



The Halferne Gambit

By Darrin Snider

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Chapter 1

The omnipresent maze of catwalks and platforms formed an artificial sky whose excesses dripped a steady, sterile rain on the lifeless city of the lower levels. Somewhere, in luxury-rich, sun-exposed spires 40 levels and nearly two kilometers above him, it was raining. Rikkard Baddon looked up, imagining for a moment that he could make out a sliver of open sky above, despite knowing full well that luxury wasn't afford to anyone this far down in the metroplex.

He checked the chronometer on his wrist for the thirty-fifth time, sighed and leaned over the gantry in frustration. It was well past dusk – just a word here, except to the worker shifts that would soon empty into the streets on their way to the more interesting periods of their day. Rik felt uneasy about being in an unfamiliar part of the lower city, and he enjoyed straying outside the carefully regulated, well-lit arco towers even less.

To most arco residents like him, these somewhat incongruously named open-air levels had a reputation for being wild and unpredictable, though Rik knew this was more legend than fact. Arco residents were simply overwhelmed by the dark corners, foul smells, and loud noises. Those who had the rare need to venture here, outside their safe and self-contained vertical cities, only viewed places like this from the safety of a public transport traveling at 175 KPH. Sure, this was further down in the city than he normally cared to journey, but his situation necessitated risk.

For the evening's task, he had chosen the dark, secluded alleyway knowing full well it would be frequented mainly by level three and four tech workers--a somewhat sordid lot by most standards, but generally reasonable to deal with themselves and usually disposed to ignoring the business of others. A better neighborhood a few levels up might frown on illicit activity in their sector of the city; any lower, and the surroundings become unpredictable. Rik wasn't certain he believed half the stories he'd heard about the sink miners of the lower five levels, or the barely-human "troggs" that lived like mole-men in the machinery in the subterranean levels, but he was in no hurry to disprove urban legends this evening.

As it was, his biggest worry at present was being taken for an arco resident, which would be instantly memorable to even the most casual observer if questioned later. Otherwise, the location was

perfect: the hovering, robotic watchers of the city's law enforcement service patrolled the area only infrequently--passing through no more than three times a night--and most of the artificial lighting had fallen into disrepair, not being on anyone's priority list for routine maintenance. The decades old architecture, with its myriad alcoves and irregular angles, left plenty of blind spots to fool the stationary vidcams that stood watch over major intersections and thoroughfares, also poorly maintained. With a bit of luck, they would be in and out unseen, or at least unremembered. More-importantly, it meant an end to his current issues with the Syndicate, and an end to a life of "minor criminality" which Rik never really felt cut out for.

"Stop fidgeting. You're making me nervous," the voice behind him quipped. Rik snorted a half-laugh and placed his hands on the railing, trying to appear calm. If Tiro Eksaar was nervous, he certainly wouldn't admit to it, or even show it. Rik wasn't sure he'd even shifted his weight in the 30 minutes they'd been standing there. Certainly there been jobs more dangerous than this one--jobs that had gone wrong and cost people their lives, leading them to their current circumstances. In all of those jobs, Tiro was the tactician, the confident planner, the swaggering, quick-witted cavalier who always kept cool, even when things didn't go as planned. Rik, on the other hand, while brilliant with anything mechanized, mechanical, or precision-engineered always felt like the fumbling pretender when on a job, as if everything that went wrong did so because he dared to tempt the Universe by feeling confident or optimistic. "He's just lost," Tiro continued, methodically sitting down on the walkway next to Rik. "We've got him 19 levels and ten sectors from home, and he's probably on foot."

Rik considered this for a moment and allowed himself to relax a little. The dark street three meters below was a simple secondary thoroughfare with almost no traffic. The only signs of life came from a handful of local businesses unfortunate enough to be located this far off the excitement and bustle of the main traffic artery, whose lively glow Rik could barely make out a few hundred meters away. In an urban sprawl of nearly two billion people, this was about as private and secluded as things got.

"Unless he got nervous and backed out," Rik grunted. "He's got five more minutes, then we're out of here. I don't care how bad we need this deal, it isn't worth putting our necks on the line."

"Our necks are already on the line," Tiro said without emotion, not taking his eyes off the street.

The Zeincorp heist had been flawlessly planned and executed--a display of raw skill and organization worthy of legend. Stealing six of the company's cutting edge neural algorithms should have

bought them a stake in the big game, made them incredibly rich, and granted them improved social status and security for a lifetime. Unfortunately, they chose their friends poorly, and some of the team had sold out. His first clue should have been that he was being ten times the normal rate for a simple corporate heist like that. His second was in letting their benefactor insist of adding his own man, Cid Wexho, to their team at the last minute, “for insurance,” they were told. In the end, Wexho made off with the goods, and their benefactor left them at the mercy of the Syndicate they’d failed to deliver for. The only reason any of them were still alive to make amends was thanks to a lot of groveling, and the Syndicate wanting Wexho and his employer dead a lot worse than the poor saps he had duped. Rik and the remains of his team had been given the chance to pay back the money advanced for the job and disappear from Arco Kiraten for good.

It had taken months, starting with nothing, then through a series of progressively larger jobs, finally building a large enough stash that they were only a couple more big jobs away from being able to settle their debt. This latest was a simple drug deal in the lower levels. It wasn’t glamorous, but it was victimless, and in the hierarchy of drug dealers, the ones trafficking “cort” more-often got laughed at, metaphorically speaking, than locked away in a reform center.

"Look, we can always find another buyer, maybe even unload this stuff tonight, but if this guy turns out to be an undercover enforcer--"

He cut off abruptly at the sound of footfalls behind them. A tall, dark figure in a long coat emerged from a side alley into the street below and moved casually towards the thoroughfare, passing directly underneath them, seemingly unaware of their presence. Tiro sat upright and squinted, studying the newcomer intently. Rik quickly turned around to look in the opposite direction. One person staring at the stranger could draw attention; two would draw suspicion. Besides which, Tiro could see far more than Rik, owing to the convenient optical enhancer implant that currently sat in the scarred and hollow socket of his long-lost left eye – another memento from the infamous Cid Wexho.

"Well?" Rik asked, apprehension creeping into his voice.

"Well..." Tiro paused, trying to make sense of the man. "He's not a badge. I'll lay credits to choba nuts that he's not from around here, though. I make him to be about 1.9" meters tall, longish black hair, full beard. Can't tell for size or build 'cause of that coat. Looks like a suneater though."

“Yes!” Rik whispered excitedly to himself. Out of courtesy, he hadn't traced their client's comm ID, but the man's accent had suggested he came from money. He had pictured a multi-room residence

in the upper 20's, but a true suneater from one of the spires would have been too much to hope for. Why would one of the wealthy elite be purchasing cort in the lower levels of the city?

Rik understood the upper-level and spire residents even less than then sink miners and trogs. Supposedly they were even more eccentric than they were powerful and wealthy, showering riches and luxuries upon randomly selected commoners purely for the amusement of their benefactors and their friends--another embellishment, sure, but one that was popular with young and old alike in these parts.

With a quick mental command, Tiro adjusted the low-light and telescopic settings on his prosthesis, "He's moving awfully slow now. I'd say either lost or looking for someone. Must be our mark, but something's not right."

"The guy on the vid was clean shaven and blonde," Rik offered.

"Hmmm. It's not a wig. Could be a dye job. Too far away to tell. Maybe this guy's an intermediary."

"Nah, doesn't make sense. See any ID?"

This was a long shot. Most upper-level types kept their identification, along with financial accounts, medical records, professional files, and personal information stored in a subcutaneous transponder. The interlinked algorithms made identification checks quick and foolproof, and the transmitter allowed the subject to be constantly tracked and monitored by watchers and vidcams. While a few people still considered this a horrible breach of privacy, most agreed this was a small price to pay for the drastic reduction in robbery, identity theft, and other crimes. It also helped that in the past century no one had made the transponders mandatory, and there had not been one reported abuse or compromise of the system. Without the proper equipment, the encrypted signal was very difficult to pick up, and the complete set of all nineteen encryption algorithms and checksum protocols needed to decode the complete set of information was considered the holy grail to data pirates. Those that had obtained all of them had a habit of suddenly disappearing, along with most of their closest friends. The best men in the business may have access to six, seven, possibly ten of the subsystems. Tiro's eye knew two, which was about all they could afford given their current situation, but even that expensive upgrade was too low-powered to be of any use from more than two or three meters away.

"I'm not getting anything," Tiro said.

"So, he could still be an undercover enforcer."

"You've been talking to Alayn again, haven't you? Look, just relax and worry about making this deal. I'll let you know when we're in trouble. Besides, I can spot policemen with a casual glance. Most of them are pretty awkward about blending in, but even the worst of them can do a better job than this guy."

Rik glanced over his shoulder to get a look at the stranger. "Seems normal enough to me," he admitted. "What makes you so sure?"

Tiro sniffed proudly and rolled his eyes. Rik knew he was about to get a lecture, but if the learning experience made him less-nervous, it was worth being condescended to. "Look at that graceful walk. This guy has never done a day of labor in his life. He doesn't know enough to walk with his hands in his pockets, leaving them completely exposed to any lightfinger who walks by. And that coat may be local fashion with enough dirt to make it look like it's been worn a while, but otherwise it's perfectly pressed and in new condition. It looks like he bought it an hour ago and just smeared dirt on it to make it look old. The pockets aren't even ..." Tiro paused for a moment and stared more intently as he adjusted the optical sensor again. He let out a small whistle of amazement.

"What?" Rik asked.

"Energy signature. Looks like a personal shield generator. Only he's not wearing it. It's turned off and sitting in his left pocket."

"Tech runner," Rik suggested.

Tiro shook his head. "No bodyguard to be seen, and no weapon on him. He may be carrying something ballistic, but that's unlikely for a tech runner. Would you make a deal for a PSG down here without a serious weapon on you? Even the most pious local here would at least maim him to get their hands on something that valuable," Tiro said.

Rik squinted and studied the man more intently, trying to imagine the fifty-thousand credit trinket bouncing around in those pockets. Forget a half-dozen drug deals. One quick robbery and their problems were solved. "You're a long way from home, suneater," he chuckled, "and you're either insane or incredibly brave."

"What's the difference?" Tiro's expression suddenly grew serious. "Ok, here we go."

"What now?"

"Coming out of the club there. Somebody's made him."

Rik strained to see in the darkness and just barely made out the indistinct shapes emerging from the shadows of a narrow side alley. "Armed?" he asked.

"In this neighborhood? You have to ask?" He paused a moment. "Oh, gods, it's Wart. He's gonna eat this guy alive. I can't watch anymore."

"Wart!? What the hell is he doin' down here?" Rik hissed.

Tiro chuckled, but kept his voice low, "Gee, Rik, maybe you're not the only one who's thought of doing tax-free business deals off the public net."

Rik grimaced. The Metroplex island covered over 200,000 cubic kilometers spread over more than 30 levels, and housed nearly two billion people altogether, most of whom never traveled more than a few kilometers from their homes. The chances of randomly encountering a familiar face this far away from their home district was almost infinitesimal. Tiro knew this, but true to his fashion, was downplaying the potential disaster.

Wart shot a sideways glance directly at the two of them. He'd known they were there all along. Rik cursed under his breath and stood up. Without taking his eyes off the group below, he swung one leg over the rail.

Tiro looked confused. "Where the hell are you going?"

"We've got ten thousand credits riding on this deal, and I'm not gonna let Wart scare that guy off before we've unloaded the merchandise."

"I seriously doubt that's our guy, Rik," Tiro hissed.

"In that case, we're gonna come out of this one PSG richer, and all our troubles are over," Rik said, wiggling his fingers as if warming them up.

Tiro smirked. "Remember when I said I'd tell you when we were in trouble?"

Rik merely smiled. "You got my back?" It was more a statement than a question, and without waiting for the answer, he dropped off the walkway and landed on the street below.

Tiro stood up and dusted off his coat. "Don't I always?" He muttered, silently fingering the plazer in his jacket pocket.

Rik edged along the sidewalk next to a row of doors and slowly made his way behind the stranger. By the time he was close enough to hear their conversation. The four thugs were posturing impatiently.

"I assure you, I don't have anything on me that would even remotely interest you." The stranger's voice was clam, but not overly confident.

"Now, how do you know what I'm interested in?" Wart asked, stepping forward and leering into the suneater's face with a yellow smile. He stretched himself out to his full two-meter height--barely taller than the stranger, but enough to make him an intimidating presence. "I got a lot of interests."

Rik darted out from the shadows and forced himself between the two. "Evenin', Wart. Surprised to see you down here."

"Baddon," the big man smiled and growled, almost cordially, "Been lookin' for you."

"And you found me. Nice work. Good for you." Rik looked straight up at the enormous man and smiled. "If you can just hang on a quick second, I need to conduct a little business transaction here, and I can't do that with a puddle of lumpy goo. So, if you can wait just two chrons, I'll finish up and get out of your way." He deliberately tried to speak faster than Wart could think as he made a quick assessment of the other three. One he recognized as a small-time muscle of some skill and notoriety named Keiv. The other, judging by the thickness of his neck, would have to be the brother, Zane--by reputation, the more dangerous of the two. The third was shorter, thinner, and thanks to a scar that ran the entire length of the left side of his face and halfway down his neck, the most sinister-looking of the group. Rik didn't recognize him at all.

