

# **THE MALYON GAMBIT**

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**By Darrin Snider**

A man in a dark coat stands on a rooftop, looking out over a futuristic city skyline at sunset. The sky is filled with warm orange and red hues. In the foreground, the silhouette of the man's head and shoulders is visible. The city behind him features numerous skyscrapers with glowing windows and intricate architectural details.

**BOOK ONE OF THE HALFERNE MASTERPLAN**

# THE MALYON GAMBIT

## CHAPTER 1.

The omnipresent maze of catwalks and platforms formed an artificial sky whose excesses dripped a steady, sterile rain on the lower city. It was raining somewhere in luxury-rich, sun-exposed spires 40 levels and nearly two kilometers above him. 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 afforded to anyone that 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. He felt uneasy about being on unfamiliar ground, and he enjoyed straying outside the carefully regulated, well-lit arco towers even less.

To most arco residents like him, the lower city 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. Sublevel 30 was further down than he normally cared to journey, but his current situation necessitated the risk.

The dark, secluded alleyway would be frequented mainly by grade three and grade four workers--a somewhat sordid lot by most standards, but they were generally reasonable to deal with themselves and usually ignored other people's business. Any higher and that disinterest was replaced with curiosity; any lower, it became chaos. He wasn't sure he believed half the stories he'd heard about the sink miners and barely human "trog" living amongst the massive machines in the bottom five levels, but he was in no hurry to prove urban legends this evening.

His biggest worry was being taken for an arco resident, which would instantly make him memorable to even the most casual observer if questioned later. Otherwise, the location was perfect: lighting in disrepair, infrequent patrols by watchers, and a jumble of new and old construction that left plenty of alcoves, irregular angles, and blind spots to confound the security vidcam that were also poorly maintained. With a bit of luck, he and his partner would be in and out, unseen and unremembered, and their current troubles with their former employer behind them.

"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. He'd never known Tiron Essien to be nervous, or at least he never showed it outwardly. Rik wasn't sure he'd even moved in the 30 minutes they'd been standing there. Back when they were a real crew, capable of handling something other than the most basic jobs, Tiron was their master tactician, confident planner, and swaggering cavalier who always kept cool, even when things went pear-

shaped. Rik, was the deal maker and face of the crew, a wizard with anything mechanized, mechanical, or precision-engineered, yet he always felt like an imposter on the job. "He's just lost," Tiron continued, methodically sitting down on the walkway next to Rik. "We've got him 50 levels and ten sectors from home, and he's probably on foot."

Rik thought about this and finally allowed himself to relax. He watched the alley three meters below, mostly dark with only a handful of people passing through during the past half hour. 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.

"What if 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," Tiron said without emotion, not taking his eyes off the street. "We need this deal."

"We can always find another buyer, maybe even unload this stuff tonight. What if he's an undercover enforcer and we're being set up--"

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. Tiron sat upright and squinted, studying the newcomer intently. Rik spun around and faced the

opposite direction. One person staring at the stranger could draw attention; two would draw suspicion.

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

"Well..." Tiron 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 20s, but a true suneater from one of the spires would have been too much to hope for.

"He's moving awfully slow now. I'd say either lost or looking for someone. I'd say he's our mark, but something's not right."

"The guy I talked to was clean-shaven and blonde-haired," Rik offered.

"That's not a wig. Could be a dye job. Too far away to tell. He could be an intermediary, I suppose. Maybe your guy got nervous."

"I doubt that. He had a real air of untouchable superiority," Rik said. "See any ID?"

"Not from here. Maybe if we got closer," Tiron said, then added, "or if you'd sprung for a better cybernetic eye."

"Be lucky I didn't leave you with a patch. You sure he's not an enforcer?"

"You're starting to sound like Alayn with all this conspiracy crap. Just relax and worry about the deal. I'll let you know when we're in trouble. I can spot police with a casual glance.

Most of them are crap at blending in, but even the worst of them could 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, secretly prompting Tiron for a lesson in "cop spotting."

Tiron rolled his eyes. "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, setting himself up to get pickpocketed. 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 ..." He paused for a moment and stared more intently as he adjusted the optical sensor again. Finally, he let out a whistle of amazement.

"Tell me." Rik pleaded.

"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.

Tiron shook his head. "With no bodyguard? No weapons I can detect, and I doubt a tech runner would carry a ballistic. Would you make a deal for a PSG down here like that? Even the most pious local here would gut him for a piece of hardware like that."

