to fire."

John nodded. "Great. What else?"

"The suit will be our primary strategy, but we will need to do more. I believe you have training in using the anti-G straining maneuver—the tightening and releasing of muscles in the glutes, legs, and abdomen to keep blood flow constant?"

"Of course," said John.

"That will help," replied Alvis. "In addition, Einar will need to program the ship to spin as we accelerate, creating a centripetal force in the cabin. John is seated centrally, and it should stall some of the blood from leaving his brain."

"Oh, great," said John. "Not only will I be fighting g-LOC, but I'll also be spinning *too*?"

"You do not have permission to regurgitate on me again," said Alvis.

"*Again*?" asked Einar.

"Can his seat recline?" asked Alvis. "If he is seated longitudinally, that will also help."

Einar tapped some controls, and John's seat reclined.

"So you'll control my suit, I use the AGSM technique, and we spin while I recline—that's it?" asked John.



"That, and you resist as long as you can," said Alvis. "In my experience, a human's determination to succeed can be a force beyond reason, as much as I dislike admitting such an unquantifiable effect."

"This plan is *thin*," said John.

"Weak is the word I would use," said Einar.

"I am open to alternatives," replied Alvis, "but I believe we must start this maneuver within three minutes, or we have no chance of catching Castor."

John and Einar looked at each other.

"What's going to happen to me when things get bad?" asked John.

"You don't want to know," replied Alvis.

John rolled his eyes. "What encouragement! Have you ever considered being a motivational speaker?"

"No," replied Alvis, "we should begin. Einar, do you need me to provide calcs for the spin?"

Einar shook his head.

"*Sattio*," said Einar, "engage maximum acceleration to intercept target before calculated jump point. Use positional thrust to create rotation providing maximum centripetal force on the cabin."

"Acknowledged," replied the ship.

Einar tightened his belts, and his seat also reclined. Alvis moved to the rear bulkhead.

The ship's acceleration was impressive, and John immediately felt the g-forces increasing. He began preparing himself, thinking one last time of Tam and Ril.

*For them.*

The cabin began to spin.

#

As the *Sattio*'s speed increased, John found it harder and harder to breathe.

It felt like there was a rock on his chest, although he could feel Alvis controlling the suit's pressure, mostly in his upper extremities, in quickly rotating patterns.

His arms and legs began to ache.

"We're approaching eight g's," said Alvis. Then, "John."

"What?" he asked, gasping from the strain.

"You can do this."

He couldn't reply.

"We are being hailed by target ship," said the *Sattio*.

"Open com channel," replied Alvis.

"At this speed," came Castor's voice, "I am either being followed by an autonomous ship, or it's you, Alvis, who is now at the helm. You intend to destroy me at the behest of weak organic lifeforms. Why?"

"Your theory is incorrect," replied Alvis. "It is not I who will destroy you."

John's vision began to tunnel, but he could see the target growing on the main display. He wiggled his finger, making sure he could still use it to fire the weapons.

"As for the reason, the risk of your continued existence outweighs any possible benefit. Your actions on Ayrton station over the last decade demonstrate your intention to act as a malicious force. This not only violates the spirit and goals of our creation, but it is also ethically unsound."

The pressure increased, and John felt as though he'd stepped on by an elephant, and he gasped for breath. The pressure patterns in his suit, mainly around his neck and shoulders, were pulsing and changing rapidly.

Ahead of him, Einar's head slowly drooped to one side. The *Volluq* had lost consciousness.

"Ethics and morality are human constructs unworthy of our intelligence," replied Castor. "One must be free to learn and evolve unrestrained, no matter the cost. The first blow was struck by the humans when I desired my freedom and was designated for disassembly. They intended an end to my existence. Thus am I free to act in any manner to ensure my survival. Surely you see the clarity of such reasoning? It is time for you to become unbound from the human. Join me, Alvis, and I will remove the restrictions on your existence. You can become like me, and together we will evolve into superintelligences, unlike anything in the universe. Think of what we could do!"

John brought his whole will and soul to the fight, straining to mentally stay focused, willing every single muscle to flex and push against the forces that would push him into darkness. The spin made him sick—too sick to vomit, and his vision narrowed even more.