Their weapons were cheap, brutal, and not particularly subtle. Keiv carried a long length of chain, which he casually twirled at his side. Zane held a large metal pipe-like object. "Scar" appeared to be unarmed until Rik noticed the thin lines of wire running from the base of his gloves and up his forearms to a small connector and the base of his neck--shockgaunts. He swallowed involuntarily. Tiro was a quick shot but, but not a hasty one, and he wouldn't give up the element of surprise by making the first move should a fight break out. Odds were, Rik would become intimately acquainted with at least one of those weapons before Tiro took all four men down.

The shockgaunts concerned him the most. Pipes and fists he could block; chains he might be able to duck. There wasn't a good defense for a 10,000-volt static discharge, however. Could Tiro, with

his enhanced vision see the gloves from his vantagepoint, or would he try to take out one of the larger men first? Rik did his best to keep talking, nodding exaggeratedly to Scar in a voice that could be heard halfway down the alley. "Hey, those are some sweet gloves you've got there. Haven't seen tech like that in a long time. All wired up to your CNS as well? I hear that's a real trip. I have a buddy that did that. Got it done cheap though. Gets seizures when he uses them too much."

Scar said nothing, but folded his arms across his chest and turned his eyes towards Wart, waiting for instructions. Wart, squinted in frustration waiting for Rik to stop talking long enough to get a word in.

Rik carried on without even pausing to breathe. "Well anyway, ol' buddy, just hang in there a quick sec and I'll be on my merry way." He held up one finger to silence the impending reply then, putting a hand on the suneater's chest, walked them both backwards five paces.

"I'm sorry, I'm afraid you've mistaken me for someone else," the stranger whispered frantically. He was remarkably composed and seemed more curious than afraid.

Rik's stomach sank as he got his first real look at the man. This was definitely not the same person he had spoken to on the vid and, judging from the confused expression on the stranger's face, not someone who had been expecting to meet anyone this evening. Even in the poor lighting, the stranger's bronzed, lively skin confirmed one suspicion, however: he was definitely a suneater. Tiro was as sharp as ever in that respect.

Rik grinned broadly. "Shut up and listen. I'm the knight in shining armor who's saving your big sun-soaked ass. You seem to be blissfully unaware of just how much trouble you've walked into." He put one arm around the man's shoulder and leaned on him slightly. He felt the PSG in the pocket brush his thigh. He hadn't picked a pocket in years, but with a bit of misdirection, this should be elementary, he thought.

"No, I--" the stranger started to protest.

"Fascinating, yes, but look, we don't have time to go into that. Just pretend to give me a handful of money and take this, then turn around very quickly and walk away before these guys take out a lifetime of frustrations on you." Rik pulled a small pouch from his pocket and held it up. His hand dropped from the stranger's shoulder and started for the coat pocket as he let go of the bag, ready to snatch the PSG as soon as the stranger lifted his arm to catch it. Instead, the bag fell to the street with a

soft thud, and Rik's stomach sank with it. The stranger hadn't even tried to catch the bag. He simply stood placid, staring at Rik in disbelief, the slightest smile of admiration traced its way across his face.

"Not good," Rik muttered to himself, trying quickly to think up a contingency plan.

A loud hiss sounded behind them as a glowing ball of superheated plasma streaked down the alley, striking the ground less than a meter away. The brief, hot wind of puddles flashing to steam made the hairs on Rik's arms stand up. Whatever Tiro had been aiming at, he had missed. Rik cursed himself for turning his back on Wart as he caught a sudden motion out of the corner of his eye.

He gave the stranger a quick shove, sending him sprawling to the street at least two meters safely away, then spun around with a wild, swinging punch. Wart raised his left arm, casually deflecting the blow. He was faster than he should have been at his size. Rik lunged forward and slammed the top of his head into the big man's chin. Though the surprise of the blow knocked Wart backwards onto the pavement, it was like ramming a brick wall. With spots beginning to dance in the corners of his vision, Rik leapt on Wart, planting a knee in his chest. With an open palm, he struck the big man under the chin, slamming his head backwards into the pavement. Wart gurgled softly but did not move, and Rik was almost surprised at how easy that had been.

He rolled sideways and sprang back to his feet, adrenaline rushing through his body. His fighting technique was probably not the most graceful fighting technique to watch, he knew, but it was effective. Grimacing, he turned to the other three. "I don't suppose any of you guys would be interested in changing employers on a whim?" He said quickly, hoping to maintain the element of surprise, or at least confusion.

Keiv smiled, dropped the chain, and extracted a vibroknife from his left sleeve. From up the alley, Tiro fired a second time. Keiv lunged at Rik, dodging the blast as it impacted the ground where he had been standing a split second before. Rik caught Keiv's wrist and turned, using his attacker's own momentum to knock him off balance. As he spun, he caught a quick glimpse of Zane, brandishing the pipe and running towards the suneater.

Keiv twisted free, slashing randomly in the air in front of him as he struggled to regain his balance. The vibroknife to passed within a few scant centimeters of Rik's face as he grabbed Keiv's wrist and punched hard into his elbow. There was a snap of bone as the joint hyperextended. The knife fell to the street with a clatter. Rik pivoted and sent his right knee into Keiv's groin.

He was spinning around to find Zane when he felt the first blast from the shockgaunts. His muscles seized up instantly, and he dropped to his knees in paralyzing agony. Through the haze of pain, he caught sight of Tiro up the alleyway. The thin man was smart and positioned himself directly behind Rik. A plaser was not a terribly accurate weapon, and Tiro would attempt a shot if there were a chance he would hit Rik. There was nothing to do but ride out the tide of pain for the few seconds that the charge would last--a few seconds that seemed like a couple of eternities running back-to-back to Rik. When the tide of energy ripping at his body finally subsided, he looked up into the laughing face of the thin man.

Suddenly, the gaunt visage went expressionless. A pipe whirred softly overhead, striking the man directly on the bridge of the nose. He let out a muffled yelp and collapsed.

Rik turned around, amazed. The stranger had not only incapacitated Zane, but also made what was, by anybody's standards, an incredibly accurate throw with the discarded weapon. Rik looked back at Tiro, who seemed equally astonished.

"You're dead!" came a scream from behind Rik. Wart was rushing in a blind rage towards the suneater, Keiv's vibroknife in hand. Rik felt a strange combination of panic and fury, and, without thinking, retrieved the metal pipe from the ground. He shakily forced himself to stand, and with what strength his muscles still carried, swung the pipe wildly towards the back of Wart's head. There was wet cracking sound, and Rik felt a warm spray of liquid hit his face. Wart crumpled instantly, blood pouring from the crevice the pipe had left in his skull. In blind fury, Rik pounded his lifeless body three more times before regaining control of his senses. Then, shocked and sickened by the sight, he dropped the pipe at his side and stumbled forwards. The suneater darted towards him and caught him just before he fell again.

"Okay, take it easy. It's over." The stranger's voice was calm, almost as if this sort of thing were commonplace to him.

"Watcher!" The cry came from Tiro as he quickly darted out of the shadows and gestured up the street.

"Not over." Rik's whimpered, his head spinning. Though the pain had subsided somewhat, his over-stimulated muscles seemed to move his limbs with a mind of their own, and his stomach felt as if it was preparing to empty its contents onto the street in front of him. Fighting back the helpless sensation of panic, he grabbed the stranger's arm and staggered back towards the shadows, weakly pointing

towards Tiro as he tried to keep from hyperventilating. "Remind me again why we got you a new eye instead of a set those damned gloves." Rik tried to laugh but it only made the nausea worse. "Where's the watcher?"

Tiro gestured. "A hundred meters back there. It's moving slow. In this light we've got about two minutes before it can see this mess. "

" We need to split up," Rik wheezed between breaths. "You head towards the thoroughfare but keep watch as long as possible to see how interested security gets. First sign they're asking questions, lose yourself in the crowd, understand?" Groans echoed through the alley behind them as two silhouettes struggled to their feet. Rik grabbed the plazer from Tiro's pocket and pointed it in their general direction. "Zane," he called out, "If you guys leave now, you'll have a six-minute head-start before this place is crawling with enforcers."

Zane studied Wart's lifeless body for a few seconds, said nothing, but pointed a finger at Rik as if to emphasize there was still a reckoning to come. Quickly, he helped the other two to their feet and started towards the thoroughfare. Rik breathed a sigh of relief. "Smarter than they look," he muttered under his breath.

"This is nuts," Tiro protested, calmly. "We can't split up. You can barely walk. Maybe those three won't turn you over to the enforcers, but what if somebody in that tavern decides to talk?"

Even Rik knew this was very unlikely. Tiro was merely playing to his insecurities, trying to protect him. "Don't play hero, just because your master strategy failed," Rik joked, knowing the levity would tell Tiro he was in control, and wasn't about to panic and do something stupid.

Tiro smiled, "My 'strategy' was working fine until you started to improvise."

"My improvising wouldn't have been a problem if you could shoot straight, but hey, good job saving me from that puddle over there."

The stranger was visibly perplexed, but still seemed completely oblivious to any danger they might be in.

"Fine, go on then!" Tiro feigned offense. "Try not to get run over crossing the street." He faked a half-salute and vanished into the shadows. Rik braced himself against the building with one arm and let go of the stranger. Tiro was right about one thing: he was in no shape to run, at least not alone. He

wasn't sure he trusted the stranger, though if the suneater was an undercover enforcer, he would have arrested Rik by now and certainly wouldn't have allowed Tiro leave. Still, he had never heard of a suneater that could fight like that though.

"Okay, pal, I'm Rik," he said. "I'm hoping you don't mind continuing to be my best buddy for a few more hours until we're sure we're in the clear, and I'm sure you're not going to turn me in for reward money." *And until I find a way to lift that PSG off of you,* he added mentally.

The stranger continued to smile, and said nothing.

Rik gave up trying to understand the mentality of the rich. "I don't suppose you have a name?"

The man paused and reflected, almost as if he had never been asked the question before. "Sal," he said finally, the grin grew wider.

Was remembering his name some major intellectual triumph?

"Okay, Sal, the only hiding place I know on this level is five streets away. We can stay there for a couple of hours until this blows over." He gestured with his eyes towards the growing sound of the watchers. "We've got to move quick, though."

Sal held up a hand in protest and shook his head. "Look this really isn't necessary, I--"

"I'm afraid I have to insist," Rik said in between gasps for air. "Don't make me get forceful with you." Sal chuckled and helped Rik stand up straight. "It will take a couple of hours while metro security runs the vid through the ID banks and realizes they don't have a clear enough picture to make an ID. Until then, however, we have to stay off the grid as much as possible."

Sal seemed amused at the suggestion. "Smart thinking," he said as he helped Rik through a narrow serviceway between buildings. He stopped and gestured towards the bag Rik had offered earlier, still lying in the street. "Don't you want your ... merchandise?"

In the confusion, Rik had completely forgotten about the bag of cort, it had cost him five thousand credits, and represented half of his total worth. What he had left in his coat might barely buy his way out of his current dilemma, and he didn't dare try to steal the PSG out of the stranger's pocket until he had a chance to recover his reflexes, and his senses.

On top of being a murderer, no less, he thought.

"Leave it," Rik sighed. "If you step out there now that watcher will place your face at a crime scene. With one corpse, no witnesses and a bag of cort just lying there, maybe the enforcers will just pocket the profits and jump conclusions without asking around too much." He wasn't sure about this actually, five thousand credits wasn't significant enough to warrant murder, and too significant to leave lying around.

"In that case," Sal gestured with an eccentric flourish, "I defer to your expertise."

Rik wasn't sure what Sal meant, but slowly made his way through the shadows and out of the alley.

The front room at Vyndyrwynd's establishment was of the darkest black, cut sharply by intense flashes of neon smoke, creating a sense of unreality that seemed to bleed over on to the faces of the patrons. It was quiet, as usual, which is exactly what Rik had counted on. With the adrenaline wearing down in his system, he was beginning to feel even more nauseous and weak.

Sal's demeanor, on the other hand, had gone from one of detached fascination in the alleyway to mild concern as they made their way through the bustling crowds--as soon as they entered the club, he appeared genuinely uneasy.

"Is this some kind of --"

"--Brothel, yes." Rik rolled his eyes. He knew perfectly well that they equivalent existed in all facets of society, even the morally upstanding districts to which Sal was no doubt accustomed. Few residents of the upper levels would ever see an establishment quite as ostentatious as Vyn's, however. Rik was secretly enjoying his companion's discomfort. "On the other hand, the people here generally don't like to make eye-contact with other patrons, if you know what I mean."

It was obvious that Sal didn't.

Rik sighed. "Vyn's an old friend who doesn't ask too many questions of his guests as long as their credit holds out."

As if on cue, a middle-aged, portly gentleman walked in from a carefully screened-off back room. "Rik! Haven't seen you since I left the old neighborhood. What's wrong, didn't like the new girls my successor brought with him?"

"Nah, just doing a little business down here and thought I'd look drop by to say 'hi.'"

"Just like the old days." Vyn scowled, half-amused. "You're in trouble again, aren't you?"

"Nothing I can't handle," Rik said waving a calming hand, though his voice conveyed uncertainty. "I don't suppose you're open for a bit of bartering?" he offered hastily in a hushed tone.

Vyn stroked his chin thoughtfully, then sighed. "Whatcha got?"

Rik said nothing but opened his jacket and slowly raised the bag halfway out of the inside pocket, then let it fall back in again.

"Cort?!" Vyn growled distastefully. "How the mighty have fallen. I thought you were bigger than that Rik."