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 left from an idiot's pocket 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?" Tiron'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.

Tiron 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 200,000 cubic kilometers holding nearly two billion people. The chances of randomly encountering a familiar face this far away from home were almost infinitesimal. Tiron knew this but 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.

Tiron eyed him suspiciously. "What are you doing?"

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

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

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

"Don't say it." Rik frowned. "You got my back?" It was more a statement than a question. Without waiting for an answer, he dropped off the walkway and landed on the street below.

Tiron 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 think you're mistaken," the stranger said calmly, "I don't have anything on me that would even remotely interest you."

"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. "Wart, hey! Surprised to see you down here."

"Rik," the big man mumbled, almost cordially. "We've 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've got business here, and I can't do that with a puddle of lumpy goo. By Paul's rules of commerce, that means I get to go first, after which we're both at your disposal." 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. Tiron was a quick shot but, but would wait for the strategic point to give up his element of surprise. Odds were, Rik would become intimately acquainted with at least one of those weapons before Tiron 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 Tiron's enhanced vision even see the power signature from the gloves? 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 right with you." He held up one finger to silence the impending reply then, putting a hand on the suneater's chest, walked them both backward 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 unmistakably a suneater. Tiron 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 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," Rik instructed, pulling a small pouch from his pocket. "Then, turn around and walk away very quickly before these guys take out a lifetime of frustrations on you. I'll keep them distracted." Rik's right hand started for the stranger's coat pocket as he let go of the bag, ready to snatch the PSG as soon as the stranger went to catch it.

Only, the stranger didn't move. He just stood smiling in admiration as the bag, containing ten thousand credits worth of drugs hit the pavement, along with Rik's stomach. He was now out his only asset and had missed his best shot at pickpocketing his way back to a legitimate lifestyle.

"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 Tiron 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 out of immediate danger, then spun around with a wild, swinging punch. Wart raised his left arm, casually deflecting the blow with faster reflexes than a man his size should have. Rik lunged forward and slammed the top of his head into the big man's chin. Though the surprise of the blow knocked Wart backward onto the pavement, it was like ramming a brick wall. Spots danced in the corners of Rik's vision as he leaped on Wart, planting a knee in his chest. With an open palm, he struck the big man under the chin, slamming his head backward 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. He knew his fighting technique was not the most graceful to watch, but it had served him well over the years. 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 at least a bit of confusion.

Keiv smiled, dropped the chain, and extracted a vibroknife from his left sleeve. From up the alley, Tiron fired a second time as the big man lunged at Rik, dodging the blast as it impacted the ground where he had been standing a split second before. Rik caught the knife hand and turned, using his attacker's 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 on the wet pavement. The vibroknife passed within a few scant centimeters of Rik's face as he grabbed the wrist and punched hard into the elbow. There was a snap of bone as the joint hyperextended. The knife fell to the street with a clatter. Rik pivoted and kicked Keiv's feet out from under him.

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 Tiron up the alleyway. The thin man was smart and positioned himself directly behind Rik. A plaser was not an accurate weapon at that distance, and Tiron would never 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 as a pipe whirred softly overhead and struck him 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 Tiron, who seemed equally astonished.

"Oh, 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 a 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 forward. 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 Tiron 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 Tiron as he tried to keep from hyperventilating.

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

Tiron 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 and make sure security stays focused back here. First sign they're asking questions of the locals, 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 Tiron'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," Tiron 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. Tiron was merely playing to his insecurities, trying to protect him. "Don't play hero now, just because your master strategy failed," Rik joked, knowing the levity would tell Tiron he was in control and wasn't about to panic and do something stupid.

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

"My improvising wouldn't have been a problem if you could shoot straight. Oh yeah, thanks for saving me from that killer puddle over there, by the way."

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

"Fine, go on then!" Tiron 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. Tiron 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 Tiron or the others to 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. "Sounds ... fun, but could I propose--"  
"No, you can't." 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 as if remembering his name some major intellectual triumph.

"Okay, Sal, the only nice, quiet 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 of us to make an ID. Until then, we just need to stay off the grid so they don't make a match."

## CHAPTER 2.

Captain Bryn Kirch, wondered if it ever stopped raining on Malyon. He'd only been on the planet three weeks, and he was certain it had rained every single day. It was just the season, everyone under his command assured him. During the rest of the year, the Valindor garrison post was supposedly a tropical paradise. Kirch didn't care. It was a shit job, on a shit agroscience colony, with shit weather, and sunny or not, the work continued, no matter how cold, wet, and muddy it was.

