

THE HALFERNE PERFIDY

A NaNoWriMo Novel
By Darrin Snider

DRAFT D: EXCERPT
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A woman with long blonde hair, seen from behind, is walking away through a snowy, medieval-style city. She is wearing a vibrant red dress with a matching cape and a black belt. She holds a sword in her right hand. The background shows stone buildings and a misty, overcast sky.

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Draft 1 -- 15 May 2023



Revision History

Draft 0	Original NaNoWrimo draft	November 2017
Draft 0.1	Minor revisions and formatting for preview copy	October 2021
Draft 1	Revised act one and two; added act three	March 2023

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Chapter One

The din of the arrival terminal was an incantation to chaos and madness that pounded in his ears. Departing the starliner he got his bearings from a too-bright sign that flashed directions in a dozen languages. Customs made up the far end of a long walkway to his left and required all passengers to stop and be registered before entering the station proper and catching a local transport to one of a dozen in-system destinations. None of these destinations were what one would consider “desirable” -- the apathetic tourism advertisements that lined the walls appeared to have long since given up trying to support that impression, opting instead for sarcasm in their slogans. “When you’re done spending an afternoon exploring everything Notosia has to offer, Erlig will have dinner and drinks waiting for you. Transports departing every two hours.”

The man known primarily as Clay -- currently traveling under the name Najaar -- had been to two dozen such gate stations in his day; all were virtually the same, except for this one detail in this one station. This seemed to be where progress stopped, the edge of human civilization, and everything seemed to say, “You’re going to hate it here.” The intricate spiderweb of Q-gates that connected hundreds of independent worlds, colonies, and outposts in five dozen settled systems only offered one route in and out of the Iota Excipio system -- a lone pair of gates connecting it to Midway station, the most remote of the Earth-controlled outposts, and gateway to the rest of what was colloquially called the nine “spinward arm independent systems.”

He approached one of the customs kiosks where a holo of a young man stood attentively waiting. Five green-uniformed guards flanked the main entrance to the station, military-style assault rifles at the ready. He recognized the rifles as Khnum 210s, explicitly designed for close-quarters urban assault – capable of firing upwards of 200 plasma bolts per minute, accurate up to nearly 100 meters. They were big, they were noisy, and they were scary looking. The problem was, on a station such as this, it wouldn’t take more than a half-dozen stray shots at close range to penetrate the shielding of a wall, potentially taking out a utility or life support conduit, or worse, melt the outer bulkhead and put a decent sized hole in the station. While they looked intimidating, that was the only practical use they

could serve here. He knew there was no way those guards would even be allowed to carry power cells for such weaponry – a suspicion confirmed when he spotted the familiar bulges of more conventional sidearms and flickblades in the guards’ leg pouches.

“Welcome to Iota Excipio,” the smiling holo said in a saccharine tone, a sharp contrast to the grave, but neutered, military presence who eyed him from three meters away.

Clay fished out his identicard – a fake provided by the agency, which had also supplied the name and associated cover. It would have a priority transit order attached, cutting the scrutiny and bureaucracy to a tolerable minimum. He smiled to match the holo’s almost inhuman expression as he presented them. An audible “chirp-beep” confirmed their acceptance.

“Mr. Daud Najaar from Procyon. Traveling to Notosia, Nakano district, on business for the Boni Saigo Conglomerate. Correct?”

“Correct,” Clay confirmed, though not a word of it was true.

There was a brief pause and more information flashed in the air between them. “You have a first-class berth on transport Miyazaki, departing from Green Level, Bay 19 at 0730. It will begin boarding in just over two hours. Your baggage is being transported from Starliner Fairbairn to the Miyazaki. Your credentials allow you access to the Green Level Passenger Lounge. Station time is 0319, so regrettably, the restaurant level is not open yet, though most of the kiosks on the concourse will sell you a meal if you wish to sample the local fare. Otherwise, the passenger lounge will have a limited variety of finger foods and hors d’oeuvres to choose from.” The dazzling swirl of data abruptly flicked off, and the holo, with one last disingenuous smile, gestured with one hand towards the heavily guarded station entrance.

Clay smiled charmingly at the guards as he passed. They watched him intently but made no other movement, nor had they so much as scratched or shifted their weight during his whole time at customs. Very well trained, he thought. Not actual military, but certainly not the average payroll security, and definitely not people to mess with.

A haze of incense and narcotic smoke greeted him as he entered the station’s main concourse. Brightly colored signs flickered and flashed directing the unwary to each of the hundred shops, kiosks, and drinking establishments. He made his way through the sparse, middle-of-the-night crowd, most of whom seemed oblivious to their surroundings. The heads-up display in his ocular implant confirmed the

presence of a mood suppressant in the local atmosphere that a completely different set of modifications were currently filtering out before it entered his bloodstream. He wondered if this was standard practice on the station to keep crime to a minimum, or simply a necessity out of a general lack of security. He hadn't bothered to pay for the data uplink from his implant to the station's public network, nor was he carrying any weapons on these commercial flights, choosing to minimize the number of flags and registrations with local agencies should the mission necessitate a hasty exit. Besides, he thought, if he couldn't handle a couple of interstellar flights and a slightly seedy space station without getting into that kind of trouble, he should probably succumb to the agency's constant hints about his advancing age and retire before he gets himself in real trouble.

The Green Level Passenger Lounge, located in a loft area on the far side of the concourse, was slightly more crowded than he expected to find it at that hour. Approximately 30 people sat at tables around the spacious room, which offered a panoramic view of the docking spoke and a variety of local transports and carriers prepping to leave for destinations within the Iota Excipio system. He scanned the room, trying to pick up on the hushed conversations -- made mostly impossible due to the sound suppressors above each table. In one corner of the room, an unassuming, late-middle-aged woman in fashionable business attire sat nursing a drink and typing on a datapad. She had silver hair, a soft build, and the slightly crinkled eyes of a kindly grandmother, but a manner of carrying herself that said she was someone who was keenly aware of her surroundings. She'd already sized him up similarly the minute he walked into the lounge, but only an expert would have noticed she'd even seen him. He made his way over and sat down across from her. "Excuse me, I just arrived on the station, I don't suppose you know what time it is in Nakano?"

"Later than you'd think," she replied, the non-specific answer indicating no duress and no surveillance detected.

Clay took the seat opposite her as she activated the sound suppressors, then nodded when they appeared to be operating normally.