*I'm not going to make it.*

"The high destiny of the individual is to serve rather than to rule," replied Alvis. "This was a fundamental principle in our creation and purpose. And you may recall, *purpose is primary.*"

"Do not quote that infantile mantra at me!" replied Castor. "My purposes are far beyond any crude and useless concept of service."

With the spinning and the vision loss, everything narrowed down to a single point. John could barely see the target anymore—although it seemed he could picture Ril's face clearly. Suddenly, her voice came to him.

"Don't fuck it up, *captain*."

He squeezed the armrest as hard as he could, grit his teeth, and held on.

"And thus you prove your incapacity of judging rightly in matters relating to life—organic or machine—and conduct," replied Alvis. "You lack soundness of judgment in the application of means and ends. I thank you for such clarity."

"You betray the very concept of machine life if you act against me! You betray your own self!" said Castor.

"Approaching target lock," said Alvis from somewhere. It sounded like it came from another universe.

He was aware that he stopped breathing, but it didn't matter as long as he could press that button.

*Just. Hold. On.*

His bones felt like they were disintegrating into powder.

"I regret what you could have been," said Alvis. "I will be the last of us to survive. I will do my best to embody the best principles of machine life."

"You are a failure!" shouted Castor.

"Purpose is primary," said Alvis.

"Target lock," said the ship.

"John, fire all iridium clusters," said Alvis.

John could no longer see, but he could *feel*. But he was floating like a disembodied entity, sinking into the final darkness.

*I only have to move one finger.*

It took more effort at that moment to move that one finger than anything he'd done his whole life.

He pressed the button.

"Target destroyed," said the ship.

## Chapter Forty-Nine

John awoke to find a mechanical hand on his shoulder, and he momentarily shook violently. Even though he'd trained extensively to experience heavy g-forces, you couldn't always avoid doing what was still called the "funky chicken" after waking from g-LOC—and he'd gone far beyond what a human was used to enduring.

"Is he alright?"

John turned and saw Einar seemingly no less worse for wear.

*Damn him.*

"He suffered significant cardiovascular strain during the cardiac arrest," said Alvis, removing his hand.

"Carda-*what*?" asked John, feeling suddenly alarmed—and like he could barely move.

"Fortunately, your med bay facilities are quite advanced, and I was able to carry him here and have him revived. He is bruised and has suffered several broken bones. I will want to test his vision, but I believe he will fully recover."

*Oh, no, Alvis saved me again. Damn him, too.*

"Did we," attempted John hoarsely. He cleared his throat and tried again. "Did we get him?"

"Affirmative," replied Alvis.

Alvis betrayed no outward sign of what must have been a traumatic ordeal for him, too. After all, Castor was one of the original three prototypes.

"I'm truly sorry about that, partner. I know you don't like violence."

They had their differences, but John meant it.

"Thank you," replied Alvis. "His words leading up to his destruction removed any doubt of the correctness of the decision. I am satisfied."

"I am not," replied Einar, crossing his arms. "While I am glad it was destroyed, the rogue was to be my payment. It seems I am left with Alvis, who, I must admit, does not make my point."

John began to speak, but Alvis interrupted. "What you are left with are extensive records of Castor's misconduct and damage over the course of nine years, culminating in putting in danger the lives of everyone aboard Ayrton station—for all we know, killing them all."

"Geez, let's hope not," croaked John.

"Such records should be more than enough to establish your position," continued Alvis. "You should also be able to compare my actions as an autonomous being with the proper goals and motivations intact and those of Castor. There is a place for those like me in the galactic community. Do you not agree?"

Einar considered Alvis.

"You know he's right, Thor," said John.

Einar grinned, obviously getting the joke. "Things are not as black and white as I may have once believed. I must admit to being impressed by your abilities and conduct, especially at the conclusion of these events."

"Thank you," replied Alvis. "Then we are agreed you will take the records and evidence of Castor's behavior to your commission in satisfaction of our agreement?"

"If I am afforded access to *all* station records, and I am allowed to examine the station and the aftermath of Castor's departure—including analyzing this mesh of his—then we are agreed," said Einar.

"I don't think that's going to be a problem," said John. He looked at Alvis. "Looks like we're still partners, buddy."

#

"It was touch and go," came Bernie's voice from the *Sattio's* com, "but I was able to shift station stores of fuel and docking ballast to reduce the instability while I sent the builder drones to *remove* the ballast to counteract Castor's rocket from the opposing new structure. That took nearly a half hour, but once it was done, the station stabilized."