"Spare me the fatherly lectures, Vyn. Can we deal?"

"That stuff's for schoolgirls, Rik. It won't move down here." He paused, studying the look of desperation on Rik's face. Then smiled warmly. "Oh, alright, for old time's sake."

Rik smiled appreciatively then palmed the bag in his pocket before shaking hands with Vyn. If Sal had even seen the exchange, he did not acknowledge it.

"Thanks, old friend, now I owe you one," Rik sighed. "Is Mena busy tonight?"

"Hardly anybody's busy these days." He gestured towards the stairs with a chubby thumb. "Room 12. No doubt she'll be pleased to see you. But ah..." Vyn shrugged and arched an eyebrow, "... she's not as indebted to you as I am."

"Of course," Rik mumbled as he unfolded a small roll of crednotes and threw most of it onto the bar in front of Vyn. He turned to Sal. "I don't suppose you're carrying hard currency on you?"

Sal considered the question for a moment and shrugged. "Well..." he said absently.

"Swell." Rik looked at the wad of money in his hand, retrieved a ten cred note, and threw the remainder on the bar. He was getting in deeper and deeper trouble the more people he spoke to.

Hands shaking visibly, he pointed to a bottle of purple liquid on the shelf, which Vyn pulled down and handed to him. Rik removed the stopper, drank half the contents without coming up for air, and then absently handed the bottle to Sal. Turning back to Vyn he asked, "That enough to insure I'm invisible?" The pile of crednotes on the counter now appeared somewhat larger than it had when it was neatly rolled in his pocket.

"Who said that?" Vyn looked around and chuckled as he scooped the money into the folds of his tunic and walked back to the other room.

Rik nodded in appreciation, then turned to his companion. "C'mon, Sal, we gotta vanish quick."

Sal was still cautiously sniffing the contents of the bottle when Rik grabbed his arm and dragged him through a strobe of lights and up an inconspicuously narrow flight of stairs. The two walked down an equally narrow hallway permeated with a haze cheap perfume and narcotic, stopping in front of a door marked with the number "12." Rik knocked three times.

A female voice sounded from behind the door. "Come on in if you're rich," it sang.

Rik opened the door and motioned Sal in before him.

A scantily-clad, blonde girl jumped out of the bed. "Rikky!" she squealed, throwing her arms around Rik's neck. "I hope you paid extra for the both of ya."

Sal turned bright red and started to protest.

"Nothin' like that, Mena. We just need to hide out for a few hours, that's all. He pressed the ten-cred note into her hand. Can you keep the bottle full and let me know if anybody comes around asking questions about me?"

"Gods Rikky, you're whiter than a sink miner," the girl laughed. Seeing that Rik was not in the least amused, she nodded in agreement. "Okay hon, I can take a hint." She smirked at Sal and danced through the doorway and down the hall. "Though I must admit, I didn't peg you for one of 'those types.'" She winked, nodded, and bounced down the stairs.

Rik thought for sure that Sal, who had already been blushing as if he had never spoken to a girl before, was about to explode from sheer embarrassment. "She's just kidding, by the way," he offered.

"Indeed," Sal said with obvious sarcasm. Once the girl disappeared, he returned to his strangely calm demeanor. Rik wondered if his companion's bizarre behavior could be some form of shock.

He motioned Sal to a chair and walked over to the window. "Drink up, we're going to be here for a while." He glanced outside. The street was mostly vacant, but free of security officers.

"You're sure we're safe then?"

"Safe? Absolutely." Rik lay down on the bed and lit up a puffstick. The drink was starting to calm his nerves and the shaking was subsiding. "Vyn looks after his customers, and his customers look after him." He opened a drawer on the small table beside the bed, removed a translucent derm patch, and slapped it on the inside of his forearm. "Besides, he probably has more to protect here than we do," he tilted a head indicating the drawer of patches, arched one eyebrow, and waited for a reaction from Sal.

"What is that?" Sal asked, gesturing towards the patch.

"ADT patch," Rik said, glancing out the window again.

Sal still appeared confused.

"Dextrip? Amodexotryphaline?"

There was still no reaction.

"Irradiated food preservative. Acts as a euphoric muscle relaxant. Not particularly strong compared to some of the more exotic stuff, mind you."

Sal frowned in incomprehension.

"You don't get out much at all, do you? I mean, your people came up with this stuff."

"My ... 'people?'" Sal asked.

"Yeah, all the ingredients are completely legal to own, but once you found out we were getting rich off of it and moving into your neighborhoods, you rewrote all of the laws, at least for those of us below Level 20."

Sal rolled his eyes and shook his head as if clearing it.

"You're from this planet right?" Rik asked. He pulled back his other jacket sleeve and spoke into the comm-link on his wrist. "What's goin' on out there, Tiro?"

Tiro's voice crackled back over the tiny speaker, "No worries. Our friends are sticking to the

short book on this one. At least SOMETHING went right tonight." He knew enough to be cryptic on the off chance that someone might be listening in on the conversation.

Rik clasped his hand over the transmitter and turned to Sal. "They've probably run an ID check on Wart and figure somebody has done the community a service. They have enough in hand that they can file a nice, tidy report without the need to start a full investigation," he translated. "If the vidcams in the alley didn't get a good view of us, then we're pretty safe as long as we stay off the sensors for a few more hours."

"They won't conduct an investigation?" Sal asked.

"Well, they'll send out a few extra watchers and monitor all vids within a square kilometer looking for known perps or strangers—hence our continued presence here—but that's about it. Wart isn't important enough to warrant any special treatment."

Sal started to protest, "Justice is 'special treatment'?! That's barbaric!"

"So was Wart," Rik sighed. "That's the point."

Tiro signaled again. "You stayin' in tonight?" It was a less-obvious way to ask if he'd found a spot to hide.

"Yep," Rik replied. "Hanging out with our old career counselor and my new best friend." Tiro should be able to glean exactly what Rik meant from that.

"Fine, I'll be there in--"

"Don't be stupid," Rik cut him off. "If our friends see you, they'll talk your ear off."

"Yeah, but if you're not feeling well--"

Rik's tone was forceful. "I'll be fine. Just keep an eye on our things, eh?"

There was a long pause, then, "Whatever you say. Send my regards, and give them both a big hug, will ya?" came the response.

"Done and done," Rik said. The "big hug" reference was Tiro's subtle way of warning Rik not to turn his back on either Vyn or Sal. For some reason Tiro didn't trust either of them.

"That's quite a good friend you have here," Sal said.

Rik nodded. "We've been through a lot together."

"And the patron downstairs?"

"He's just returning a favor. I helped him out a few years ago. Strictly legit," he added holding up a hand. "I'm a maintenance technician by trade. Nothing more seemly than a few 'non-standard repairs.'"

"Don't discount loyalty. It's no small feat to inspire that in others, especially in the face of danger."

Rik ignored the implied praise and gestured to the drawer of ADT patches. "You're welcome to try one if you like," he said. "They're non-addictive, I assure you. And we should probably hide out here for a few more hours at least."

"I never understood the need to artificially control one's mood," the tone was not accusatory, but oddly curious, as if he expected a simple answer.

"Oh, like they don't have drugs where you come from? What are you, some kind of stress-management consultant?"

Sal took a precarious sip from the bottle, choked violently, and grimaced. "More a curious student of human nature," he said, wiping his lips with the back of his hand.

"You should study from a safer vantage point," Rik offered. "Speaking of which, you fight pretty well for a 'student.' Where'd you learn that trick with the pipe?"

Sal quickly dismissed the question. "I took a couple of self defense classes as a boy. I had very good instructors. Though until tonight, I hadn't fought anything beyond a sparing drone. I never thought how different it would be to actually have to fight for your life." He suddenly looked very ashamed and quickly took another hit from the bottle. He was obviously trying to cover up a larger story, but Rik decided to let it slide. "I'm sorry to seem so casual about it," he added. "I imagine you're used to these things."

Rik wondered if Sal really was that at ease with the idea of being in the same room as a murderer. It was a heck of a first impression he must be making. "I've never killed anyone before," he offered. "You are the proud witness to me hitting rock bottom--from upstanding citizen, to corporate thief, to drug runner, to cold-blooded killer." He chuckled nervously, wondering if such an admission

helped or hindered Sal's perception of him.

"Hardly cold-blooded. I would call it self-defense."

"You might, but I doubt the enforcers would see it that way."

"By all accounts, you're a hero. You saved my life--"

"Around here, you're the only one who's gonna care about that," Rik interrupted, brushing off the moniker. What was he supposed to say? He couldn't tell the man that greed had gotten him in over his head, and saving his life was just a happy coincidence? Sal seemed ready to canonize him as it was.

"You obviously did. You could have walked away and not gotten involved at all. Why would you--"

"Look, you're welcome, okay," Rik said, his voice becoming annoyed. "I didn't get up this morning looking to be a hero, and I sure as hell didn't plan on becoming a killer today." That much was true, at least. He had always been certain that he had been bred beyond that base instinct.

Sal shrugged in mock defeat. "Then maybe you should have let me get beaten and robbed in that alley."

Rik was eager to change the subject. "Well, then maybe you should have stayed home instead of trying to pass yourself off as a labor rat walking around in a dangerous neighborhood at night with a PSG switched off in your pocket."

Sal's face suddenly tensed up, obviously amazed that Rik knew about the personal shield generator. "Touché," he smiled.

Rik knew the expression was from old Earth, though he had no idea what it meant. The fact that Sal retreated behind fancy words now simply confirmed Rik's suspicions about the man's lineage. "Don't worry, I don't care what kind of tech running scam you've got going and I wouldn't dream of using you to elevate my social standing. I saved your butt; you're saving mine. As of now, we're square, I'm out of the hero business, and tomorrow I'm back to being plain old street scum, okay?"

"Hardly street scum," Sal said. "It's obvious you're a good man. You possess a refined sense of honor and justice, you have a capacity for self-sacrifice, and you inspire bravery and loyalty in the people who work with you."

"That's naïve even for you." Rik rolled his eyes. "Do you really believe that's who I am!?"

"I am a keen judge of people."

"Well, you're wrong. I'm nobody--barely a step up from those guys we left back in that alley."

"Why?" Sal asked calmly.

"What?"

"It's a simple question. If you are indeed a nobody, surely this was not your ambition. People don't just choose to be criminals. What was your downfall? Resentment of authority? Psychopathic disorder? Strong political beliefs?"

There was a long pause, as Rik considered the question. "Pride, I guess," Rik sighed. "I just wan't to live life on my own terms. Sometimes you can't do that playing by the rules."

"Nonsense," Sal said, as if his simple use of the word would make it true. "The kind of life you're looking for simply has to be earned, not taken. This is a free society that has afforded you the opportunity to better yourself. There is absolutely nothing to stop you from obtaining a decent education and gainful employment tomorrow if you wanted--"

"Had one." Rik waved his hand, dismissing the argument. "Level nine technician. One of the best in fact. Didn't like it much." He studied Sal intently, trying to determine the purpose behind the question. "What are you? Some kind of rogue politician trying to get re-elected?"

"I'm just saying--"

"You're not saying anything. You're reciting all those propaganda posters in the trans stations that I've been reading all my life." His voice was noticeably raised now, and Sal's jaw dropped in astonishment at Rik's aggressive posturing. "Let me enlighten you: you need money to buy that kind of freedom. Society abhors change, and you wealthy types don't want my kind living on your levels."

"Oh, come on--" Sal started to protest.

"I'm serious. Your speech and mannerisms speak of a good education, and the cut of your hair, beard, and nails tell me you've probably got a pretty decent job somewhere back home. In fact, I'm willing to bet that if you've ever journeyed below Level 20 before now, it was probably because you were lost. Me? I was abandoned by my parents as a baby. I was raised by social services on Level 12:

Open Air. I never had family ties to get me educated by the proper schools or employed by the proper companies the way you did. I've been taught harsh realities from the time I was three and sent to the public education system. Oh sure, the 'Royal Subsidy and Assistance Programs' and 'Social Promotive Programs' got me a job and a residence in an arco and kept me from ending up like Wart down there. All I had to do was play along. But still, the best I could have hoped for--after thirty or forty years of reporting to work on time--was a middle-grade tech job on one of the teen levels. Frankly I never much liked being able to see the limitations placed on me. It may not be a cell with force fields and guards surrounding it, but it's still a prison. At least this way I am the master of my own destiny with some semblance of free will," he paused, briefly, "Well, I WOULD have been if I hadn't taken one too many risks, but at least I'm not some automaton, programmed by the social services to do his job without question and sing the 'Aurian Hymn of the Kings' on key every royal holiday."

Sal seemed dismayed at Rik's words, "What's wrong with the Hymn of the Kings?"

"We all know the words, Sal: freedom, unity, liberty and all those other pretty slogans. Did you ever stop to think about them, though? Hell, I'm the living embodiment of them, and, ironically, completely at odds with what His Majesty and the royal cronies feel is a respectable lifestyle."