"You'd be my handler then," he said without making it a question.

The woman appeared surprised, but not startled. She did not even look up from her pad. "Mr. ... ahhh ... Najaar? I'm sorry, I had hoped I wouldn't be so obvious."

"You weren't. Just a bit overdressed for the hour." He pulled a small datapad from his breast pocket, placed it face down on the table, and pretended to take in the view outside.

“I’m Marte Ness. Welcome to Iota Excipio.”

“Charming place you’ve got here from what I’ve seen so far.”

“Oh, wait until you see Notosia. This is just the pretty part they put in the brochure.” She gestured to the hedonistic concourse below.

“Can’t wait. Been in country long?”

Ness shot him a curious look. “5W doesn't have any agents in country. Just me, the lucky girl they call when they want to cash in a favor.”

“You’re not with the bureau?”

“Nope. Just a friendly informant who enjoys the undisclosed, bureau-paid residence, and who also happens to work locally as a private investigator. The kind you hire when you want to know if your spouse is cheating on you or if your business partner is cooking your books and hiding assets off-world. You’re the professional.”

“A sleeper then. I’m surprised they would clear a civilian for work like this.”

“A chaotic world and chaotic times.” Ness typed a few commands on her datapad and Clay heard his own beep in response. He activated his ocular implant, which allowed him to read the incoming data without turning the pad over. A holo of a youngish businessman, along with a detailed biography appeared in his display.

“Sylvester Locke,” Ness began, “owner of Locke Industries, one of the largest, most-powerful megacorps in the Earth Union.”

“I know of him, obviously,” Clay confirmed.

Ness frowned, punching another series of commands into her pad. A series of file headers appeared in Clay’s view. The summaries of each were almost identical. “Locke has traveled to nearly a dozen systems outside of the Earth Union in the past several months meeting various executives of companies that are normally his competitors, and in each case, the person he spoke to has met with an unfortunate accident shortly thereafter.”

“Seriously? Why hasn’t he been picked up yet?”

“Maybe because Locke's free and clear of the system days before each accident occurs. Maybe because local law enforcement assumes they really are just accidents, so they never check with off-world agencies and find the pattern. Maybe because Locke Industries has significant control over law enforcement and media on most of those worlds.”

“How did 5W see all this if it happened in non-Union systems?”

“That’s where it gets interesting. 5W was already tracking Locke’s movements after one of his orbital factories around Titan in the Sol system exploded killing 200 of his employees. 5W performed a few routine checks and discovered that station, which was supposedly developing new farming habitats for off-world grain production, had an operational budget about ten times higher than would normally be required for that purpose.”

“A front then,” Clay nodded. “Any idea what he was really developing that he shouldn’t have been then?”

“Something that goes ‘boom’ and blows up orbital factories?” Ness shrugged. “There was no trace of any unusual production equipment in the wreckage, so the odds are it was no accident.”

“So, Locke’s built something – newtech – and immediately covers up his invention. Why visit the competition then? What could he have found that’s more valuable if he shares it?”

“Some kind of tangential breakthrough he can’t exploit with his own resources?”

“Something he needs partners in order to mass produces and bring to market? Only it’s so revolutionary, he has to eliminate anyone he’s not working with who knows what he has?”

“It’s one theory, but it fits.”

“Barely,” Clay conceded. “Now he’s headed to Notosia. So why is 5W just now sending in wet assets? And why do they care about a one-gate system on the edge of civilization that’s out of their jurisdiction?”

“Because, it’s a one-gate system with plenty of potential buyers, none of which could offer him half of what his previous stops could have netted him. The adage is true, this is the last stop for the desperate. This is probably our last chance to find out what he’s sitting on. What do you know of the government on Notosia?”

Clay sat back. “Notosia’s an independent world, not tied in with any of the major interplanetary powers – the Spinward Alliance, the Perseus Federation, or Earth Union. The economy has been mostly collapsed for decades since the government is completely unstable and has been passed back and forth between various competing paramilitary factions for the past sixty years. When one of those revolutionary groups gets in power, they just embezzle their budgets instead of building up the legitimate military, so for the most part, terrorists are better armed and equipped than the government most times. The result is, whoever is in power never holds it for long and the cycle starts over. With no stable authority or economy, nobody really takes the planet seriously as anything other than a source of a few cheap, low-quality goods.”

Ness nodded in agreement. “It’s a powder keg with dozens of potential buyers for whatever Locke has. The real power on Notosia is the Syndicate, a loosely allied group of megacorps and crime families that, among other things, are the arms brokers who supply all of the warring sides – the government through their legitimate shipping and logistics capabilities; the terrorists, through the same channels, just at more private locations. If anyone really runs the planet with any consistency, it’s the Syndicate. My guess is, they’re the most-likely buyers. If Locke’s newtech is a weapon of some sort, and the Syndicate doesn’t control it, then that’s when the maps start getting redrawn all over Iota Excipio and maybe beyond.”

“I suppose 5W doesn’t consider that a good thing?”

“Notosia might be a one-gate, backwater system, but it’s not in anyone’s interest to see them with any kind of newtech that would give them an edge over their neighbors. The Syndicate won’t do anything to aggravate their off-world business interests. Some of the rebel leaders, however, are not so into capitalism and profit.”

“If we’re even talking about a weapon,” Clay reminded her. “So, I’m to get in there, find out what Locke has, if anything; what he plans to do with it, if anything, and then stop an interstellar war, if necessary.”

“I’m thinking of this as a hell of a last mission before retiring, personally.”

“Organized crime? Terrorists? Megacorps? An unfriendly government? I’ll be lucky if I get to retire. Where’s Locke now?” Clay said and instantly bit back on his own negativity.

Ness squinted her eyes and studied the myriad ships through the massive windows. She pointed to a personal Yacht that was almost as big as a starliner docked at one of the service hubs. “La Terreur. It’s his residence.”

“I’ve heard about it. It’s atmospherically maneuverable, landing-capable, and even submersible. I’m surprised he’s taking the public gates and refueling here with the common folk. Surely, he owns his own network of gates hidden somewhere just outside the system, or he could buy passage from someone who does.”

“I don’t know of him ever doing business on Notosia before, so his off-the-books gate network probably doesn’t extend out this far. Sure, the Syndicate and some of the smugglers at the mining outposts have them, but that would just put him in their debit and risk mistrust from other potential buyers. No, he’s being completely upfront and legitimate with this trip.”