It wasn't the worst assignment on Malyon at least. He'd met the other garrison commanders at the briefing in the orbital command station. Muddy forests and grasslands in the planet's temperate zone were far better than heading up bases in the arctic mines and the equatorial power stations, or a zoological study in the swamps. After five minutes of small talk, Bryn knew those had been assigned as punishments. If his post was intended as such, he wasn't sure what he'd done, or whom he'd pissed off. While he didn't particularly feel the need to be nice to everyone he met, he always made sure not to offend.

"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, Kirch

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 update, 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 in the hills about a klick south of the village, Corporal." Kirch turned to the man seated behind him, the post's Chief Warrant Officer and third in command. "Prepare the men for deployment, Sergeant."

"Sir," Lt. Keldin said as he made his way from the cockpit back to the main cabin.

"Do you think we'll catch 'em this time, Sir?" Danoy asked.

Kirch considered the possibility for a moment, "Let's hope so. Losing two villages inside of a week shows these scumbags have more balls than I gave them credit for."

"Still no idea who we're dealing with, Sir?"

"Officially, OrbCom has said nothing ... to me anyway," he added. "We're operating under the assumption it's a group of pirates. The colonists probably uncovered something they weren't supposed to see." 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," Kirch scolded.

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

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

He didn't elaborate, instead electing to allow the Corporal to draw her 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 Kirch read the intelligence reports: retired military officers turned merchants who tried to avoid paying taxes by stockpiling goods off-world. 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 braid," she beamed, nodding towards the patch on his sleeve which doubled for a more impressive ornament on his formal dress jacket. "They don't just hand those out for nothing."

Kirch 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."

Kirch 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 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 those last few 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 Keldin's voice crackled over the speaker, "Standing by and go for deployment, Captain."

"Very good, Sergeant," Kirch 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.

Kirch 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. Kirch 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 klicks away."

"Yes, sir."

#

Kirch 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 warped plasteeel and charred wood 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 Kirch 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 the entire population and discourage anyone from starting over. He had heard of such operations being used to contain particularly aggressive plagues on frontier worlds but quickly dismissed that line of thinking.

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, no power signatures, 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," Kirch 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.

The private was losing it already, Kirch 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, Kirch 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. "Contact OrbCom," he said calmly. "Verify they aren't 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 Kirch and his men during a potentially hostile operation. "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 Kirch's helmet. He 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 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. Kirch 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."

Kirch grabbed the console and configured it for his headset faster than he knew Egril would have been capable of. 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, 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.

Kirch, Keldin, and Egril took cover behind the village's eastern wall just as the noise of aircraft rose over the din of rain. Kirch unstrapped the lazrifle 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 toward the ships and dissipated on the invisible shell-like energy shields. The two craft split off north and south.

That was a tactical mistake, Kirch thought. He was disappointed, though not surprised that the men had completely forgotten their orders. The craft was 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. No visible damage to the craft," the voice of his scout on the edge of the village reported, though Kirch had already made that assessment himself. If the enemy could take out an armored transport in a matter of seconds, then lazrifles would be of little use.

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

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

Kirch watched one of the aircars circle 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 two quick blasts of blue-white energy back toward the source of the gunfire. The tactical marker 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.

"Recon 1. Recon 2 is down. Still no significant damage to the aircraft." The voice was calm and methodical.

"Dammit! We're not equipped for a bloody firefight!" Kirch swore. He struggled to remember Recon 2's name but drew a blank--even though he'd picked him 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. Kirch'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 the north side of the village, and the grove of trees protecting Recon 1 went up in flames.

Kirch 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 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. "All units, power down your suits."

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

Kirch 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 suit, "Now! Both of you!"

Egril and Keldin hastily obeyed.

The aircars had stopped moving and had not fired on anything in several seconds. That was the trick then, they were tracking by power signatures. While they should be able to scan for life

signs or heat imagery, it would take a few seconds to switch their tactical systems. The northern aircar turned and headed back towards the east. Kirch 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, Kirch motioned for Keldin and Egril to start the retreat to the south. The three ran alongside 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 orders, those men were deliberately sacrificing their lives to buy him time to retreat. He felt shame at underestimating his people, shame at putting them in such circumstances unprepared, and panging guilt that he should have been the one laying down cover fire for them.