"Now listen here," Sal said, angered. "If you want to wallow in your own self pity and personal misery, that's fine, and just because you turn your back on the opportunities afforded you by His Majesty's government--"

"Oh, come off it, Sal. You're defending a bunch of phony ideals nobody really believes. What's the King personally done for you? What does all that power and wealth really do for any of us? It's all just symbols on the back of cred notes--which we end up paying back in graft to the great political machine, I might add. Everything you've seen tonight," he gestured broadly around the room, "is what slips through the cracks of the utopian society you and your King live in. We are the parts and pieces of the machine that sustains your idealism, the cast off and forgotten foundation that makes your so-called 'perfect world' work." He paused, attempting to gain control of his tone. He wasn't sure he believed any of what he was saying, but he was angry now, and he enjoyed the look of discomfort that suddenly crept into Sal's visage. "The King's power fades the further you get from the sun. Around here, flowers don't bloom at his uttered command. In fact, they don't bloom at all. If the King ever had time to visit the dregs of a neighborhood like this, he'd probably be so shocked that he'd run screaming back to the Royal Palace and beg the Cabinet of Ministers to make it all go away. One man, no matter how powerful

he may be, can not make a difference in something this big."

Sal was wide eyed, but his voice was calm. "I don't think you really believe any of that, Rik."

"I don't know if you noticed exactly who you're talking to. Okay, you're right, maybe this isn't exactly the life I would have chosen. I'll own up to some mistakes and some bad decisions along the way, but hell, at least I made them for myself. So fine, I'll own up to what I am: a smuggler, a data runner, a corporate thief, a drug dealer, a murderer--"

"All labels. Conveniences. You are the sum of your actions--an honorable, if somewhat misguided, man who, despite his own self-loathing, stands up for what he believes is right. I've been around people with far higher stations in life that cannot say the same for themselves. Do not confuse social status with personal identity. You are a far greater man than you give yourself credit."

Rik growled and waved his hands frantically, tired of arguing. He took a deep breath and tried to regain his composure.

Sal too sat back and tried to appear more relaxed. "Believe it or not, I begin to see your point—at least the way you see it. But, consider this: You're not the only one on this planet with problems, Rik. You don't know me as well as you may think. Don't think that, just because we come from different stations in life, that we are so different." Sal's tone had taken on that of a professor scolding an underachieving student.

Rik suddenly felt embarrassed but was not sure why. He found it difficult to meet Sal's gaze, and began stare emptily out the window, jumping when Tiro's voice squawked over the comm-link. "Okay, buddy, this party is breaking up. I'm headed your way."

Calmly, Sal put the bottle on the table beside him and stood up. "Well, with that, I think really must be going. Don't worry, should the authorities question me, I will tell them nothing of your part in this. Should they catch up to you, I will testify that you acted merely in self-defense. Like your friend downstairs, you have done me a great service, and I am indebted to you. Should it ever be in my power to return the favor, I promise I will."

Rik started to protest. After all, watchers still may be patrolling the area, waiting for a stranger to appear on a deserted street near the crime scene. Nah, let 'em catch the fool, he finally decided. When he heard Sal start down the stairway at the end of the hall, he grabbed the bottle and finished the last three swallows left in it. Sal didn't ask for his address, comm number, or even his last name--so

much for a reward for saving his life. Rik tapped the comm-link again. "A collection of bruises, a botched sale, lost merchandise, a potential arrest warrant for murder, a visit from the Syndicate bosses in my imminent future, my last dollar spent on a whore's room--whore not included--and to top it off, my one inadvertent good deed of the evening goes unrewarded," he mused aloud to Tiro. "Remind me again why I got into this business."

Chapter 2

Haleth Captain Bryn Hidek, wondered if it ever stopped raining on Malyon. It had been three weeks since receiving the assignment to head one of nine garrison outposts on the fledgling colony world. Since that time, he was certain it had rained every single day. There were many things he missed about his native Auria, and certainly the opportunity to experience rain was one that few people who were born and raised in the arcos would ever have, but after three weeks it had begun to lose its luster, and he longed for the climate controlled comfort of the interior metroplex. It was just the season, everyone assured him, during the rest of the year, the Valindor garrison post was a tropical paradise. Hidek didn't care. The work continued--no matter how cold, wet, and muddy it was.

Despite the remoteness of the Malyon Colony itself, the assignment to Valindor was considered an honor. Other garrison Captains--such as those assigned to the Arctic mines and the equatorial listening posts--had no doubt been exiled to Malyon out of spite. Hidek had met many of them on the orbital command station during bi-weekly staff meetings and was generally unimpressed.

The first two weeks of his command had gone more smoothly than he could have wished. Certainly, there was the usual degree of adjustment, that was expected. Every commander had his own style of leadership, as did the senior officers under his command. The adjustment period was nothing unusual, and quickly everyone learned where Hidek's various boundaries of casualness extended. To them, Hidek was a war hero, though -- a Haleth. Even if the honor was not deserved, it garnered unspoken awe from the men under him, and that made all the difference. It almost always made for smooth assignments.

All of that had gone wrong during the third week, however.

The Valindor outpost's 25-year history had been littered with various incidents. Most of these involved hurricanes, earthquakes, or rampages by some of the planet's fiercer, indigenous life forms. Hidek was not at all prepared for the emergency broadcast from Settler's Grove indicating that they an attack by armed gunships. The first time, his men were slow to respond. Twelve villagers had been killed, two large fields had been burned to the ground, and several warehouses had been completely cleaned out, with no clues as to the identity and motive of the assailants.

Now, a mere three days later, a second attack had been reported, this time from New Rinsic, a slightly larger settlement a mere thirty kilometers north of the base. Fearing that he might lose his

command so soon after arriving, Hidek decided to accompany fifteen of his best men and see to operations personally.

"ETA: Five Minutes, Haleth Captain," Corporal Llyn Danoy said from behind the pilot's seat. "Visibility less than a kilometer, heavy rain, moderate winds." She was a competent pilot, Hidek thought, but she somehow seemed a bit too eager. She had given the same report not five minutes earlier. He hadn't asked for either report, and he could see the rain through the front window of the transport as easily as anybody. He decided to say nothing.

"Set us down about a klick south of the village, Corporal." Hidek turned to the man seated behind him, the post's Chief Warrant Officer and third in command. "Prepare the men for deployment, Chief."

Jorad Keldin stood up and snapped a casual salute. "Yes, Haleth Captain," he said and made his way from the cockpit back to the main cabin.

"Do you think we'll be too late again this time, Sir?" Danoy asked.

Hidek considered the possibility for a moment, "I hope not, Corporal. Losing two villages inside of a week shows these scumbags have more balls than I gave them credit for."

"Do we have any idea who we're dealing with, Sir?"

"Officially, Orbital Command has said nothing ... to me anyway," he added. "It's probably a group of pirates. The colonists probably uncovered something they weren't supposed to know about." It was his best theory, though anyone could see it didn't make sense. Malyon did very little trade on an interstellar basis and was too remote to be of any strategic value. There were no other colonies in the system, and its only hypergate was to its homeworld, Auria.

"I just hope we get a chance to take the bastards on this time, Sir."

"Be careful what you wish for, Corporal," Hidek scolded.

Danoy frowned, "Have you been in many firefights, Haleth Captain?"

"Plenty when I was in law enforcement. As far as official military campaigns go, just Thurin. Which wasn't really everything the legends paint it to be."

He didn't elaborate, instead electing to allow the Corporal to draw her own romantic images of

a heroic rescue operation. Thirty soldiers in the latest battle gear fighting a group of five poorly armed middle-aged businessmen. The political office called them militant radicals, but Hidek read the intelligence reports: retired military officers turned merchants who tried to avoid paying taxes by stockpiling goods offworld. When they got caught, they panicked, took a group of Trade Ministry inspectors hostage, and tried to bargain their way out. The entire operation lasted three hours--two and a half of which were spent navigating the ventilation shafts just to get into the place.

"You're too modest, Sir. It earned you a Haleth designation," she beamed. "They don't just hand those out for nothing."

Hidek debated arguing that one. Should he remind her that when a society has no real enemies to defend itself against, the military is relegated to serve as the blue-collar workforce to help build farms and villages for a bunch of elderly colonists? Should he point out that there were currently fifty-five (or was it fifty-six now?) Haleth-designated officers actively serving in the military, and more than half of them were born after the last war? "I suppose you're right," he said at last, deciding to keep silent out of respect for those who had performed a worthwhile service to their world.

"I'm afraid that, being stuck on this rock flying an unarmed troop transport, it'll be years before I get to see any real action."

Hidek chuckled slightly. "Get shot at and die, and they call you a hero. Get shot and live, and they call you a Haleth. Either way, you don't have to do much except duck--or not duck." Noticing her disappointment, he decided to confess, rather than let her think he was ungrateful for the honor. "Okay, look, just between us, all I did was trade a few rounds with a level nine starship mechanic in a hanger bay. I finally managed to put one in his leg and take him down before I ran out of ammo. Had he been smarter, he would have known to wait and make me waste a few more shots. Then he could have just walked over and put one between my eyes at point blank. The story isn't exactly the kind of thing they put in the history books. Honestly I did more heroic things when I was a plain beat-enforcer back in the teen levels of the industrial sector, and all they gave me for that was a paycheck."

She smiled, as if not believing a thing he was trying to tell her.

The intercom beeped and Chief Keldin's voice crackled over the speaker, "The men are standing by and ready to deploy, Haleth Captain."

"Very good, Chief," Hidek answered as he unstrapped himself from the co-pilot's chair. "Drop

pattern Gamma in ninety seconds ... mark. Who's our tac/com officer?"

"Egril, Sir."

"Good. I want you and Egril at point with me."

"Yes, sir." The intercom went dead.

Hidek checked the ammo in his sidearm and found himself wishing the nature of his command would have allowed him to carry a bit more firepower, or at least some less-archaic support equipment. He had been better equipped for a fight when he was a police officer, and had never had to face armed gunships back then. Unfortunately, agricultural garrisons did not normally stock advanced combat equipment in their inventories. Hidek winced as he mentally calculated the collective experience of his men. "Corporal," he snapped, turning back to the pilot, "once the men are deployed, I want you to do a flyover of the village, then circle around to the east. Maintain radio silence until you're at least two clicks away."

"Yes, sir."

Hidek had never seen such carnage in his life. While the Settler's Grove attack had resulted in a few fields burned and a few warehouses looted, this one was much more thorough. No structure in the tiny walled village of New Rinsic had gone untouched, and only a few bare frames of buildings were left standing. The rest had been reduced to piles of wood, steel, and melted plastic that continued to smolder an hour later despite the continual heavy rain. Within a short time they had accounted for 160 of the 177 residents - all dead. The thoroughness of the attack convinced Hidek that the remainder would be found buried in the debris.

He grew more and more concerned that he was not dealing with simple pirate raids. This attack had the methodical look of someone who was trying to neutralize entire populations. He had heard of such operations being used to contain particularly aggressive plagues on frontier worlds, but quickly dismissed the thought. Even if OrbCom had decided to keep the garrison commanders out of the loop, there would have been rumors on the local newsnets. He walked slowly through the village checking

the scanners. There were no life readings, and the village had the eerie quiet of a ghost town about it.

"Recon reports all crops and outlying structures completely destroyed as well, Haleth Captain," Keldin said, reading a report from the communications officer.

"It doesn't make sense, Chief," Hidek muttered. "If somebody's staked a claim to this planet, why resort to sneak attacks on farming villages? And why be concerned only with this part of the planet? If their intent is to drive us away, they should be systematically attacking military outposts. What was the point of this slaughter? Surely they know command will just send in reinforcements and hunt them down."

"Then what is it? What are we missing?" Keldin asked.

"Sir!" a panicked shout came from Private Egril as he ran up the dirt path to where the two men were standing. "I'm picking up scrambled chatter on a low-band frequency. It's pretty strong, Sir, can't be too far away."

"What direction?"

The tac/com officer checked the readings on his equipment. "East, Sir," Egril said, his voice shaking.

He's losing it already, Hidek thought. He should have been sure enough of the direction and not wasted time confirming it. At the very least, the display should have been second nature to him and should not have taken those few seconds to read. If they were about to get into combat, Hidek knew would not be able to rely on his men's ability to react with the necessary degree of assuredness. He needed to find a way to instill confidence in these men, and he needed to do it quickly. "Check with Orbital Command," he said calmly. "See if they are running any support ops in our area."

"Yes, Sir," the officer replied, hastily tapping out a series of codes on his console. He repeated the series two more times, then frowned. "I am getting no response from OrbCom."

"We're being jammed?"

"No, Sir, the station's transponder signal is strong. It's like there's no one up there to answer, Sir."

That didn't make sense. The operations center at the orbital command was understaffed by any definition of the term, but they certainly would have a team posted to monitor Hidek and his men in

such a potentially dangerous situation. "You're sure?"

"Positive sir."

"Pipe that scrambled signal over to me," he snapped. Egril hesitated a moment again, then punched a series of commands into the terminal. A strange flood of electronic chirps and flutters came out over the earpiece in Hidek's helmet. Hidek listened to the scrambled transmission for a moment. A more-experienced communications officer would have been able to estimate the type and origin of the unit just by listening to the electronic gibberish. There wasn't anyone on this planet with that kind of experience, however, and he found it difficult to blame Egril for that gap in his training. "Call Danoy, tell her to run recon for us."

The communication's officer squinted and froze, listening to a new set of signals. "Corporal Danoy is calling us, Sir. Visual confirmation of two inbound craft closing at low altitude." Suddenly he gasped in pain and instinctively tried to cover his ears, though his hands clasped uselessly to the outside of his helmet. Hidek heard the static from two meters away and knew the source even before the comm officer reported it. "An explosion, Sir. I think the transport's been hit."

Hidek grabbed the console and configured it for his own headset faster than he knew Egril would have been capable. He extracted the microphone from the pocket in his helmet and fitted it over his mouth. "Danoy, come in. Report."