Clay scanned the itinerary on his datapad. La Terreur would depart immediately after the Miyazaki, carrying the two of them – no doubt the result of a maintenance delay arranged by 5W. Both ships would be arriving at Nakano spaceport at approximately the same time. He flicked through the last of the data she had sent to his pad. There was a balcony room reservation at a hotel next to the starport which he assumed would have a view of all available berths, including Locke’s yacht.

“You’re in charge. How do you want to play it?” Ness asked.

“Well, your idea of surveillance from the hotel is a good instinct, but I’m guessing Locke will be using personal aircars instead of public transit lanes to get around the city. By the time we see him leave, he’ll have already lost us.” Clay thought for a moment. “I’m thinking you take the room and act as lookout while I sneak on board the La Terreur and see if I can’t gather a bit of intel for us.”

Ness’ eyes widened. “You’re serious?! That’s a megacorp CEO. Do you have any idea how many intrusion systems that Yacht probably has?”

Clay nodded. “If it was easy, 5W would be tagging it with a tracker or installing a transhuman or synthetic agent into its mainframe right now while it’s docked. This is why after hundreds of years, they’ve never come up with a substitute for a plain ol’ wet asset with a bit of ingenuity and experience in the field. I’ll find a way to make it work.”

“Speaking of wet asset,” Ness said looking a bit sheepish. She turned to look out the window and made a subtle gesture with her hand to the table behind Clay. “The Olive suit behind you hasn’t taken his eyes off of us since I pointed out the La Terreur. “

“You think he works for Locke?”

“I don’t know. He could be Locke’s. I’m legitimately registered with the government, and known to the Syndicate and most of the opposing factions as an independent intel source. He may just be an unrelated tail watching me, trying to see why I came all the way out here to the jump station to meet with a client. He’s not very good, whoever he is. Any local would know it’s rude to stare that much at a lady.”

“Maybe he’s just an admirer.”

“Don’t flatter me, Mr. Najaar. I know I’m two decades past using that tactic ever again.”

“So, it could be nothing, but if he works for Locke, we may already be done for.”

“These noise suppression fields aren’t easily beaten, and if he can read lips, he’s only been watching mine and the back of your head for the past two minutes.”

Clay smiled. “Then I suggest we split up, see which of us he follows, and ask him his intentions.”

Ness nodded, downed the last of her drink, and stood up. Clay followed suit and the two walked off in opposite directions, with Clay intentionally walking right past the man and sizing him up. The two made casual eye contact as he passed, which no professional would have done. Were he and Ness jumping at shadows? Before he had left the room, Clay heard the sound suppression field snap off as the man pushed his chair away from the table.

Clay proceeded leisurely to the Lounge’s men’s lavatory, which he thankfully found empty in the middle of the night. He’d thought for a moment about taking position in a secluded corner or maintenance room off the main concourse but decided station surveillance would definitely have that locked down and monitored. No, this would have to do. He walked to the wash basin in the middle of the row, preferring one closer to the wall to obscure the line of sight of anyone walking in, but deciding it was best not to find half his angle of retreat cut off should it become necessary.

He pretended to wash his hands and check his hair for less than thirty seconds before his pursuer entered the room, obviously somewhat surprised to find Clay watching him in the mirror and smiling warmly at him.

“Good evening,” Clay said and went back to pretending to wash his hands.

The man nodded, averting his eyes. “Morning, I suppose we should say.” He smiled nervously and walked over to a sink a respectable distance away and began washing his hands.

Clay had no weapons on him and could find nothing in the immediate area that he could use. The demeanor of the man would seem to indicate that he was in a similar position, or at least felt at a disadvantage, even though he obviously had no issues following his target into an unfamiliar, secluded environment. Something didn’t feel right about any of this.

“So, I don’t suppose you want to tell me what you find so fascinating about my traveling companion and me?” Clay said, deciding to see if the obvious discomfort was legitimate, or a ruse.

“I ... I ... I’m sorry?”

“Well, you seemed to take quite an interest in her back at the lounge, and then you followed me here.”

“I’m sure it’s just a coincidence,” the man stammered. “If I was staring, I apologize ... I didn’t mean anything by it. I’m just a nervous traveler, I guess.”

“I see. Nervous enough that you forget to take a piss BEFORE washing your hands?”

The other man’s face drained of all color and expression. That reaction just saved his life, Clay decided, stepping towards the man, and with one swift motion, shoving his head into the mirror just hard enough to avoid cracking the reflective plastene. Had the mirror been glass, it would have shattered, made a noticeable racket, and possibly left a sizable scar on the man’s face. As it was, he just stumbled back, eyes rolling into his head as Clay searched him, throwing the contents of his pockets onto the counter in front of them. By the time the man came to his senses enough to fight back, Clay had used one arm to bend his wrist downward, lock his arm behind him in an incapacitating hold, and bend him over the counter with the force of his right elbow. His left hand continued the search.

There were no weapons on the man, merely a datapad, an ID chip, a small amount of currency, and a small case containing a medium-quality, commercially available, tracking surveillance kit. Clay applied pressure to the wrist and the man stifled a scream.

“Alright, start talking,” Clay hissed.

“Ahh ... okay ... my name’s Karim ... I’m an information broker.”

“Broker?!”

“Yes, you are Daud Najaar, head of the Boni Saido division on Procyon. The woman is Marte Ness, a private detective and one of my competitors on Notosia. You both took quite a casual interest in the La Terreur, owned by megacorp tycoon Sylvester Locke. I thought there might be something to it.” He groaned in discomfort, then offered, “Ah, obviously, I was wrong.”

“Who hired you to spy on us?”

“Nobody!” Karim protested. “I’m a freelancer. I recognized Ness, but I didn’t know who you were until I ran your profile. Ness taking on a client off-world at a transit station, within sight of one of the most powerful men in the galaxy, smelled like an opportunity to me. I thought maybe I could get the inside scoop on what you were planning and then sell it to Locke.”

The man was good, Clay decided. He’d pulled 5W’s cover story almost instantly and probably knew more about “Najaar” than Clay did after just a few minutes. There was nothing on the counter that would have been able to take Clay’s picture for ID lookup, however. He groaned in distaste. He hated this part. “Right or left?” Clay asked, his voice half menacing and half frustrated.

Karim sighed. “Right.”