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

"Run!" Kirch 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. Kirch's lungs burned from the smoke and stench as he ran with all his strength, Egril and Peretz were two steps behind him. They reached the edge of the jungle and dove for cover in a small gully lined with outcropped tree roots just as the

aircraft passed overhead. Kirch motioned for 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 period.

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 Kirch 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. Kirch 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, Kirch 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 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.

## CHAPTER 3.

It would probably be a bestseller 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, after almost ten years in the making, it would finally be ready for publication. As a journalist, she'd published interviews and exposés on kings, ministers, dictators, and psychopaths, sometimes 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 q-gate. For a moment, she felt as though the couch was 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.

After sitting there for most of the morning, it was 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 every thirty minutes, which meant she had a long wait ahead of her. With portal activation and entry being substantially less than an 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 for this portion of the voyage. 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 audience simulation before uploading her trip to the Phrame. For all she knew, there could be completists who habitually purchased the entire two-week experience for their memories. Maybe they relished seeing and identifying the different classes of starships that diligently waited their turns to enter one of the dozen portals that surrounded Midway station. Maybe they longed to know that the orange juice at the lounge service bar was a bit too warm and sour. Maybe they were always curious about the softness of the synthetic wool fabric of the lounge sofas. Most interested parties, however, would probably be content with an edited version that skipped these minutiae of interstellar travel.

The shuttle from Earth to Sol Gate station—nearly three 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 and strictly to satisfy her curiosity, but maybe it would make the edit. From there, the Olorin would make the two-jump trip to Auria. First to Midway station for her second one-day layover, then to North Point Station in the Iota Caticum system where she would immediately catch a three-day cruiser to Auria itself. Twenty years ago, the Olorin was a fully-fledged starliner that would make the trip shore-to-shore in two weeks. Now it served merely as a luxury gate ferry for those who wished to avoid or at least supplement station accommodations with something a bit more extravagant. It was much more opulent than the station-to-planet cruisers, but quaint and slow when 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. They won't pop out until dinner tonight, long after we've docked." 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, and 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 businesspeople 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.

"It is," the man nodded. "I thought it might help set the mood for you."

"Thank you, Mr...."

"Uller," he said, smiling warmly. ". 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 who you were. You see, I run a large technology and manufacturing company on Auria, so I'm fascinated with the latest 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. "As I'm sure you know that kind of tech is taboo back home. We have very few transhuman augmentations, no synthetic personalities to speak of, not even life model simulations. Even if the government didn't severely restrict Earth tech, nobody would be interested in such a thing, and we hardly have the infrastructure to create the market. Our version of your Phrame is a century behind and is more about efficient communication and collaboration than entertainment and maintenance of virtual and synthetic lives. I suppose it makes us look like primitives to Terrans."

He was correct, and Serah knew all this from her research, but it had been one of the points of attraction for this trip. "Not at all," she smiled. "I'm the type of Terran who thrives on those kinds of cultural differences and goes to visit them in person. That probably makes me more of a primitive back home than you."

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

"Oh, the sense recording is strictly a personal project." Serah fumbled the cortical interface behind her left ear where the VSR at her belt connected with a barely noticeable wire. "I just got the interface two years ago, so when they forced me to take a vacation, I thought I might use it for something." 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. To be honest, I've never actually been to Earth."

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

He smiled, condescendingly. "Auria and Earth have had very little need for each other since the secession. Earth has no pressing need for trade or commerce with former colonies, no real interest in art or culture other its own, and frankly is inherently distrustful of 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. Anyway, tell me more of this 'personal project' of yours." He nodded towards the VSR again.

"Oh, just a docu-experience. My boss says it's my excuse for working when I'm not supposed to be working, but honestly, I think it will enhance the trip for me. It's like having a silent travel partner."

"Docu-experience," 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. "I was going to tag it for food, art, and culture aficionados, not adult entertainment."

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

"I see," Serah muttered. She was not offended by Uller's remarks. Statistically speaking, there were far more adult docu-experiences than travelogues available on the Phrame. "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 of 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, q-gates 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 marked the entrance and exit of an artificial wormhole, 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 arm's length--gradually grew in size, becoming the distinct hour-glass shape of a large space station surrounded by a massive ring of buildings, spires, and docking arms. Hundreds 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. "When I graduated, I took a cruise to Poseidus and Manitou, just like everyone else. This is the first time I've traveled interstellar since then."