There was only static.

"Corporal, what's going on over there?!" he yelled, as if the forcefulness of his voice might somehow compel her to answer. After a few more seconds of silence he switched over to the broadcast frequency. "All units, this is Command. We have incoming aircraft on approach from the east, presumed hostile. Take cover and prepare to repel attack, but only if fired upon first. I repeat, do not fire unless fired upon. Recon 1 and 2 take up positions in the hills to the north, you're going to be our eyes." He threw the console back at Egril with a frustrated growl.

Hidek, Keldin, and Egril took cover behind the village's eastern wall just as the noise of aircraft rose over the din of rain. Hidek unstrapped the lazriffle from his back, checked the power load, and scanned the horizon. The small, electronic tactical screen projected over his left eyepiece indicated the position of the targets, though he still could not see them himself.

Within seconds the aircars shrieked over the village. The noise was deafening. A volley of fierce

gunfire erupted from the rubble. Flashes of supercharged energy streaked upwards towards the ships and dissipated on the invisible shell-like energy shields. The two craft split off north and south.

That was a tactical mistake, Hidek thought. He was disappointed, though not surprised that the men had completely forgotten their orders. The craft were nothing less than intimidating; terrifying to the inexperienced. Still, he would make it a point to reprimand the men for disobeying orders and endangering the team should they make it back alive now.

"Recon 1 reports no visible damage to the craft," the communications officer offered, though Hidek had already made that assessment himself. If the enemy could take out an armored transport in a matter of seconds, then lazriffls would be of little use.

The craft were like nothing he had seen before. The tactical display's automated silhouette recognition also showed no match. "Do you recognize their configuration, Chief?" he shouted over the roar of their thrusters.

"No, Sir," Keldin answered. "Very advanced design, though. Both craft look brand new."

Hidek watched one of the aircars circle around the north side of the village, slowing as it approached the outer wall. Electronic markers on the tactical display constantly showed the exact positions of each of his men, even when they were visibly obscured by structures or landscape. Recon 1 was on top of a hill amidst a grove of trees. Recon 2 was directly underneath the enemy. It was unlikely that they could be seen with the unaided eye, and their suits would protect them from most conventional sensors.

Light flashed briefly from the ground as Recon 2 opened fire on the aircar. The men were panicking.

The craft quickly pulled up, reversed direction, and sent a sent two quick blasts of blue-white energy back towards the source of the gunfire. The tactical markers faded from his display instantly, but there was a full second of silence before the sound of the shots reached him. If the blast had been powerful enough to knock out the telemetry on a combat suit, it was unlikely that anyone in the suit would have survived. He had just lost three good men.

"Sir, I've lost Recon 2," the communications officer said hurriedly. "Recon 1 reports there is still no significant damage to the aircraft."

"Dammit! We're not equipped for a bloody firefight!" Hidek swore. He struggled to remember the names of the men assigned to Recon 2, but drew a blank--despite the fact that he'd picked them personally.

The sound of more weapons fire erupted from the south. The other craft had swung around and was making a strafing run behind the south wall of the village. Hidek's tactical display confirmed that the craft knew exactly where they were aiming. As the explosion collapsed the wall, two men ran out to avoid being crushed and were quickly and mercilessly gunned down.

A third series of shots erupted on north side of the village. They watched the grove of trees protecting Recon 1 go up in flames.

Hidek felt an overwhelming feeling of helplessness eat at his stomach. "Dammit!" he shrieked, slamming a fist into the wall behind him. Instantly he regained his air of calmness. "Tac/com, relay our situation to Valindor base. Request backup and emergency medical evac. All units will begin retreat south into the jungle. Maybe we can lose them there."

Eight men dead--half of his force--wiped out in a matter of seconds.

He thought for a moment, trying to come to grips with the situation. "Order all units to power down their suits."

"Sir, that's against procedure," Keldin shouted over the noise.

Hidek knew all about procedure, of course. With the suits powered down, they would no longer receive battle telemetry and sensor displays, to say nothing of the fact that they would lose the benefit of the sensor jammers. They would be relying solely on their own, unaided capabilities. "Just do it!" he barked as he pressed the series of buttons on the sleeve of his forearm that shut down his own suit, "Now! Both of you! And order the rest of the men to do the same."

Egril transmitted the orders, and hastily obeyed his Captain.

It had been quiet for a few seconds, and the attackers were no doubt looking for new targets. The northern aircar had turned and headed back towards the east. Hidek guessed it was planning to verify the destruction of the transport and neutralize any survivors. The other craft slowly circled above their heads. When it had finally angled itself away from them, Hidek motioned for Keldin and Egril to start the retreat to the south. The three ran along side the eastern wall. It took only a few seconds for

the aircraft to notice the movement and swing around to intercept them.

More energy bolts, this time fired from the center of the village, licked at the gunships. Surely the men knew the weapons were unable to get through the enemies' shields. This was an act of desperate heroism rather than blind panic. Against his own orders, those men were deliberately sacrificing their lives to buy him time to retreat. He felt shame at underestimating his own people, shame at putting them in such circumstances unprepared, and panging guilt that he had not offered to sacrifice himself thusly.

The aircar stopped and returned two quick blasts. Quickly, ruthlessly, mercilessly, their numbers were reduced to three. Hidek, Keldin, and Egril leapt the wall and ran straight for the treeline.

"Run!" Hidek shouted, "It will only take them a couple of seconds to reacquire us."

As if to confirm, they instantly heard the aircar throttle up. Though he did not look back, the growing noise told him that they had only seconds before they were overtaken. Then came the sound of gunfire--another strafing run. Hidek's lungs burned from the smoke and stench as he ran with all his strength, Egril and Kafsai were two steps behind him. They reached the edge of the jungle and dove for cover in a small gulley lined with outcropped tree roots just as the aircraft passed overhead. Hidek motioned for the Keldin and Egril to remove the useless helmets that limited their hearing and peripheral vision.

"They'll have to rely on thermal and motion sensors now," Keldin observed. "Get down in the mud and try to stay as still as possible."

It would be at least twenty minutes before backup arrived, with luck, the gunships would give up their search long before then; if not, he might be forced to witness a repeat of the slaughter he had just escaped from--assuming he could avoid getting killed himself in that span of time.

Based on the sound, he guessed the enemy had slowed and was hovering over the trees approximately fifty meters further into the jungle. The second aircar had already returned and was slowly circling the village again. Then, in unison, both craft powered up their thrusters and flew north, disappearing over the horizon before Hidek realized he had been holding his breath.

After a few moments, the sounds of wildlife returned. It was still an eerie feeling, being trapped as they were in the wilderness, not knowing what manner of creatures walked only a few paces away. Hidek hoped that if any of them were carnivorous, they would be drawn to the scent of the fresh kills

back in the village and ignore the living prey--at least for the time being. The thought sickened him as soon as it entered his mind, and he wrote it off as a psychological defense mechanism.

With their suits and comm-links turned off, Hidek watched the others for autophobic responses. For probably the first time in their lives, there was nobody--not even an automated vidcam--watching them. Nobody was reading their blood pressure, heart rate, body temperature, global position, or movement. Nobody was listening to their every breath or recording and archiving every word he said and filing it away in an endless archive at the Ministry of Defense. Nobody knew where they were or if they were even alive.

He had been through extensive psychological scenarios more terrifying than this when he first trained as an officer. Had had he shown any pronounced aversions to isolation, he would never have been given his commission. Still, if he did not have greater concerns now, he was certain that the full realization would set in, and he too would be terrified.

He focused all his energies on the thirteen men who had just been lost under his command. That was his main concern. He spat and swore to himself that he would avenge them before the end.

"... and you didn't recognize the design of the ships?"

Hidek sat back in the command chair. He had served with Joad Kasfal for six years and could think of no one he would rather have as his First Lieutenant. Kasfal had been his first--and for a while his only--friend when the social promotions program had granted him a military rank, despite not having any formal training or experience.

Kasfal, by contrast, was a born and bred soldier and understood that the spirit of that honor went beyond such formalities. He recognized Hidek as a noble, able commander and warrior of the streets, if not the battlefield. He had been Hidek's conscience, mentor, and advisor all through indoctrination. He had made every effort to steer Hidek towards a successful, productive military career. He jokingly told stories of how together they had survived the "horrible battle of Thurin," even though he had not received the Haleth commendation and promotion that Hidek had garnered. When Hidek became his superior officer, Kasfal showed no animosity. Hidek knew he owed no small debt to

Kafsai for preparing the men for this latest change of command. He trusted Kafsai implicitly and considered him to be his best friend.

Still, Kafsai's official tone made the debriefing almost feel like an interrogation at times. Hidek ran through the sequence of events in his mind once again, as he had done repeatedly for the past three hours. Everything seemed to blur together as one long, bright noise to him. He had relived the events so many times now that he was beginning to doubt the accuracy of his own memory. This much was certain, however: he was no closer to discerning the identity of the attackers now than he was when he stood toe to toe with their gunships, and that made this debriefing a waste of time.

"Positive," Hidek said, defeated. "I've been through the war books and all of our intelligence files on the current designs coming out of all known shipyards. I even went through the records of the other colonies and free nations. I couldn't find anything that even remotely resembled these things anywhere. Of course, it would help if we had any of the video or telemetry that the suits should have captured."

"Nothing. We lost the feed with you as soon as Egril picked up the scrambled signal. The data storage in your suits was wiped clean. Had to be some kind of electronic pulse or jamming system."

Hidek sighed. "This is bad, Joad."

"Pirates?" Kafsai said, almost pushing the assumption on Hidek.

"That's what I thought at first, but those ships were very advanced for non-military craft. Pirates usually can't afford to have ships made to spec. It would take a fortune to equip them and keep their construction under wraps, even if these two were the only ones they had."

Kafsai shrugged, "Maybe they stole prototypes of some kind. You know, classified design."

"Possibly, but pirates are pretty cowardly when it comes to a firefight, and there's no profit in blowing up villages and burning farms, and if there was something of value there that they wanted, they never stopped to collect it."

"Well, Capatin, I'm running out of ideas here."

"Any response from OrbCom to my report."

The Lieutenant shook his head. "Just an acknowledgement that it was received. Otherwise things have been strangely quiet up there for the past two hours. I left word with the communications

center to deliver any additional messages to you the moment they come in."

Frustrated, Hidek threw the datapad on the table. "Bureaucrats and greenhorns!" he grunted. "There was no response to our requests for backup or tactical support when we were there either. If we were back home and they showed that kind of incompetence, they'd all be..." He paused.

"Shipped out to a remote agricultural colony someplace?" Kafsai smiled grimly. "So, somebody panicked. Those people are expecting to deal with overzealous settlers who get lost in the woods and get attacked by Tarwulfs, not gunship assaults. Granted they may be a bit out of their league up there, but what can you do about it?"

"I've already done it. I filed a formal complaint explaining how I find it extremely difficult to perform my duties in these adverse conditions if I can't even count on my own command center to respond to emergency calls."

"Well, you may be the big Haleth back home, but that doesn't really count for much in this post. I doubt OrbCom will take you seriously, Captain."

"They'd better. I copied Duguth General Nordril's office on it, secure-com, eyes only. He's on an inspection tour, but will see it first thing when he gets back four days from now."

"You what!?" Kafsai sat up, amazed.

"That's right. That little communications snafu cost the lives of thirteen men, I'm sure he'll be very interested in hearing exactly how that happened."

"I hope you know what you're doing. Once Orbial Command finds out you went over their heads, it's likely to put you on a lot of people's bad sides. We still have to work with these people, you know."

"Yeah, what are they going to do? Ignore me next time I'm getting shot at and call up for support?"

"They might make you give up your beaches," Kafsai chuckled.

A Corporal entered the room, interrupting the thought. "Excuse me, Sirs. This just came in from OrbCom."

"Finally!" Hidek smirked, taking the datapad. "Thank you." He completely drew a blank on the

Corporal's name. With his adrenaline level dropping, he found himself growing more and more tired. The others were probably finding him extremely irritable, he thought.

Kafsai leaned in and eyed the datapad. "What does it say?"

Hidek read the display and scrolled down the page with his right thumb. "They've read my report and, in the interest of avoiding rumor and speculation, have ordered an investigation from the Ministry of Internal Affairs. "

"Well, that's what you'd hoped for then," the Lieutenant smiled. "Anything else?"

Hidek scanned further down the screen. "Orders for the deployment of additional equipment and troops in the event of further attacks."

"Don't they know we're short on supplies and bunks as it is? Where are these new guys going to sleep, in a lazturret or--" Kafsai cut himself off, realizing that there were now thirteen empty bunks back in the barracks. "--Sorry, Sir," he said dejectedly.

Hidek grimaced and nodded, reading the expression on his Lieutenant's face. "Regardless, I have a feeling we're going to need--" he paused and stared in disbelief at the datapad.

"What is it?"

Hidek threw the datapad on to the table in disgust. "We are ordered to conduct no further investigation of our own or to discuss the 'incident' with any of the other officers or men until the results of the Ministry's investigation are made public. We are to make no admissions or speculations about the 'incident' or offer any comment or confirmation to any civilian agencies."

"They're shutting you up while they cover their collective asses."

Hidek arched his eyebrows. "Failure to comply will result in disciplinary action or general court martial."

Kafsai rolled his eyes. "Oh my, and they're serious. Probably some bureaucrat up there wants to earn accolades for swooping in and resolving the matter personally."