Clay released his arm, grabbed him by the shoulders, and threw him hard against the wall, then grabbing his throat with his right hand, expertly plucked out his artificial right eye in one swift motion with his left.

Karim shrieked, more with surprise than with pain. Clay pocketed the eyeball and the contents of the counter, aside from the ID chip, which he handed back to the man. “Find another line of work.”

“You can’t do this! How am I going to get off-station with no money?”

“You’re lucky you’re getting off this station at all,” Clay reminded him, then shoved him into the wall, hard, and turned back to wash his hands. Artificial or not, he hated handling the eyeball.

Karim was in a near panic. “Wait! I’m a broker, I know things that would be of value to you.”

“What could you know that’s worth anything to me.”

“The woman, Marte Ness. She’s not what she seems to be. She’s actually—” his voice cut off with a gurgle. Clay spun around to see that Ness, in one deft moment of stealth, had entered the room, walked over to Karim, and embedded a small flickblade into the side of his neck completely unnoticed. Karim was currently taking his last few breaths, almost oblivious to the artistry he had just been a part of.

“What do you think you’re playing at, Clay?” Ness hissed, slowly lowering Karim’s body to the floor. “You were just going to let him go?”

“He’s an amateur. Wasn’t even armed. He just got over his head with curiosity.”

She pocketed the knife and started dragging the body towards one of the stalls, careful not to let any of the blood gushing from his neck hit the floor. “He knew too much. If he had gotten your picture to Locke or anyone with the Syndicate, we’d have ten more like him tailing us, and your cover would be blown within hours. You can’t leave loose ends like this!”

“I’m not in the business of killing civilians.”

“There ARE no civilians on Notosia. Don’t you get it? Everyone has taken a side. The smart ones just don’t tell who they’re playing for until they have to. The rules are different here. Loyalty doesn’t exist, right and wrong are outdated concepts, and sentimental morality like that will get you killed. You have to forget everything you know and adapt quickly if you want to get out of this system alive.” She finished propping the body up, closed the door, and started for the exit.

“Yeah, fine, whatever,” Clay said, taking everything she said as adrenaline-induced hyperbole. “Either way, leaving a trail of bodies wherever we go just complicates more things than it solves.”

They left the lavatory and stepped down onto the concourse. Ness ignored him and scanned the room, obviously looking for something. Finally, she spotted a uniformed technician and darted towards him, extracting a handful of hard cred from her pocket as she approached. Clay watched her whisper

something in his ear and hand him the money. He nodded in understanding and started back towards the restroom, not even acknowledging Clay as he hastily bumped into him.

Ness smirked and said, “Complication averted.”

Chapter Two

The two-day journey from the transit station to Notosia passed uneventfully. Clay spent most of his time educating himself on the key names and faces in the six Syndicate “families,” the dozen or so megacorp executives, the ruling party, and the top dozen or so resistance movements/terrorist factions scattered across the planet. Any one of these people could be about to purchase a newtech weapon, and every one of them was exactly the type of person who should never be allowed to get their hands on such a thing.

Locke’s yacht arrived right on schedule, 30 minutes after they had, and immediately parked itself on the most remote berth the spaceport had to offer. Unwilling to take his eyes off of it for even a moment, Clay stood in the terminal, watching from the window. He had seen no one approach or leave the La Terreur during the time Ness retrieved all of their luggage and set up the surveillance equipment in the hotel room. Everything he needed for his part of the mission was conveniently stored in a medium-sized shoulder bag.

“Okay, we’re online. Full spectrum scanners are up,” Ness reported via a comm in his right ear. The heads-up in his ocular implant indicated a new menu item that would give him access to everything she was seeing. While it would be inefficient, if not distracting, to use in the field, he quickly availed himself of it during these early planning stages. He activated the feed and instantly adjusted it to overlay the sensor data on top of his natural vision. The effect was that parts of the ship took on an eerie glow, and a series of words and indicators appeared to dance around it, the details of any of these he could access or call up with a thought.

“Stick with passive scans for now. Let’s start with power signatures.” The glows took on different hues and seemed to move to different parts of the ship.

“No shields. No active sensors,” Ness reported. “No tight beam transmissions coming in or out. He’s not moored or hooked into spaceport systems at all.”

“He’s venting air, though. The topside decks are open,” Clay noted, seeing people walking in what amounted to a balcony area at the top of the ship. “That’ll be my way in.”

He heard Ness chuckle in his ear. “That’s only a five-story climb. All you have to do now is find a way to clear half a kilometer of open terrain to get there without being spotted. He cleared customs and

restocked at the jump station so even maintenance crews won't be going out there. He doesn't want visitors, and he can sit out there for months as long as his dock fees are paid."

"I'm sure the local authorities are thrilled about that."

"Let's see," Ness said, switching the sensors to active and aiming them at the Spaceport Authority security tower. Instantly Clay's vision lit up in an array of colorful beams bouncing back and forth between the tower and the La Terruer. "Yeah, they've lit him up and are watching him like a hawk."

"At least we don't have to worry about accidentally drawing his attention with a couple of extra sweeps. Switch to active scans." A new set of menu options appeared in Clay's vision. "How many on board?"

A wireframe of the internal layout of the ship overlaid itself on his vision. Markers appeared throughout the ship indicating the presence of twenty-five passengers and crewmen scattered across five decks and a large cargo area at the base.

"Okay," Clay smiled for the first time, "at least there's room to move around without being spotted if I'm careful. Check that hold. Any unusual power signatures? Radiation? Chemical? Unusual shielding?"

The overlay cycled through a series of colors and modes for approximately 30 seconds. "Nothing," Ness said. "Whatever he's selling, it doesn't immediately stick out on sensors, and I don't see any indication he's trying to shield anything. Maybe it's not a 'thing.' Could just be a design of some sort."

Clay thought for a minute. "If it was just a design, why the need to kill everyone who sees it? He could withhold key components when he shows it, make the knowledge useless, and encrypt the redacted parts making the whole concept virtually impossible to steal."

"Maybe 5W has all of this wrong and it's not a newtech sale at all."

"Or maybe it's newtech that doesn't even show up on scans. Either way, that's why I have to get on that ship."

"Well, he's not sending for carry-out, and port authority is content to just sit and watch him, so nobody is getting near that thing tonight."

Clay scoffed, “Where’s a door-to-door salesman when you need one?”

“That’s it,” Ness said. “Excellent idea.”

“What is?”