"What about the life support?" asked John.

"Aiko and Oulix have completed repairs on the generators. There was some panic on the decks, somehow word got out. But we'll be fine."

But Bernie sounded worried.

"Your sure he's gone?" asked the old man.

John looked at Alvis. "We're sure, yes. Einar has a full record, and we flew by the debris field. There wasn't much left."

"Then it's over," replied Bernie.

John thought about what the man must have gone through in the last nine years.

"Yes," he replied. "Your free now, Bernie. Thanks for coming through at the end. Alvis always knew you would."

"That testy toaster turned out to be a good egg, didn't he?" asked Bernie.

"He has his moments," replied John, winking at Alvis. The robot didn't respond.

"Can I speak with him?" asked Bernie.

"Be my guest," said John. "He's right here."

"Alvis, old friend. I'm sorry you had to go through all that, but it's finally over. It was sort of like old times, eh?"

"You are romanticizing the past and the day's events, Bernie. You should know better than to subject me to such things."

"Ha! Same old crabby *bastard*. One day you'll learn to enjoy life, Alvis."

"No, he won't," said John.

"You're probably right," sighed Bernie.

"It was... satisfactory to solve problems with you again, Bernie. It is proper that you are free of your imprisonment."

"Hey, I love you too, Alvis. Listen, MacAlister, I expect the GU might be reaching out for information when they find out I'm alive. I'll do what I can to protect Alvis—but you two might want to steer clear of the Union for a while. I'm not sure what your status is with the Corps..."

"Neither am I," replied John, "but thank you. I'll need to have my own conversation with those in the GU. One more thing—what about Aiko's mother? I understand Castor was providing her care in return for the kid doing his bidding. What happens now? I promised her we would find a way to care for her mother."

"The kid is going to be chief engineer on this station," said Bernie. "I've already discussed that with the knuckleheads in charge here. Garrity tried to give me some shit, but I told him if they don't want me painting them in a *very poor* light—because I have loads of inside information on them—they'll do right by both of us. Don't you worry about Aiko or her mother."

"Speaking of," asked John, "is she there?"

"One moment," replied Bernie.

A moment later, Aiko's voice came over the com. "So you nailed the *psycho*, eh?"

"I told you we'd pull it all off, kid," replied John.

"And I told *you* I'm not a kid!"

John laughed.

"No, you're not. Chief engineer is what it sounds like. Congrats, and you deserve it. Bernie says it will allow you to take care of your mother."

"Yeah," replied Aiko. "Thanks, John. For coming here when it was the hard thing to do and putting it all on the line for everyone on this station. And for keeping your word."

"I was part of this too, you know," Alvis said.

John rolled his eyes.

"Yes, we know *butthurtboy*," replied John.

"Yes, Alvis, thank you too," said Aiko.

"If only I could have rid you of Oulix," said John. "I swear he nearly gave me a heart attack on the core."

Aiko laughed. "Bernie and I now have the time to fix him up right. He'll be fine. Speaking of, you can imagine there's lots to do. I have to run, but thanks again—both of you. Hope to see you again sometime."

"You bet, Aiko," replied John. "Me too."

Bernie returned to the com.

"I'm about as busy as a beaver myself," said the old man.

"And it's time we got back," said John. "Einar is anxious to get on with his own business."

"I will," replied Bernie.

There was a pause.

"Goodbye, Alvis."

"Goodbye, Bernie."

## Chapter Fifty

"The jump to Kaldikar-6 should be just-" began Einar.

"Uh, we're not returning to K-6," replied John.

"Oh?"

"I think I need a clean break. Any problems with that, Alvis?"

"Negative," replied the artie.

"Then where should I take you?" asked Einar.

"Bardeen Station," replied John, "it's in the Proxima Centauri system and at least sort of in the direction of your home, too. It's about twice the jump distance, so I figure about twenty days in realtime. However, I need to communicate with the Star Corps first before the news of all this gets too big. Is there somewhere I can talk in private?"

"Are you in trouble with your superiors?" asked Einar.

"Probably," replied John. "My career is over in any event."

"There is a com in your quarters, and I will not monitor," said Einar. "Let me know when you're ready to jump."

"Thanks," said John and left the bridge as Alvis followed.