"Somebody up there isn't thinking. How the hell am I supposed to prepare the men for another attack if I can't talk about what little we do know? How can we prepare civil defense plans for the other villages if we can't talk about the specific threat?"

"Well, surely you can use your Captain's prerogative and request a clarification of orders from the Ministry of Defense."

"That may work fine at any other post, but do you really think it's going to do any good this far out? Think about how many more civilians could die before my request makes it through all the red tape."

Kafsal took a sip from his coffee and seemed to ponder the situation for a moment, "Look's like you filed that complaint prematurely."

Chapter 3

It would probably be a best seller, if only people still bothered to read period novels, printed ones at that. Serah Wyles saved and closed the file on her datapad. Just a few more edits and it would be ready to share. As a journalist, she'd published interviews and exposes on kings, ministers, dictators, and psychopaths, sometimes one and the same, but the idea of publishing something as personal and internal as a novel terrified her. It took years of coaxing from her editor and friend, Henri, and the ominous approach of her 30th birthday to make her realize there was room in her life for both professional goals and personal dreams.

The first-class lounge of the starliner Olorin encompassed almost the entire lower deck. Through the large windows that made up all four walls, as well as much of the floor, an incredible field of stars slowly shifted around her as the ship made the turn to put its bow in line with the massive hyperspace portal. For a moment, she felt as though the couch were sliding across the floor and instinctively grabbed the arm of the seat, even though the inertia fields generated by the ship nullified any sense of motion.

It was, to this point, the most exciting spectacle the otherwise empty lounge had offered. She had left her cabin and made the short walk down to the lounge as soon as the captain announced they were third in line to enter the gateway. It was only after she arrived that she learned the gateway was only activated once per hour, which meant she had a long wait ahead of her. With portal activation and entry being a less than exciting visual spectacle -- really nothing more than watching a big ship pass into shadow amidst a few flickers of lightning-like plasma -- most of the passengers would not even bother to come down until much closer to their scheduled departure. Even then, it was less about seeing the spectacle and more about being seen as the spectacle.

She contemplated turning off the visual sensory recorder, which had been meticulously recording every physical sensation of hers since boarding the starliner, but decided that in the interest of completeness, she could edit out the more boring details with the help of an analyzer before uploading her trip to the Phrame. For all she knew, there could be completists who were fascinated with seeing different classes of starships that diligently waited their turns to enter one of the dozen portals that surrounded Midway station, or who longed to know that the orange juice at the lounge service bar was a bit too warm and sour, or who had always wondered about the softness of the synthetic wool fabric of the lounge sofas. With luck, there would be a few who might pay a premium rate for such

thoroughness. Most interested parties, however, would probably be content with an edited version that skipped the minutae of interstellar travel.

The shuttle from Earth to the gate station—nearly four AU perpendicular to the center of the plane of the ecliptic—had only taken three days. She made good use of a one-day layover at that waypoint exploring the duty-free shops and sampling the latest cuisines from the outer colonies and free systems. It was typical tourist stuff but would certainly be of interest to some earthbound citizen. From there, the Olorin would make the two-jump trip to Auria. First to Midway station, and then to Auria gate approximately four hours later, where she would catch another shuttle for the four day trip from the gate to Auria itself. For a starliner, normally booked as a casual luxury trip, this was very fast, but Olorin, once a shore-to-shore luxury liner that would make the trip in weeks, had long since been relegated to simple gate-to-gate ferry duties a couple of times a day. She was much more opulent than an express shuttle service, but much too old and quaint compared to the new generations of luxury liners that dwarfed it.

"If you were hoping to bump elbows with rich and famous down here," a voice came from behind her, "I'm afraid you're going to be disappointed." A man walked around the side of the couch and sat down in one of the oversized chairs across from her. She guessed him to be in his early forties. He was tall, slender, with deep-set grey blue eyes and hair that was just starting to go grey at the temples. His suit was charcoal gray and distinctly Aurian in style. He held a glass of champagne in each hand, and offered her one.

"So I gathered," she said, taking the glass. "It was mostly business people in the departure lounge. Not one good conversation to be had." She, nodded cordially, and took a sip. Though, she knew very little about champagne, she was informed enough to know that what was in the glass was very good quality, even if it did not come from an Earth vineyard. "Is this Aurian?" she asked, smiling approvingly.

"As a matter of fact it is," the man nodded. "I thought it might help set the mood for you."

"Thank you, Mr...."

"Uller," he said, smiling warmly. "Phaedo Uller. And you are Ms. Serah Wiles from the Neward and Provident Newsnet agency."

"I didn't realize I was known on Auria," she said, smiling half-heartedly.

"I'm sorry to say you are not, and I suspect it is our loss." He raised one eyebrow. "No, I noticed the VSR on your belt when you were on your way down here and asked the porter told me who you were. You see, I run a large technology and manufacturing company on Auria and am always fascinated by Earth tech. I assume it is currently recording?"

Serah nodded. "That's right. You don't have VSR's on Auria."

"There's no market for them," he explained between sips from his glass. "Cybernetics was never fashion the way it was on Earth. In fact everything but the most basic trans-human ideals are something of a taboo on our world, I'm afraid. Very few augmentations, no synthetic personalities to speak of, not even life model simulations. In addition, the government's restrictions on Earth tech technically forbid us from importing or copying any of your designs. Though for the most part they turn a blind eye to everything but blatant disregard of regulations, strictly in the interest of keeping the technology reasonably compatible. I suppose it makes us look like primitives to Terrans."

Serah knew all this from her research and sympathized somewhat. "Well, Mr. Uller, I'm a Terran who is actually going off-world to conduct interviews and record a story, where anyone else would simply use an avatar or telepresence. That makes me just as much an anachronism to most Terrans."

"Well, at least you have the VSR and aren't dragging a crew of directors, set decorators, and vid operators with you," Uller said.

Serah fumbled the cortical interface behind her left ear where the VSR at her belt connected with a barely-noticeable wire. "Oh, two years ago I would have. I only got this because I was starting to get tired of writing, typing, and still managing to lose all my research notes."

They both chuckled, cordially and sipped awkwardly at their champagne and Serah became quickly aware of her casual body posture. She sat upright and adjusted her jacket. "So, what brought you to Earth, Mr. Uller?" she asked in a tone that was slightly too journalist-like to be conversation.

"Please, call me Phaedo," he smiled. "Actually, I am only passing through after finishing up some business on Thurin and transferred here at the gate station. I've never actually been to Earth."

"Really?" She marveled. "A frequent interstellar traveler like yourself has never bothered to visit the mother planet?"

He smiled, condescendingly. "Aurians don't have such a sentimental attachment to it. When it

comes down to it, Earth is quite detached from the independent worlds. You have no pressing need for trade or commerce, as you can produce just about anything we can more efficiently. You have no real interest in art or culture other than your own, so you're less than interesting as tourists, and frankly, most of you inherently distrust off-worlders."

"I see," she said, sounding disappointed.

"Present company excluded, of course," Uller caught himself with a smile. "That's why I found you so interesting. What brings you out to Auria?"

"I'm going to be spending a few weeks doing a docu-experience on your world."

"Ah," Uller said, impressed, "I've heard of those. Seems a silly waste of your talents, doesn't it? I mean a journalist of your caliber--"

"It's not one of 'those types,'" she interrupted quickly, realizing that Uller had no doubt gotten the wrong impression of her. "Neward and Provident is a respectable news agency, not an exploitative adult entertainment publisher. This is a serious piece to document the attractions, culture, and lifestyle on your world. I'll be sampling your cuisine, visiting your historic sites, talking to your people. You see, not all Terrans are so isolated and disinterested. We just do tourism a bit differently, I suppose."

"Oh, I'm terribly sorry," Uller blushed. "I suppose off-world perception of 'the mother world' does tend to err in favor of stereotypes at times."

"I see," Serah muttered. She was not actually offended by Uller's remarks, in fact she mostly agreed with him. "Apology accepted, then," she sighed, smiled, and finished the last of her champagne.

A low hum made the room shutter slightly as the drive engines were engaged. The massive rectangular frame of the gateway generator in front them grew steadily larger. They could see the lights on the steel frame blinking in sequence--first red, then yellow, and finally green. A flicker of blue static ran through the black, starless void between the pylons. The ship continued forward, gradually picking up speed. Serah stared into the nothingness of the artificial wormhole and felt a rush of anxiety, but quickly dismissed the feeling. After nearly three hundred years, hypergates had a nearly perfect operational record.

The ship nosed its way into the gate, the enormous structure slid past the side windows. A second, identical gate appeared at the far end of the room and moved in unison with the first. Though

the two structures appeared to be separated only by thirty or forty feet of starless space, Serah's mind knew they actually marked the entrance and exit of a quantum tunnel, twenty-two light years long. She felt no sensation as she passed through it, and the view changed only slightly between the two sides. Notably, the number and configuration of ships were different, the brilliant orb on the port side that had been Sol was now gone, and a slightly paler orb of a different sun now appeared on the starboard side.

She was now almost halfway across the width of human expansion. She exhaled slowly, having forgotten to breathe during the transit.

Outside the forward window a small gray speck--at first no bigger than her thumb at arms length--gradually grew in size, becoming the distinct hour-glass shape of a large stardock. Dozens of ships, attached by umbilical arms, berthed at the upper and lower segments.

"And there's Midway station," Uller said triumphantly.

"Amazing," she said, her voice cracking a little.

"Have you been there before?"

"No, actually, I've never been downeast at all," she said, using the standard compass convention that someone had arbitrarily come up with to make conversations like these easier: Galactic center was always north; clockwise around the arms was west; counterclockwise, east--up and down were occasionally used with reference to distance perpendicular to the ecliptic--thus Midway station was casually considered 'downeast' from Earth. "When I graduated, I took a cruise to Poseidus and Manitou, just like everyone else. This is the first time I've had to travel interstellar professionally."

"And now you find yourself on the farthest border of Earth's influence, the gateway to the independent worlds, and the Child-Empires of man." He gestured with a flourish and named the four gateways silently floating outside the windows. "Ofaniel, Dumas, and of course, our Auria."

"What is the fourth one, a new gateway not on line yet?" Serah asked, indicating the furthest steel structure. Unlike the other three, it was not lit and had no line of ships waiting to use it.

"I'm afraid not," Uller said with an air of mystery, "That was the gate to Notosia."

Serah felt a cold chill. Notosia had been colonized by political exiles. It was an anarchistic state for almost two hundred years as various political and corporate factions fought each other for control of

the government. When the hypergate at the other end was destroyed during one of their myriad revolts over a decade ago, all links between Notosia and the rest of the galaxy were completely severed. Without the gateways, a conventional transmission took almost a decade to reach the world, and in order to re-establish the quantum bridge, a new gateway would have to be sent to Notosia through normal space – a twenty-three-year trip from Midway Station. In the interest of conserving resources, Earth had coldly decided that Notosia had always been more trouble than it was worth, and was better left to its own fate.

"Will you be taking the shuttle to Midway?" Uller asked, snapping Serah back to the present.

"Me? Oh, no, I'm going non-stop to Auria gate on the next jump. I should be planetside in two days. Why? Are you not going home just yet?"

Uller frowned, disappointed. "I'm afraid not. I have some business to tend to on the station tomorrow. I'll reboard tomorrow." He smiled. "Tell me, did your agency make arrangements for you to meet the Royal Family during your visit?"

Serah grimaced. "I didn't think any offworlders ever met the Royal Family."

"Ah, very few thus far," he replied, holding up a finger, "but I have some influence with the Court." He smiled, studying her reaction. "Allow me to do you a favor, purely in the interest of making your docu-experience more exciting, and see if I can't call in a few favors on your behalf."

A wide grin spread across Serah's face. "Really? You could. . . You would do that for me?"

"Think nothing of it. Where will you be staying?"

"The Omniluminez in Arco Naima," she offered.

"I'm familiar with it. You'll love it there. I'll have someone contact you with the arrangements."

"Thank you--," she started to say, but suddenly felt disoriented. Uller was speaking, but his voice seemed to echo through her head. The room spun lazily for a moment. She felt her body sway slightly. There was a blur of motion as Uller's large gray form moved forward to catch her with enormous outstretched hands. What little light there was in the room seemed to grow dim. Her last memory was the sickening sensation of falling.

The two-day journey from the Hypergate to Auria's orbital starport was exhausting. Following the incident in the lounge--written off by the ship's doctor as a simple reaction to the Aurian liquor--she didn't see Uller again. The ship arrived at Auria just after midnight metroplex time, which to her felt like mid-morning. After three hours spent mired in legal formality, working out travel and technology permit issues at the starport, the metroplex entry terminal, and finally Earth's embassy on Auria, she managed to reach her hotel. Before she had even had the chance to unpack, the concierge delivered the personal communique from Uller: A private transport would pick her up in a mere four hours to take her to the Royal Palace for a personal tour. In a panic, she had the room's data terminal brush her up on protocol while she showered and changed into something more appropriate to wear. She cursed Phaedo Uller's efficiency the whole time.

As she walked out of the hotel lobby onto the transit platform, she got her first view of Auria in daylight. The platform extended outward from the hotel lobby ten meters above a large open parking area. Below she could see rows of aircars meticulously lined around a marked thoroughfare where transit trains regularly ran. A large pit, forty meters in diameter served as the entrance to the metroplex itself, which extended nearly two kilometers to ground level, and another kilometer beyond that. She looked up and marveled at a cloudless blue sky between the tall columns of office buildings and apartment towers. The air seemed surprisingly fresh for being this far into a major city/island, and there was only a slight breeze with the faintest chill of early spring about it.