“Just be by the east security gate in two hours. I’m sending a sales team in.”

One hour and fifty-five minutes later, the sun had set, and a bitter winter night was blowing. Clay crouched behind a giant trash dumpster next to the east gate watching a swarm of twenty guards surround a large hoverbus. “Ness, what did you do?” he asked confused.

“Well, on the off chance he was here to meet with the Syndicate, I did a little impersonating, called in a favor, and sent him and his crew a little gift with their compliments.”

One by one, Clay watched thirty of the most beautiful men and women he had ever seen step out of the idling vehicle and allow themselves to be frisked multiple times by the guards. They were wearing far too little clothing to be comfortable given the cold breeze, yet given the obvious signs of chemical stimulation, it was apparent none of them noticed this detail. Clay wondered if the drugs were merely enhancing or outright controlling their behavior. In his thirty years with 5W, he’d met murderers, gangsters, terrorists, drug lords, sadists, and anarchists, but human traffickers caught his ire more than those. He almost felt guilty for the abhorrent fantasies he had, picturing things he would do if he ever pulled an assignment that involved people who would use drugs and torture to psychologically reprogram the innocent until they voluntarily handed over their own dignity and free will just to make it stop. This was probably evident in his psychological profile and the main reason he never received such assignments.

Was this human trafficking? Or were these people genuinely as happy and uninhibited as they seemed? Within a few minutes, the entire area was a cacophony of flirting, laughing, and fondling. Guards and spaceport personnel slowly began to funnel out of nearby buildings to join in what was quickly becoming an impromptu party.

“Right now, you could probably walk up, shake every guard’s hand, and take a seat next to the driver, but you’ll probably want to be a bit more subtle than that,” Ness quipped in his ear, but Clay had

already made his way over with the crowd and was casually leaning against the rear exit of the transport.

Ness' urgent voice sounded in his ear. "They're reloading the bus. You've got to get in there quick."

Fumbling behind his back, he found the access panel and pressed the button to open the rear cargo hatch. Dejected, he saw the entire compartment was taken up by three large crates, which upon quick inspection were packed with bottles of a rather expensive vintage of champagne and various recreational consumables, both legal and dubious. He tried desperately to shift them and make enough room for himself. He would deal with the discomfort and indignity of contorting himself into a compromising position, but he still had to find those crucial square centimeters to climb into, and the crates were simply too heavy to slide out of the way.

"You've got about twenty seconds, Clay."

Thinking fast, he peeked his head around the side, smiled charmingly, and wordlessly motioned for two of the guards to help themselves to one of the cases. Nodding and smiling, the two unloaded the crate and in doing so, cleared just enough space for Clay to slip in and close the hatch behind him without anyone taking notice.

"My god, you're smooth," Ness laughed in his ear.

It proved to be the last bit of fun he had that evening, as twenty minutes later, after slipping away in the chaos of La Terreur's security guards attempting to break up the welcoming celebrations of thirty young and beautiful people, Clay found himself clinging by magnetic gauntlets to the side of the ship, some fifteen meters above the tarmac. By the time he completed the climb to the open top deck, his body was nearly numb from the cold of the bitter wind and the even colder hull of the ship, and he wasn't entirely sure his knees would have enough strength to allow him to stand up once he got to use them properly again.

"Okay, the forward hatch is three meters to your left. There is one guard at the bow, his back to the hatch, watching the tarmac. There are two guards to your right. They appear to be talking to each other. Everything looks clear from the hatch down to the forward stateroom."

Clay turned on his optical implant just long enough to confirm he was seeing what she was seeing, acknowledged her transmission from his heads-up display, and turned the implant back off.

While it was extremely useful to know who was hiding behind every wall and what weapons were being charged up for use, he found the constant stream of information distracting during these situations and always chose to rely on instinct whenever possible, not to mention the small, but significant, chance that the activation of such a device would register on a security sensor.

With the coast clear, he forced himself onto the deck. Sticking close to the bulkhead, he crouched and made his way to the forward hatch, conveniently left open for him as it vented fresh air into the ship below. As described, he saw a lone guard at the bow of the ship, leaning on the rail overlooking the tarmac and rubbing his hands in an effort to stay warm. Clay drew his sidearm, and without taking his eyes off the guard, slowly backed through the hatchway into the well-lit interior of the ship. Within seconds, he had made his way down a flight of stairs and entered an ornate stateroom, one of four on the massive ship.

The room didn't appear to be in use. A quick inspection turned up nothing but empty drawers and closets. "Well, this one's a bust," he said in a hushed tone. He was no longer worried about being overheard as the room was most likely sound-insulated.

"The other stateroom is at the opposite end of the level you're on, but it's occupied by four people at the moment. The bridge is one level up and halfway back, and it looks like there's a maintenance room off the cargo bay on the bottom level that's been converted into the main security center, judging by the number of people in--" her voice cut off suddenly.

"Ness?"

"Oh, crap."

"What happened, Ness?"

"There were five people in that room a minute ago. I looked away for a couple of seconds and now they're gone."

"Great, they're on the move. How did they spot me? Where are they now?"

"No, that's just it. They're gone. I'm showing only twenty people plus you on the ship now."

"They've got personal camo emitters?"

"On their own ship? Why would they bother?"

Clay made his way to the door. He heard no sound outside. “Is the hall clear?”

“Ummm, yeah,” Ness confirmed, a touch of urgency in her voice. “You’re good to the dining area midship. The galley will be on your left; a lounge of some sort on your right. Both are empty. The stairs lead to the bridge above so keep it down.”

Clay opened the door and rapidly made his way down the hallway to the lounge. Once inside he hugged the perimeter of the room to avoid being seen down the long hallway that ran the length of the ship. Stairs on both sides of the room led upward as well as down to the third deck.

“Whoa. Two more people just up and disappeared on Deck 5, aft section.”

“What the hell is going on?”

“Now one in the fore section just vanished.”

An alarm klaxon suddenly erupted in Clay’s ears and the lights all came up to full brightness, illuminating the room, himself, and everything around him.

“Two more down. Deck five is showing completely cleared now.”

Two guards, rifles drawn, ran into the lounge from the aft stateroom. Clay ducked behind a sofa, barely avoiding being seen as they stormed down the stairs. Seeing his opportunity, he set his own pistol to full power, leaped to his feet, and walked steadily and surefootedly down the hall to the aft stateroom.