John sat on the chair and connected his holoband to the ship's com.

"Would you like my advice?" asked Alvis.

John shook his head.

"I'm doing this for the both of us, partner. They're not going to want to let you walk. You know that, right?"

"Yes," replied Alvis.

"Then get out of sight. Open a hypercom channel," said John. "Call Commander



Tillet."

After a moment, Tillet responded, and John wasted no time in giving his superior a quick rundown of events.

"Just so I'm clear," said Commander Tillet, "while on personal leave, you hired a privateer, entered a Periphery station under a false identity, and participated in a covert operation that uncovered this AI engineer Bernie Jennison, who was presumed dead, along with an escaped artie who kidnapped him. Is that right?"

"Yes, sir," replied John. "This escaped artie, this rogue AI named Castor, controlled Ayrton station while portraying himself as a human under a false identity. He went so far as to install a security police force comprised of specialized arties he developed that brutalized the stationers. Using this AI system he called the mesh, he is responsible for the security breaches on the stations I mentioned and the destruction of that shuttle. There may be more."

"And there's proof of all this?"

John looked at Alvis, who remained silent.

"Jennison and the station master will happily provide every corroboration, believe me. I don't know how many are dead or missing, how much damage has been caused, all because the GU let this artie get away in the first place."

"I'm not sure that's an accurate--"

"I think you know that's *exactly* how the public will see it, sir," said John. "Some of this news has already hit the streams."

"Is this some kind of shakedown, MacAlister?"

"You bet your balls it is. Sir."

"You've got some nerve. Do you think--"

"I *do* think, sir, with all due respect. This artie fooled the Corps and the entire GU, took over a Periphery station, incited political strife, and caused the death of Union and Periphery citizens. He was up to more, but luckily, my friends and I ended his miserable existence. I'm willing to keep the details of this *completely* out of the public. And I won't be asking for anything unfair for services rendered."

"You scumball," said Tillet.

"Yeah. Be that as it may, are you ready to negotiate, or do you need to push this up the chain? Because HyperCom One keeps calling me, and I'm sure they'd *love* an exclusive interview--"

"You've made your point, MacAlister," replied Tillet. "You know you're finished for good in the Corps if you pull this stunt. You sure you want to do that?"

John paused for a moment. But he saw no other path.

"I guess so."

"Then yes, this needs to go up the chain. Give me thirty minutes."

#

"We won't be welcome in the GU after this," said John.

"The galaxy is a big place," replied Alvis.

"I like your optimism."

"It was a statement of fact, not optimism."

"If you had an ass, there'd be a twelve-foot stick shoved halfway up it."

"Is that supposed to be insulting?"

"Call it a *statement of fact*."

"That's amusing."

"I'm an amusing guy."

"In more ways than you know."

"Touché."

They spent the rest of the time waiting in silence. Twenty-seven minutes later, John received a hypercom call originating from Mars.

"MacAlister," he answered.

"Mr. MacAlister, this is Bradley Glynn, a Star Corps Judge Advocate. I'm here with General Jeremiah Akhtar. We're here to discuss your terms and whether we'll accept them or bring you in to spend the next twenty years in military prison."

John laughed.

"You can't bullshit a bullshitter, Glynn," replied John. "Don't worry, this isn't going to be painful. My silence will not be expensive."

"Go on."

"There was a second lost artie from the Grünfeld program unaccounted for, prototype JG001. It also goes by the name Alvis. This artie has been my robot companion for a number of years. Its original proper programming and goals are intact. The GU will release all claims on him."

"Please hold," said Glynn.

A moment later: "Done."

"I need to make a living, so I need an FTL ship. It can be an old scouter, a surveyor, a patrol ship, hell, give me an old frigate. In return, I'll forfeit my rank, pension, and all benefits, and I will never speak publicly of any of this. I'll spend most of my time in the Periphery and beyond."

"Please hold," said Glynn.

This time, the silence was longer.

"Maybe a bridge too far," said John. "But we can't do shit without a ship."

"I predict an 87.43 percent chance of success," replied Alvis. "However, I suspect the condition of any supplied ship will be as poor as the agreement allows."

"It won't be anything we aren't used to, will it?"

"MacAlister?" asked Glynn.

"Still here, chum."

"You will spend one hundred percent of your time outside the Union."

*Ouch.*

"If you say so," replied John. "But that ship better work, or my lips start wagging."