"And now you find yourself with a mere half-million people at the farthest border of Earth's influence, the gateway to the independent worlds and child empires of man." He gestured with a flourish and named the four gateways silently floating outside the windows. "Sol, Beta Ofaniel, Epsilon Hermia, and of course, our Iota Canticum and Auria."

"What is the fifth one, a new gateway not online yet?" Serah asked, indicating the furthermost 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 Iota Excipio. It went offline during their last revolution three years ago."

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 q-gate at the other end was shut down, or destroyed, 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. To re-establish the quantum bridge, a new entangled gate would have to be sent 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 fate.

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

"Me? I hadn't planned on it. I thought I'd dine and see a show here on the Olorin and take in Midway on the trip home. What about yourself?"

Uller frowned, disappointed. "I have an appointment there in a few hours, then an express charter back to Auria this evening." He smiled. "Tell me, how long will you be on Auria."

Serah grimaced. "It's a one-month sabbatical. I'm afraid with a week in transit each way, I only have two weeks to see everything."

"You'd certainly planned to tour the Royal Palace at least?"

"Yes, in fact, all of Government Center, with dinner in the historical district afterward starting bright and early on the first day."

"Well then, please, allow me to do you a favor, purely in the interest of making your docu-experience more exciting. I think you should meet the Royal Family themselves. "

"I didn't think tourists got to meet the Royal Family," Serah said, impressed.

Phaedo grinned and bowed slightly. "Very few do, but I happened to be an old friend of the cwen's – before she was cwen that is. I'm sure she would be very interested in contributing to your 'side project.'"

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.

"Excellent hotel. 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.

#

Light stabbed at Serah's eyes as she struggled to open them. She recognized the bright interior of a sickbay swirling around her. "Try not to move just yet, Ms. Wyles," a distant voice said and she felt a hand on her shoulder gently pushing her back down onto the biobed. "Do you know where you are?"

"Sickbay on the Olorin, I would guess," she said, though the words sounded distant in her head. "What happened?"

"Just a reaction to the champagne we suspect. Your body isn't used to off-world food." Serah pried her eyes open and saw she was staring into the face of a middle-aged woman dressed in the blue tunic of a medical staffer. "The champagne you brought was vintage and not export-grade," the woman continued. "It contains numerous indigenous microbes your body simply isn't prepared to process. It's a common mistake infrequent travelers like yourself often make."

"It wasn't mine. Mr. Uller gave it to me."

"Who did?" the doctor asked, checking Serah's readings again.

"Uller. Phaedo Uller? He wasn't the one that brought me in?"

"I'm afraid not. One of the pursers found you unconscious in the lounge area."

"Yes, but there was a man with me, at least he was there when I started feeling ... he was the one who gave me the champagne."

"Uller you say?" The doctor scanned through a holodisplay projected in front of her. "No, I'm afraid there's no one in the passenger manifest by that name. We ran back the video surveillance to make sure you hadn't been drugged by another passenger. It showed you were

the only person in the lounge the whole time, and you took the bottle off one of the complimentary refreshment tables.”

“No, that can’t be right.” Serah accessed the VSR controls with her mind and scanned the playback, only to find she had turned the machine off shortly after she learned of the delayed departure. That couldn’t be right, she thought. She had debated turning it off but had finally decided on leaving it on and editing the sequence if it proved uneventful later. Perhaps her unfamiliarity with thought-based controls had caused her to accidentally stop the recording. It didn’t seem likely, but she decided she would need to be more careful in the future.

None of this, however, answered the question of Mr. Uller. There must be some sort of mix-up at the security office, or perhaps they were attempting to cover up a bigger gaff than having no presence in a public gathering area such as the underside lounge. She couldn’t be certain he didn’t grab the bottle from the refreshment table, but she was certain she hadn’t imagined him, and she knew he was the one who handed her the glass.

“We’ve given you a full immunoboost. A bit of disorientation is normal after that, but you should be fine by dinner time, and now you’ll be able to eat anything you like – though I’m afraid the calories still count.” The doctor grinned. “We’ll need to observe you for another hour or so, at which time you’ll be free to go.”

Serah managed a half-hearted, “Thank you, Doctor,” before laying back down in defeat.

# APPENDIX

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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



## AFTERWORD

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

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