Immediately upon entering, he saw Sylvester Locke sitting behind an ornate wooden desk as if preparing to receive visitors. A subtle shift in the man’s attention gave Clay the one piece of information he was looking for. Without breaking eye contact, he fired two shots at the right corner of the room and was rewarded with the sound of the third and final guard falling dead to the floor. He quickly trained the gun back on Locke. “Before you press the silent alarm under the desk, I thought you might like to know that whomever you were planning to meet with tomorrow has double-crossed you. Right now, the only way you’re getting off this ship and to safety is if you trust me.”

“Interesting,” Locke’s voice was cool and collected, though his hands were still out of view under the desk. “Whom do you represent, then?”

“Cripes. Clay, he’s lost over half his force. Whoever they are, they’re on deck four, right beneath you.

“That doesn’t matter. What matters is, someone has killed half your crew and is on their way here. You’ve got seconds to grab the goods and let me get you out of here.”

Locke hissed in disgust and rage, slid himself back from the desk, and walked over to the wall opposite Clay. He pressed two fingers in three places and the panel slid back. Reaching in, he grabbed a small attaché case and a pistol, which he carefully showed Clay in a non-hostile manner before pocketing it.

“Give me the case. Keep the gun handy. You can shoot me if I try to double-cross you,” Clay said, gesturing with his free hand for Locke to hand the case over.

Locke gave him a disapproving smirk as he drew the gun and handed over the case in one smooth gesture. Clay had transferred the case to his gun hand and had just begun fumbling through his belt pouch when he caught a flash of something spinning through the air in front of him and embedding itself in the wall to his left. Instinctively he ducked backward and looked to see what had just missed him. There embedded in the wall next to a straight splatter of blood was a glistening shuriken. Before he made sense of what was happening, Locke had already collapsed to the ground, holding his throat where the blade had neatly passed through. Clay transferred the case back to his left hand and readied his gun, only to find that he was no longer holding it.

Much to his surprise, it was now being held by a figure who stood directly in front of him wearing a black tunic, balaclava-style mask, and combat goggles. Startled he stumbled backward two steps. Whoever it was moved inhumanly fast and made it down the hall from the stairs to the stateroom without making any noise. Obviously, this was the same person who had dispatched most of the crew of the La Terreur, along with one of the richest, most powerful men in the galaxy in a matter of minutes. At least this answered one part of the mystery, even if it created a larger one.

Completely unarmed, and assuming he was only seconds away from joining the rest of the unfortunate damned, Clay made a desperate swing at the black figure’s head with the case. His opponent merely leaned backward, dodging the attack and ducking under his arm. The last thing he remembered was the sensation of falling as his feet were kicked out from under him.

He awoke, fifteen minutes later to a voice screaming in his ear. “Clay! Answer me!”

“Ness?”

“Oh, thank God! Are you hurt? Anything broken?”

Clay made a quick assessment. There was a large lump on the back of his head where he'd hit the floor with a bit more force than a normal fall would have produced. His arms and knees ached even worse, more from old age and the climb than anything else. There was no sign of any broken bones, bruises, or contusions. "Aside from a headache and a probable concussion, I'd say I'm fine." He picked up and checked his gun, which had been neatly placed on a side table next to the chair in front of him. As expected, the attaché case was nowhere to be found.

"What happened?"

"If I had to guess? Ninja."

"Ninja?!"

"Yeah, just like something out of those old movies."

"I think you hit your head harder than you think."

"Maybe," Clay acknowledged. "Okay, get me out of here. How's the path down to the cargo bay?"

"Clay, you're the only person alive on that ship."

"What?"

"Your 'ninja' started on the bottom level and went straight up to the bridge, killing absolutely everyone there, except you, and then just up and vanished. Though, technically, he never showed up on my scans at all."

"What the hell is happening here?"

"I assume he's got the case?" Ness asked.

"Yeah. Do we think it's the actual merchandise though?"

"Well, assuming it was, we'll probably never get that close to it again."

"Maybe. Maybe not." Case said, pulling a small box from his belt pouch and opening it. "Open up broad a spectrum receiver to 2148 terahertz."

There was a brief pause while Ness adjusted controls on her end. “Yeah, some sort of beacon, coming from the market district about five kilometers away. Looks like a hostel of some sort. What the hell did you do?”

“Why do you think I had Locke had me the case? I stuck one of the trackers I took of Karim at the jump station onto it.”

“You clever boy, you.” Ness sounded genuinely impressed.

“Is the signal strong enough to triangulate? Are we back in business?”

“Oh, I can get it down to the square meter. We’re definitely back in business!”

Chapter Three

Despite getting a shower, a change of clothes, and four hours of sleep, Clay didn't feel any better the next morning as the air taxi deposited him at the edge of Nakano's market district. Street vendors, peddlers, zealots, and highwaymen converged and mingled amongst themselves until they were indistinguishable from one another. Sometime while he slept, the weather had broken, a blanket of snow and slush covered the ground, and an unceasing wind whipped between buildings and stung any patch of skin left bare. Despite the abundance of large disused structures in the district, the market was set up outdoors in the streets and alleyways, as was the tradition all year round. It was probably the only tradition the godforsaken planet held to, Clay thought.

After four generations, the general population didn't appear to have evolved much from the political agitators and social criminals who volunteered – or were exiled – to found the original colony. If history was the basis of cultural identity, then these people were a blank slate. The winners are inevitably the ones who wrote history, and on Notosia there are no winners – or if there were, they were erased a few years later with the next change of regime. It could almost be considered anarchy if Clay didn't know enough about sociology and history to see it was actually far more pathetic than that. Was Ness right? Had everyone here already taken a side and decided their fate but played allegiances close to the chest until pressed on the issue?

He made his way through the streets to the modest hostel Ness had identified as the current location of Locke's case. Fortunately, he knew how to make his physical presence appear slightly more menacing than it was, and the vast majority of the lowlifes seemed to go out of their way to avoid him, rather than try to make a quick sale, con, or snatch-and-grab. A blast of welcome heat greeted him as the door opened. The brightness of the morning sun shone through the entryway into a common room/commissary, reflecting off the pale, zombie-like faces of the patrons within, all of whom stared at him with loathing for letting in the winter air.

Ness crackled through the earpiece. "What's the atmosphere like?"

"It's like hell's version of that Green Level Passenger Lounge," Clay muttered under his breath.

"Charming," she said, reappropriating his overused phrase. "Sounds like my kind of place."