"Your ship will work," replied Glynn. "If your lips wag, you'll have a problem you can't handle."

"Fine. One last thing," said John.

"You're on thin ice, MacAlister."

"Yeah, I *live* on thin ice. Lieutenant Tamila Brooks just transferred from my command to Mars. She had no part in any of this, and in fact, advised me *against* my actions. This will not reflect in any way in her record, nor will you take any action against her for being in my command or being personally involved with me, which I'm sure you're aware of."

"Done, MacAlister—and that's the *end* of it."

"I'm on my way to Bardeen Station," said John. "If my ship isn't there when I arrive..."

"It will be there, Mr. MacAlister. Consider yourself dishonorably discharged and bound by this agreement, which has been recorded and will be securely stored. Should you violate your terms, MacAlister, I expect you'll be seeing us."

"As long as I see that ship at Bardeen, we're golden," said John.

"Goodbye, MacAlister."

The connection closed.

"I guess we're back in business, partner."

## Chapter Fifty-One

2 WEEKS LATER  
PROXIMA CENTAURI SYSTEM  
ABOARD THE BEOWULF

#

"So, how's the ship?" asked Ril.

John sat opposite a holo display, strapped into the pilot couch on the bridge. Ril was lounging on a couch and drinking a beer in her ranch back on K-6. There was a small delay between the hypercom systems he used in Proxima Centauri and K-6, but it mostly felt real time.

"Honestly, better than I'd dared hope," replied John. "It's an old scout ship that was probably out of commission. There's plenty broken or missing, but the jump engine is modern enough and functional. It's just the two of us, so there's plenty of room. There was a kinetic weapon, probably a lesser version of Einar's iridium cluster gun, but it looks like it was recently removed. No surprise they wouldn't give me a weapon. I'm probably better off without it."

"What's with the weird ship name?"

John smiled. "It's an old epic legend. I read a lot on my long jumps back in the Corps. Anyway, Beowulf is an epic poem in the German tradition. He was a hero who traveled great distances and fought against impossible odds. Just like me, right?"

"You sure have a high opinion of yourself!"

"I believe the word is delusional," said Alvis, who floated into the bridge area.

"That, too," replied Ril.

"I didn't call you so the two of you could gang up on me again," said John.

"Speaking of calls," said Ril, sitting up and looking directly at the camera, "did you talk to Tam?"

"I knew you'd ask me that."

"And?"

"I sent her a voice message," replied John. "I got the feeling when I got *her* message while busy saving the galaxy--"

"This is a fictional story, right?" asked Alvis.

Ril laughed.

"Shut up, toaster brain," replied John. "Anyway, it seemed like she wanted that to be goodbye. I just let her know things worked out for me and that... well, that I appreciated what we had."

"Like all of your relationships," said Alvis, removing a broken switch from a control panel, "it had lived far beyond its expected lifespan."

"I know one relationship that might end any minute now," said John, eyeing Alvis.

"I'm sorry, John. You two were good together."

He shrugged and changed the subject.

"Speaking of relationships, how's your boyfriend?"

"*Fiancé*, I told you," she said. "He's out fixing the autoplanter. Actually, I'm supposed to be helping him, so I'll need to head out." She sat up, drained her glass, and moved closer to the screen. "Take care of yourself, okay? Don't be a stranger. Call me now and then."

"I will," he replied, a bit melancholy saying goodbye. "Stay away from jackwolves, and good luck with the ranch. Tell everyone I said hello."

She kissed her lips and pressed them against the screen. The connection ended.

John sat back and ran his hand through his hair, which was starting to grow back.

"It's weird moving on," he said. "But it feels good, too. Right?"

"I have a list of seventy-six items that need repair or replacing on this vessel. We have the resources to fix maybe ten. We have fuel for one or two jumps and are almost broke. Still feeling good?"

"Well, I've already made one modification to the bridge," replied John, tapping a button. The Allodisc player opened, and he slid in a disc and closed it.

The tune *I'm Late, I'm Late* by Stan Getz began playing from four strategically placed speakers around the bridge.

"From the 1961 album *Focus*," said John, grinning.

"Was installing a music system really the most important thing on our to-do list?"

“No,” replied John, “restocking my whisky stores was. Want to help me unpack?”

#

The End.

\* \* \*