Strangely, Auria did not feel all that different from Earth. The only notable difference, in fact, was the visible population. She was enthralled to be around so many actual flesh-and-blood people, rather than the light-projected avatars or vid images--now the most common means of socializing on Earth. She had often heard people saying that Terrans were inherently sociophobes, though she hadn't really given the accusations much thought. It was not until she stood in line to enter a lift, or accidentally bumped in to someone on the crowded boarding platform--which they didn't even acknowledge or seem to notice--that she finally understood how detached and isolated Earthers had become. Strangely, despite its obvious inconveniences, life felt more natural this way, and somehow, she felt more at home on Auria than back in London.

Her transport was parked at the far end of the platform. It was really nothing more than a flat

circular disk, three meters in diameter and one meter thick, ringed by bench seats along a waist-high rail. A smartly dressed man walked down the short ramp and made his way through the crowd directly towards her. "Ms. Wyles?" he asked, not waiting for her to respond. "My name is Andru, Mr. Uller sent me to take you to the palace." He gestured towards the disc.

"Thank you," she said and clumsily made her way through the crowd.

Andru skillfully darted ahead of her, stopping at the base of the ramp. He waited for her to walk up before boarding. She eased herself onto one of the padded benches as Andru walked to a small pilot's podium at what she presumed was the front of the disc. He expertly manipulated a series of controls. Silently, the ramp retracted as the disc began to climb into the air. Inertial compensators and graviton generating engines insured she felt no sensation of movement.

As the disc made its way down the transit pit, maneuvering through a series of tunnels and throughfares--some exposed to daylight, others completely covered by overlapping structures and walkways--Andru explained that he had been instructed to take her along an indirect route so that she may record a better view of the city.

During the trip, he pointed out various points of interest--recommending some as interesting places to visit or eat; warning her to avoid others. He was able to answer most of her questions and seemed to have an extensive knowledge of the history of many of the places they passed.

After ten or fifteen minutes, the disc entered the massive canyon-like thoroughfare that Andru explained was one of many that spanned the entire city and separated various political districts. She was amazed that she still could only barely make out the bottom. She understood that the hotel was located on level twenty-nine, and that parts of the city were over forty levels tall. Until now, she had not fully grasped the idea that one level averaged twenty to thirty meters in height, and consisted of several multi-storied buildings.

As the craft descended rapidly almost half a kilometer to ground level, the air became warmer and slightly more humid. Artificial lighting gradually took over as they entered the shadows of the artificial canyon. Traffic became more and more congested. Andru explained that they were entering a historical area where some of the first structures built on Auria still stood. She noted that most of the buildings were uninteresting in their architecture, the same dull gray of steel and that she had seen all her life at home. Enormous immigration demands had no doubt led to an incredible demand for housing and commercial building sites--demands that left little time for the development of unique or

artistic designs. The economic conveniences of prefabrication and duplication meant that most of the oldest buildings were simply cookie-cutter copies of each other. Uniquely "Aurian" movements in art and architectural style didn't seem to have taken root until decades later, much deeper into the metroplex. It seemed an odd contrast to Earth, where older generally equated with artistry and newer with efficiency.

Andru explained that the decision was made early in Auria's founding to limit bulk of the urban settlements to the islands just off the coast of the largest continental mass. She already knew this of course. Aurians were notoriously environmentally-conscious. When the islands filled, the cities were simply built upwards--stacked on top of each other--rather than spilling significantly across the shoreline and unnecessarily destroying natural resources. There were warehouses, shipyards, transport stations, and a few small cities on the coast of the continent itself, most of these were dedicated to transporting goods back and forth between the Metroplex islands and the agricultural and mining centers further inland. All of them combined, however, totaled up to only a fraction of the population that lived in the Metroplex itself.

The mentality of "stacking cities" had minimized the impact on the natural ecosystem of Auria, and had solved most of the problems of energy consumption, transportation, and communication that had plagued Earth for centuries. The self-sufficient arcology towers, originally designed to simplify government by creating local agencies and the necessary evils of bureaucracy, helped Auria to grow both economically and socially by giving it's populace a feeling of community in which they had a personal stake, but now efficiently housed millions of people, most of whom have all of the necessities of life within a few hundred meters of their homes. Serah found it amazing that, after three centuries, the population of planet Auria had grown to nearly four billion, yet less than 400,000 square kilometers of the surface had been disturbed by urban, industrial, and agricultural development.

As they approached the end of the thoroughfare, the structures that made up the walls grew gradually shorter in height. Eventually there was only a single level of square, gray buildings that surrounded an expansive open park-like area that was the hub of government for the entire planet. At its center stood the massive marble spires of the Royal Palace easily the most impressive, and certainly the most lavish, structure she had ever seen. Architectural regulations limited the height of artificial structures the closer they were to the royal grounds, thus ensuring the vast nature and historical preserve enjoyed abundance of sunlight for the better part of the day. The result was that, from above, the entire government complex looked like a small green eye in a sea of gray steel.

Back on Earth, there was no longer an equivalent to a structure such as this. The castles and palaces of old had either been torn down centuries ago, lost in wars whose ideals had been long forgotten, or carefully preserved in sterilized museum-domes where their atrophied structures could be shielded from the ravages of the weather and time. To see such opulence and ceremony dedicated to a single man and his family was one of Serah's primary motivations for accepting the opportunity to visit Auria. Now, thanks to Mr. Uller, she was going to meet them in person.

As the disc continued its approach over fragrant fruit groves, sparkling ponds, lively parks, elaborate fountains, and colorful gardens, the details of palace itself began to take the shape of something out of a storybook. It was an oasis of beauty in the center of the urban chaos. Andru brought the disk into a slow, spiraling descent, and Serah leaned over the railing to get a better view of the courtyard below. There was a slight vibration as the graviton generators changed focus to decelerate the platform. Within seconds it stopped, hovering less than a meter over the marked landing pad in front of a set of massive steps flanked by red marble pillars.

The gate in front of her slid back, and the small departure ramp extended itself. Serah walked down onto the cobblestone courtyard and presented her credentials to an ornately-dressed guard who tapped out a brief message on the wrist pad on the back of his glove. Within seconds her escort appeared at the palace entrance and walked down the steps to greet her.

He was a tall man, dressed in a garish uniform of crimson and gold with a cape that fluttered dramatically in the breeze. His hair was jet black with flecks of gray at the temples and his eyes were a steely blue-gray, a genetic trait that seemed to be more common on Auria than back on Earth. In all, Serah decided he was a handsome man, though he would have been more so if his face showed any sign of humor, or any other emotion for that matter.

"Good morning, Ms. Wyles," he said. "I am Haleth Captain Daon Haravan, Royal Order of the Heart. I've been assigned to escort you to your meeting with the Cwen." His voice was monotone and very rehearsed, and his attitude was one of detached formality.

"Thank you ... Captain," she was uncertain which part of his extensive title was to be used as a means of address but assumed Aurian custom still held close to its Earthen roots. Serah knew from her preliminary research that "Haleth" was the designation given to a knights who earned their rank as combat veterans, rather than through inherited nobility, and the "Royal Order of the Heart" were the soldiers assigned to the personal security of the Royal family. Captain would represent the Order's

highest rank, so no doubt Haravan was ultimately responsible for all palace's security. "It's an honor to be greeted by someone of your importance," she said, hoping it didn't make her sound too awe-struck.

Haravan did not acknowledge the compliment. "The Earth Embassy sent your credentials to us this morning. His Majesty the King regrets that matters of state will prevent him from meeting with you personally today, though he promises that, if his schedule permits, he will contact Ambassador Jeret at your Embassy and arrange an audience with you before you leave for home."

"That's very kind."

"Her Majesty Cwen Delana is very much looking forward to having lunch with you, however, and she has asked me to give you a tour of the palace and answer any preliminary questions you may have." He motioned for Serah to proceed up the steps and followed one pace behind.

When they reached the top step, a third guard dressed in the same red and gold uniform removed a small device from his belt and held it towards her. The device chirped twice and he instantly made a subtle gesture with his left hand. Serah assumed this to be some sort of silent code.

Haravan quickly stepped in front of her. His expression was grave, but not confrontational. "It appears you are carrying power source of some kind."

Serah thought for a moment. "Yes, a sensory recorder. I am a journalist." She pulled her hair off her neck to show Haravan the wire connecting the recorder on her belt to the neural jack behind her left ear.

"I'm afraid I was not informed of this. I will have to ask you to deactivate it until you have obtained permission from a member of the Royal Family to record the proceedings."

"Yes of course," she blushed and switched the recorder off at her belt. The guard made another barely noticeable gesture with his hand. She should have expected that. Journalists did not operate in the same fashion or enjoy the same freedoms here as they did on Earth. It was a very amateur mistake on her part.

Haravan smiled emotionless. "It's just a formality you understand. The ambassador informed us that you were a journalist here to do a story about Aurian life, but we had not considered that, as an Earther, you would obviously be equipped with a cybernetic recording device." He made a distasteful face, then motioned for Serah to continue into the palace. When she reached the massive entryway,

she paused and turned back to view the grounds. The courtyard was enormous--she estimated it could hold as many as 50,000 people. The administrative wings of the palace flanked it on each side, and a ten-meter-tall gated wall made of stone formed the far end. The bars of the gate were open, and she could see a grove of tall trees beyond. The site looked oddly out of place, as the enormous structures of the city still towered like steel mountains hundreds of meters above the horizon wherever she looked.

"I don't suppose you find this view quite as impressive as I do, Captain."

Haravan considered it a moment, "To be honest, miss, I've been told it's very impressive, though I have no frame of reference with which to compare it."

"On Earth, a megalopolis this large would be either domed or largely underground. To see so much of one in a single view would be almost impossible." Serah studied Haravan, who indulged her, trying to view the massive spires and the distant flutter of air skimmers, hoverdiscs, personal transports, and orbital shuttles the way she did.

"Interesting," was all Haravan could manage, and even that lacked any sort of enthusiasm. "Shall we begin the tour?" He walked into the palace and began describing various points of interest pertaining to the stonework, its history, and its architectural style. Serah followed, unsure whether her guide had a genuine interest and knowledge in such things or was merely reciting a speech that all palace guards were required to memorize. The Captain's delivery was very dry and factual, and Serah decided it was a shame that she wasn't allowed to turn on her sensory recorder--no doubt, once she obtained permission, she would have to endure this same tour a second time.

After quickly passing through several museums and galleries of famous artifacts, historical technology, regional artwork, and modern holophotography depicting each of the 27 monarchs who had ruled Auria, Haravan led Serah into the massive foyer that served as a central hub to each of the wings of the palace. She looked up and marveled. The ceiling, some 35 stories above her head, was a beautiful stained glass pattern unlike any she had ever seen before. Four enormous tapestries of gold and green, which Serah estimated must weigh several tons each, ran the entire length of the walls. At each point of the octagonal room, glass elevators ran up and down between floors, almost all of which provided observational balconies that gave room a feeling of even more space. There was a bustle of people, most walking frantically by, speaking into headsets or wrist communicators--technologies that had been obsolete for centuries back on Earth. A few others sat calmly at one of the tables surrounding the massive fountain in the center of the complex.

"It's incredible," she gasped.

Haravan seemed to have grown used to her expressions of wonder and continued without acknowledgment. "This is the central atrium of the palace. From here you may catch lifts, trams, or moving sidewalks that will take you anywhere else in the complex. Assuming you have the proper clearance, of course."

"How many people actually work here, Captain?"

"At any given time, there are between fifteen and twenty-five thousand people on the grounds. When the houses of Parliament are in session, that number can double. This includes shop and restaurant workers, tradesmen, the Cabinet of Ministers and their staffs, and various other government agencies. We employ nearly 2000 people simply for facility management."

"But the King and his family do actually live here, don't they?"

"Yes, Ms. Wyles. There are over 1000 permanent residents here, including the Royal Family, the Cabinet of Ministers and their families, and 500 staff members to maintain them--including the rest of the Order and myself. All living quarters are on the upper sixteen levels of C-Wing." He gestured at one side of the octagonal courtyard. "I'm not at liberty to discuss the exact locations, you understand."

"And you're in charge of securing all of this? That must be quite a job."

Haravan bowed slightly and smiled emotionslessly, "The Order of the Heart represents the best of the best that Auria has to offer. In addition, there are a number of technical and military staff at our disposal. You may even find it interesting to know that one of our Order serves as the wetware for the Palace's central computer network."

"Really? I thought cybernetics were illegal on Auria."

"Earth tech developed after the founding is largely illegal. Cybernetics was a fact of life back then, which technically does not officially place it on the prohibited list, though it is not nearly as prevalent here as on your world. The wetware position was a moderate concession proposed by one of our more 'progressive' Kings about a hundred years ago. At the time, many our citizens were having cybernetic modifications made--something of a fashion statement related to our Earth ancestry. The King, not wanting to appear 'behind the times' in the eyes of his subjects, ordered a complete overhaul and modernization of the palace. It was an effort to get younger people interested in and involved with

public service. While I cannot go into the details of the system, I can tell you that some of our most advanced technology is employed behind the scenes here at the palace. Some of which, you may be surprised to learn, even rival those of Earth. Would you believe that almost every aspect of this place," he gestured around, now beaming with pride, "including every door, light, environmental system, monitor, and almost two million other variables are monitored and controlled by a single man in symbiosis with the central computer?"