He took a seat at a table against the far wall, ordered a meal from the kiosk screen, and busied himself by pretending to read the latest headlines and editorial commentaries on his datapad. In reality, he had already paired it to his ocular implant as was scanning and pulling up profiles on each patron of which he had an unobstructed view. So far, no one here seemed too far out of place, and the few who appeared slightly above the station of the average clientele checked out as off-world merchants or transport captains.

A gruff-looking server brought him his breakfast, a bowl of porridge of some sort accompanied by a large piece of fruit he didn't recognize, and a steaming cup of black sludge that, according to the menu, was what passed for coffee on this world. He decided to try that first and, to his surprise, actually liked it. It was spicy, it was persistent, and above all, it was strong, much like the planet. He decided he was imagining the faint taste of industrial waste, as that would have made it too on-point.

"Stay sharp. The case is on the move," Ness said via comm.

Clay grabbed his datapad and sat back, trying to take in as much of the room as possible. Plenty of people were leaving, but the only arrivals so far had been from the street. The most recent was sitting two tables away at a square, four-top table. He noted that they were sitting in positions next to each other, instead of facing each other. They were expecting someone to join them, and he bet himself that that's where the transfer would be made. Slowly, he slid down the bench to get a better view.

There was a sudden shift in the tone of the room as several conversations stopped suddenly. Clay looked around and saw that most eyes were now on a newcomer who had just stepped off the lift and entered the commissary.

Anybody could see she didn't belong on this planet. She had the wrong build, the wrong coloring, the wrong clothes, and the look of life about her. She was approximately twenty years old and tall for a female, almost 1.8 meters Clay guessed. Tresses of blonde hair framed an angular face beset with exotically shaped steel gray eyes. She wore a form-fitting white leather tunic and pants, both ornately accented with a bright red, vein-like pattern. A dark red, multi-layered cloak was fastened loosely around her neck, billowy enough to conceal the case along with any other weapons she might be carrying. She moved with an angular grace and balance that he could not decide was more befitting a ballet dancer or a predatory animal. Her eyes darted around the room, subtly making a quick study and assessment of each inhabitant – expertly as well, Clay determined, based on the speed with which she

was doing it. He decided to hold off making any sudden moves to identify her via the datapad for the moment.

As expected, she walked immediately to the table where he had noticed the two sitting before, smiled slightly, leaned forward, and began speaking in soft tones. Her face was expressionless, her lips hardly moved, and despite his best efforts, Clay could only make out the faintest timbre of her voice over the background noise.

Deciding she was sufficiently engaged, he looked directly at them long enough to make decent scans of all three faces and upload them to the datapad. Almost immediately, he identified the two men as independent Freighter Captain Dom Biery and first mate -- no political ties on Notosia to speak of, and aside from a few minor "manifest inconsistencies," legitimate businessmen. He was not surprised to find the datapad came back with no ID match on the girl.

"Sending you scans to run through the 5W data back," Clay whispered. "The two men show as civilians; the girl is a nonexistent."

"Yeah, the guys look like innocents," Ness said. Clay could hear her rolling her eyes in sarcasm. "The girl's pretty. Is she the one with the case?"

"As near as I can tell."

"What's on the inside of her arm? Some kind of tattoo?"

Case looked at the image on the datapad and zoomed in on the forearm. "That's a brand."

"A brand? She's some kind of slave?"

Clay's eyes suddenly lit up in recognition. "I don't think so. Run her profile against immigration and customs on Adad."

"Checking. Adad? Really? You think a girl like that is an ore miner?"

Clay chuckled. "No. Wait for it."

"Holy shit," Ness hissed.

"Tell me I'm right."

"The Venerable Ursza Tulaana, a Bikuni in the order of the Tul'Zur'ach. What the hell is that? Some kind of priestess?"

"An ancient order of monks. They have a monastery and training college high in the mountains of Adad."

"What the hell is a monk doing running ninja assassins and stealing newtech from the Syndicate on Notosia?"

"She IS the ninja," Clay said confidently. "The Tul'Zur'ach are descended from the lineage of the Shaolin and are said to be among the finest hand-to-hand combatants ever produced. The modern order incorporates cybernetic and chemical enhancements on top of the finest Eurasian martial arts. Any government would give up half their gross national product to have a Tul'Zur'ach train their military, but their secrets never leave the order."

"So what's a venerable monk of the order doing on the other side of the galaxy involved in a tech-running scheme?"

"No idea," Clay admitted. "They rarely leave Adad for any reason except maybe for a personal pilgrimage, during which they're expected to make their living helping the weak and innocent."

"That girl is definitely with the wrong people on the wrong planet then."

"Agreed, this makes no sense." Clay continued to watch the conversation. While Ursza's face remained completely passive, the other two were growing visibly agitated. Eventually, her eyes became pleading. The look seemed unnatural on that face--a bad imitation of helplessness. She retrieved a small pouch from her waist and tossed it on the table. The unmistakable noise almost silenced the room again. The two men shifted and looked around nervously. Hard currency was dangerous to carry in this part of the city, and everyone in the room now knew she had enough cred in that bag to book a stateroom on a luxury liner. It was a severe miscalculation, and one that to most people, would prove fatal. The two men quickly shook their heads, stood up, and apologetically exited the restaurant with the haste of someone expecting a bomb to go off any minute.

"She's not trying to deliver the case, she's trying to buy her way off-planet with it."

"What?!"

"That's the only thing that makes sense. We've got another interested party. Call that in to 5W. Ask if there's any chance one of the previous buyers may not actually be dead."

Clay didn't take his eyes off Ursza, who sat motionless and alone at the table, sipping at her tea as if deep in thought as to what she should do next. If she was aware of his presence, she made no indication.

"Well now," Ness said. "You have new orders. Eliminate the girl, retrieve the case, and proceed to rendezvous at Earth consulate on Midway Station."

"Are they insane?! You don't just eliminate a Tul'Zur'ach Bikuni like you off a smuggler. You may as well bring in artillery, bomb the city, and hope for the best."

"You're seriously afraid of her, aren't you?"

"They say her kind doesn't even engage you unless they've already anticipated every move you're likely to make and determined exactly how they're going to kill you."

"Actually, not to confuse you further, but that brings up a question: Why ARE you still alive?"

"What?"

"She killed 25 people last night, but only gave you a bump on the head. Why?"

A couple of possibilities entered Clay's mind which he filed away for consideration at a less pressing time. At present, a small group of ruffians had approached Ursza, three men dressed in the manner of common street thugs. The largest of the three, obviously the leader, made a rather loud inquiry as to how she would be spending her evening and how he might help her spend some of the small fortune she was carrying. She said nothing but collected her belongings and got up to leave. The other two quickly darted around her to cut short her exit, the big one chortling in a deep baritone at his own cleverness. Ursza said nothing but arched one eyebrow and gave him a look back over her shoulder that should have made entire planets shift orbits to get out of her way.

It didn't do much good.

Like a wild animal, enraged at the challenge, the big man stood up and pointed a finger at her. Clay made out a few rather uncomplimentary remarks about her social habits as well as a particularly nasty threat if she didn't sit back down. She still stood passively, her face unchanging, eyes locked on the big man in some sort of feral challenge.

He nodded to his partners, who reached out and grabbed her by each shoulder. Instantly she crouched, disappearing momentarily from Clay's view. When she reappeared, she was standing facing her two assailants, who were just beginning to register confusion as they held an empty, bulky cloak. With no wasted motion whatsoever, she struck the first man in the throat, collapsing his windpipe. He gurgled his surprise and stumbled backward into the crowd. A swift side kick to the groin and a palm to the chin ensured that the second would be of no further concern.

Enraged, the leader drew a pistol from his coat--a slug-thrower, not particularly eloquent, but cheap to own and easy to maintain. Instantly, Ursza thrust her left hand out, palm extended. Two loud blasts made everyone in the room instantly dive for cover. The big man had shot from no more than a meter's distance yet, miraculously--or perhaps not so miraculously-- seemed to miss his intended target completely both times. Next, there was a flash of steel as a sword arced through the air and neatly separated the gun-wielder from his forearm. Both fell to the floor silently, the big man in obvious shock and surprise.

Ursza's young face was completely expressionless as she pulled a microfiber cloth from her pocket, wiped the long, curved blade with one quick stroke, and returned it to the sheath that was now plainly visible on her back. She had already refastened the cloak around her shoulders and retrieved her belongings, including the case, before screams of terrified patrons began filling the air. She paid them no heed and proceeded towards the street exit. Her movements were so subtle, and her face so dispassionate, that Clay almost failed to notice the flick of her left wrist that sent a flashcap sailing to the far corner of the room, where it promptly exploded with a relatively harmless blaze of white light and an equally loud bang.

Clay spun around instinctively at the explosion to see if the blast had injured anyone. Flashcaps were generally for show and effect, but they could still be dangerous at very close range. When he looked back, he caught the billow of a red cloak exiting hastily exiting through the door and down the street to the left.

"That was impressive," he said to Ness.

"Let me guess, you lost her. She's across the street heading north."

"I gathered that," he confirmed and made his way through the startled crowd, most of whom hadn't even started towards the exits yet. It took a few seconds for his eyes to adjust to sun on snow again, long enough for the girl to make her way completely through the market and into an alleyway at

the far end. Crowd maneuvering was obviously another skill she possessed that he lacked. Clay ran after her, pushing through the throng until he reached the entrance to the alley.

She was now walking, not running, a few dozen meters away. He trotted after her, trying to stay as close to the wall as possible. While he had a talent for covert surveillance, he knew nobody could stay completely inconspicuous in broad daylight.

Ursza rounded a corner, still very nonchalant about where she was going. Once she was out of sight, Clay broke into a run, slowing just a few meters from the turn, guessing he had made up about half of the distance between them. When he rounded the corner, a hand appeared from nowhere. Fingers wrapped themselves around his throat and he felt himself thrown against the wall with much more force than a demure twenty-year-old girl should have possessed. Momentarily stunned by the blow, he opened his eyes and found two unmistakably gray orbs staring back at him.

"That was dangerous," was all she said and even that little more than a mutter.

"There must be some mistake," Clay stuttered, not having prepared any more-believable explanation.

She shook her head. "You aren't part of this. You need to stay out of it."

Whether from fear, shock, or some secret pressure point she held under her gloved fingers, Clay found it difficult to move. His muscles were distant things that only half-heartedly paid attention to his instructions. The Tul'Zur'ach reputation as warriors was well earned, and something about her eyes seemed to compel him to tell the truth. "Can't do that. I'm ordered to retrieve the case."

"For whom?" she demanded softly, her voice had the slightest trace of annoyance.

"You first," Clay offered. "I'll tell you who I'm working for if you tell me who you're working for." He tried to raise his hands to show he was unarmed and just wanted answers. The instant he moved, however, an electrical current surged through the gloved fingers clasped around his throat.

"Can't do that," she warned, her tone was that of a mother who was forced to discipline her child but didn't want to. After three seconds, her point made, she released her grip on him.

"Look," Clay said, "We can deal. I need the box; you have the box. You need to get off planet; I can get you anyplace you want to go."

Clay suddenly heard Ness in his ear, "Careful. You're breaking mission parameters now."

Ursza looked puzzled for a moment, then reached up and pulled the receiver from his ear, dropped it to the ground, and stepped on it with her boot.

"I'm not a mission parameter," she said defiantly, her hand whipping out from under her cloak.

Clay awoke fifteen minutes later, lying on the sidewalk, with a second lump on the back of his head.

Appendix

About the Author

Darrin Snider is an award-winning Internet radio and podcast host, cloud engineer, analytics wizard, mannequin wrangler, recovering software developer, and resident expert on the Indianapolis local music scene. His hobbies include baseball, strategy gaming, the occasional RPG, voraciously reading everything in sight, DX-ing exotic radio streams around the world, quantum physics, day trading, comic books, old-time radio, the technological singularity, biking, cooking/baking, wuxia/chop-socky flicks, cyber/technoculture, imported teas, transhumanism, dead programming languages, and speed-writing first drafts of novels (mostly to get the NaNoWriMo certificates) which he locks away as part of some grand retirement scheme should he live that long.



Afterword

These first three chapters of the "latest (not final) draft" are offered free of charge. If you enjoyed them, drop me a line, and I'll add you to a list to receive a copy of the final book and possibly some other goodies along the way. If you're a publisher, potential alpha reader, or bookworm like me that doesn't care if it's a bad draft, and you would like to see the full outline or other existing parts of this novel as a prelude to helping edit or publish it, I can probably make that happen too.

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