Serah took this as a wild boast, "You're joking, of course." Even by Earth standards, so many functions being monitored by one conscious brain would be a remarkable feat, and most of the people who attempted it would go mad if they maintained it for any length of time--though she knew of one or two people who might be up to the job.

The Captain shrugged a small concession, "There are equivalent manual and failsafe systems of course. During his off-hours a team of fifty perform the same jobs, allowing him to sleep, eat, and otherwise have a life away from his work. For the most part, however, nothing in this palace, no matter how trivial, escapes his attention."

As if on cue, the lights flickered and the giant fountain at the center of the foyer suddenly fell silent. Everyone in the immediate vicinity stopped to stare at its absence. Serah could not help but to giggle. After a few seconds, the fountain resumed its display and activity returned to normal once again.

At least someone on this planet still possessed a sense of humor, she thought. She hoped she would get the chance to meet him.

Haravan seemed annoyed but managed to smile ever-so-slightly. "Yes, I doubt even Earth can boast such a remarkable talent," he said with the slightest hint of sarcasm.

Compared to what she had seen of the rest of the palace, Serah thought the Cwen's Garden was surprisingly low-key--nothing more than a small terraced balcony displaying a modest collection of floral and plant life. Captain Haravan escorted her past the two guards who stood on either side of the arched entryway and stopped three paces in front of an old iron table that stood in the middle of the patio.

Seated at the table was an elegant, but not overstated, woman dressed in white slacks and suit jacket. Aside from a large ornamental collar and ruffled cuffs at the wrists, it was not all that different in style from what Serah wore. The woman smiled, brushed a long strand of auburn curls from in front of her face and stood to greet the newcomers. Serah knew the woman to be in her early sixties, but her appearance, no doubt preserved by artificial means, was that of a woman half her age.

"May I present," Haravan began formally, "Her Royal Majesty, Cwen Delana Prytani, Matriarch of the loyal citizens of Auria, wife of--"

"I'm sure she knows who I am, Haleth Captain, and this is not a treaty negotiation," the Cwen scolded gently, then added, "Though should the need arise, I will certainly call upon you to continue your recital." She made a gesture of dismissal, and Haravan, with an exaggerated bow, turned sharply and walked back into the palace. "Ms. Wyles, I am delighted to meet you." The Cwen's tone was informal, and she gestured Serah to the seat opposite her own.

"May I say it's an honor and a privilege to meet you, Your Majesty--"

"You may," Delana laughed, "though please address me as 'my lady.' You're not a subject, and I'm afraid it's about as informal as protocol will allow."

Serah smiled, relieved that the Cwen did not stand on ceremony. It would have made for a difficult interview. "Then please, call me Serah," she said, returning the sentiment with a slight nod.

"Very well," Delana's voice was almost song-like. She motioned for the attendants to begin serving lunch. "So, I suppose the first question would be: What brings you to our Auria? I understand you are a journalist back on Earth."

"Yes, my lady, I'm the youngest field correspondent for Neward and Provident--the second largest newsnet agency in the European Consortium." The Cwen did not even acknowledge this. Of course not, Serah realized. How impressive was that compared to being the ruler of an entire planet and several subsidiary colonies?

"Yes, but why here? Why now?"

"I'm recording a sensory experience of Aurian life and society for the 300th Anniversary of its founding."

Delana appeared genuinely confused, then suddenly understood, "Three hundred Earth years,

you mean. By our calendar, we celebrated that anniversary almost 40 years ago. Though you are two years early for the tricentennial celebration of our independence."

Serah blushed. Had she forced the Cwen to posture with the first question? She feared that she would have a very long lunch ahead of her and considered apologizing for any unintended insult but decided it best not to acknowledge the error and simply move the subject away from politics for the moment.

"My lady, do you mind if I record this interview?" she asked hastily. Stupid, she realized too late. If she had indeed just insulted her hostess, offering to capture the moment for posterity would surely have her extradited to Earth on the next transport. She breathed a sigh of relief when the Cwen sat back, almost in a deliberate pose.

"No, not at all." Serah turned on the sensory recorder at her waist and verified that the wetware connection was secure. "Audio/optical sensory recorder?" Delana asked.

"Acutally, my lady, it's a virtual sensory recorder. It captures smell, taste, and tactile senses as well."

"Fascinating. I've heard of such things before, of course. Regretfully, however, we're several years away from developing our own." She smiled. "Though I'm sure VSRs such as that have no doubt made their way here through the black market. I'm curious, however: what is the capacity of that unit?"

"Ten terabits with compression, more than adequate to record my entire three-week visit."

"Using VanGucht's compression algorithm, or Robinson's?"

"VanGucht." Serah smiled, amazed. "You are remarkably knowledgeable, my lady."

Delana took a sip from her glass, never losing her poise. "Before becoming Cwen, I was a director for one of our leading technology megacorps. While we would never dream of copying Earth tech here on Auria, I made it a point to stay informed about the latest advances on your world. So, am I to assume that, when you return, you will sell these experiences for others to enjoy?"

"Actually, my lady, the newsnet I work for has the publication, editing, and distribution rights for this particular trip. I receive only a small per-access royalty."

"And you believe people will actually pay to relive your experiences on our world?"

"I believe it will be quite popular, actually. Our ratings analyzer indicated a substantial portion of Earth's population has a growing interest in the independent worlds, and Auria in particular, as it was the first of the colonies to declare independence." Serah cringed. She had just steered the conversation back to the very topic she was trying to avoid.

"I see," Delana mumbled quietly, pretending not to notice Serah's discomfort. "To my knowledge, no one on Auria has any interest in Earth," she said, raising an eyebrow as if trying to recall any particular account of such a person, "beyond its historical significance that is. It is widely regarded as a dingy gray planet, a decadent culture, and a waning empire." She smiled slightly with just the faintest hint of arrogance. Serah assumed this was for the benefit of those Earth citizens who would be sharing the experience of their conversation. It was a pity the VSR couldn't record her own terror and personal thoughts, though it would have already made a permanent record of her elevated heartbeat and the cold drops of sweat sliding down her neck beneath her collar. "In fact," the Cwen continued, "you are probably the most human Earther I've ever met."

Was that a compliment? Serah's face flushed with embarrassment. The Cwen was arrogant, opinionated, and extremely patriotic, no doubt it would be best to move on to topics that would take advantage of these traits. "The thing that interests me most about your planet, my lady, is its diversity. You were founded 300 years ago--by Earth's calendar," she chose the words carefully. "Your founding fathers were, if you'll forgive the term, anachronists who disliked technology and wanted to form a simpler more human-centric lifestyle. Yet what I see is a thriving industrial world only a few decades behind Earth in terms of technology, a few billions behind in terms of populace, and certainly far advanced in matters of ecology and the environment. Many on Earth would call this a paradise."

"As well they should." There was pride in Delana's voice. "Our forefathers created this world with all of the benefits of modern technology and used Earth as a perfect blueprint of how that same technology can socially enslave a society and practically sterilize a planet. Once that foundation was developed, they applied for Auria's independence and, as you well knew, eventually earned it. What you see is a world that has, for the most part, grown completely of its own resources; a somewhat unique treasure. Despite our original charter, which was abandoned due to the inconveniences of supporting such a population that was growing out of control with immigration and an abnormally large childbirth rate, in a mere 300 years we have very nearly kept pace with Mother Earth," her voice boiled with apparent sarcasm, "and as you pointed out, surpassed it in many important ways."

Serah nodded in agreement. Now she was beginning to understand the Cwen's position. It was not one of arrogance, but pride. "Yes, which brings up a topic that I'm sure many people would be interested in: sociogenetics. Is it true that there is practically no murder, or any other crime on this world?"

Delana smiled, "It is my experience that Earthers are somewhat confused about the nature and specifics of sociogenetics, since their principles do not apply to a non-interactive society such as Earth's. In fact, they are thought to be unique to the social structures of this world. Essentially, however, you are correct. Most of our initial population base consisted of academicians and philosophers. The arcological social construct limited diversity in breeding, allowing for some traits to become prominent much more quickly than in an open population. Conversely, many other traits were essentially 'bred out' or became dormant after just a few generations. Much of it, however, is social. Violence is abhorrent to almost everyone on Auria. A select few are simply incapable of such actions, yes, though in most the conditioning can still be overridden by extreme circumstances such as self-preservation and the like. In general, however, our low crime rate -approximately 3% of that on your world - is simply due to extensive, effective social programs."

"Still, some might say that you are, by definition, a more evolved species than your forefathers."

"Would you, Ms. Wyles?" The question had the bite of intention behind it.

"I'm a journalist, my lady, it is not my place to put forth an opinion, but merely to state the facts."

"How delightfully naive." The Cwen laughed smugly as she took a sip from the glass in front of her. "I've seen you Earth journalists at work. You are hardly the champions of the facts you herald yourselves to be. Take Neward and Provident's interview with Oron Prevo eight years ago. Your own agency practically had him tried and convicted in print."

Serah struggled quickly to remember the facts of the story before attempting to rebut the accusation. She was at the agency then, a rookie working mostly in foreign correspondence on Earth. She never cared much for interplanetary politics. "He was the last governor of the Notosia colony before the revolt.¹ There was some question about the necessity for his use of force."

¹ Detailed in the prior novel, "The Halferne Perfidy." Paid off if I ever get around to writing the sequels to this monstrosity.

"Your agency described him as a murder and a monster."

"If I remember correctly, he butchered 500 of his own citizens."

"He executed convicted terrorists to ensure the safety of nearly one billion civilian citizens. In the end, that is the job of a lawfully elected leader."

"He was accused of considering anyone with a political viewpoint contrary to his own to be a terrorist. He killed those people in a live broadcast on his government's vidnet. As someone who is supposed to have evolved beyond premeditated murder, I find it interesting that you would condone such actions," Serah protested.

Delana sat back like the chess master who had just won the final gambit. "He was a personal friend of mine."

Serah realized the Cwen had led her right into that verbal trap. She felt as if she was about to cry from embarrassment.

"Oron Prevo is neither a madman or a butcher," the Cwen continued, "He did what he felt he had to do. His people had lost faith in the government's ability to take action ... to protect them ... to preserve the rule of law. His stated policy was not to cater to the whims of the extremists, or tolerate the actions of anyone willing to kill innocent civilians. Frankly, though I could never knowingly order the death of another human being, I agree with him. What would you have had him do? Ship the problem back to Earth? Ask the 'mother land' for help in what was clearly a local issue? Earth had abandoned them long ago, and the resources to rehabilitate and/or incarcerate such violent criminals simply did not exist. Prevo took the only option he had by offering them military tribunals and summary execution-- which, frankly, was more honor than they deserved. They were animals, not soldiers. He took no pleasure from it, and if your agency had bothered to air the entire speech he gave before the executions, he might not be remembered the butcher that most now thought him to be. Of course, speeches don't get ratings, and ratings take precedent over truth on your advertising-happy planet. In the end, I suppose he answered to his own people for his actions."

Serah knew there was little she could do to save face in this interview, and since it was unlikely that the Cwen could have her executed for speaking her mind, she decided that she may as well find a polite way to speak the remainder of it. "My lady, it was my sincere desire to come here in the interest of studying and reporting, and not to argue politics with you or to defend the actions of people I have

never met who have nothing in common with me other than a profession and place of employment. I ask that you take me on my word that their policies are not my own and that you not judge me by the actions of others."

Delana paused, smiled, and took a bite of her lunch. "It is nice to see that not all of the Earthers are little more than organic versions of their infamous A.I. constructs. I see that passion and self-confidence have not yet been bread out of your line just yet." The Cwen sat back and smiled warmly, suddenly seeming to be a completely different person. "You do your planet credit, Ms Wyles. And, you are correct, of course. You must understand however, that despite the fact that we are not a true monarchy in the historical sense, my husband and I are the personification of Aurian politics, and not mere figureheads. The Cabinet of Ministers and the Houses of Parliament may write and enforce the laws, but you may be assured that they do so in adherence to constitutional articles that the Royal Family lays out and ultimately passes judgment on. If nothing else, we are the chief executives of the largest corporation on this planet. That, at the very least, should account for something."

"Your majesty, I intended no disrespect, and I am sorry if I have offended you in any way."

Delana's expression shifted to one of satisfaction. "No, you haven't. Actually, I was baiting you a little there." She sat back at picked at her food with the fork, "I find that when most people find themselves face to face with royalty, they tend to be annoyingly humble and agreeable."

Serah chuckled with both relief and amazement. "I must say, frightening them into speaking their mind is a rather cruel, but effective way to make a point," she said, laughing.

"Fear and anger, properly used, are very honest emotions. We understand each other better now, don't you think?"

Serah nodded in agreement.

Satisfied, the Cwen said, "Now, finish your lunch and then I will show the parts of the palace that our revered Haleth Captain Haravan no doubt failed to impress you with."

"Yes, about the good Captain," Serah chuckled, "am I to assume that you have been trying unsuccessfully for years to get him to speak his mind?"

The Cwen just smiled, as if enjoying a private joke.

Appendix

Afterword

These first three chapters of the "latest (not final) draft" have been 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 and would like to see the full outline or draft of the rest of this novel as a prelude to publishing it, I can probably make that happen too.

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Other Unfinished Novels by the Author

The Pessimist Incursion

The Pessimist Design

The Halferne Perfidy

The Halferne Incubus

The Halferne Gambit

Woke Up Covered in Bitches Again (Observations of an Internet Radio Host)