

# IRON FIVE DOGS OF WAR

AN EARTHFRONT NOVEL  
Written by Seon Stronghold

## PROLOGUE

Through the cockpit viewscreen, Earth appeared as beautiful as ever and like always, Captain Kelly Winterfield marveled at it. Docked at the International Space Station for four hours now, he was sitting in the dim pilot's cabin of The Legacy II, preparing for departure.

The station controller's voice crackled over the comm. "*Legacy Two, you're good for auto and cleared for undocking.*"

"Legacy Two, copies clearance on full guidance..." Kelly responded.

The ship lurched as the powerful arms holding it in place disengaged. Manipulating the controls with experienced nudges this way and that, Kelly turned the freighter a full one hundred and eighty degrees until the view of the planet gradually changed to the white shell of the sprawling space complex.

The International Space Station was an old one, the very first. Unlike its newer counterparts, it was the only station in the galaxy with this design. A patchwork from additions and upgrades over hundreds of years, cylindrical arms ten miles long extended horizontally from its bustling core and harbored thousands of ships of varying sizes, linking them to its interior by way of retractable bridges.

The Legacy II drifted from the wharf-like structure and ten minutes later, when the computer indicated that they were safely beyond the outer edges of Earth's junk rings, Kelly took full control of his ship and ignited its thrusters.

Seven minutes later, he came out of Hyper Light and the coppery-colored curve of Venus came into view. His destination was a Military facility, five hundred feet above the base of Mount Danu. In all his time delivering for Earthfront, he had never been to this port; had never even heard of it. Whatever the cargo in his hold was, it must have been something big because only very-high-level clearance could get him surface-side on Venus. According to his agent, all he needed to do was pick up the shipment, deliver it, make no inspections and not stick his nose into it.

Whatever *it* was, he had an uneasy feeling about the whole deal and just wanted to get there, drop the shipment and get Earth-side in time to catch a shuttle home. Today was his daughter's birthday. She was, in her own words, officially ten and he knew she would never let it go if he missed her big celebration.

*Do you really have to go out this time?*

His wife had tried to convince him to stay, but this job was important and the credits it would earn him would set them good. His daughter would have a better future and he and Laura would finally be able to go on that honeymoon vacation they always wanted. After all, a Light-Class Space Trucker made barely enough credits to cover the cost of living on Earth, but this time they would be able to make the move to Pluto or Charon. Life on the Border Worlds was easily affordable and less stressful than mid-system planetary hubs. His trucking business would flourish out there too. Haulers were always in high demand on the outer edges of Sol.

The cockpit beeped three times, alerting him of his proximity to atmospheric entry.

Venus and Mercury, unlike Mars, Jupiter's moons, Saturn and Neptune's moons and Pluto and Charon, were nothing more than mining planets. The space stations orbiting Venus numbered only two but Kelly would not be docking in space on this trip. His hauler was one of a few types of interstellar Light-Classers that could make the transition from space to atmosphere and back.

At twenty thousand kilometers from entry, The Legacy II slowed rapidly, covering the remaining distance in twenty minutes before burning through atmosphere. As the ship transitioned into Venusian airspace, Kelly found, though nothing like Earth, that there was a unique beauty about this hostile world.

Sulfuric clouds, twenty kilometers thick, spread planet wide below him and lightning lit up the vast blanket in periodic displays of spectacular bursts. A few miles away and even as far as the horizon, massive barges hung miles above the surface, transporting precious ore to waiting cargo ships in vacuum but they soon disappeared and the acidic cloud cover enveloped his ship, blotting out the bright yellow sky above. The cockpit shook with turbulent winds and bucked its way through the density of the mid atmospheric storm. Beneath the perpetual cover, life on this planet existed in near darkness by day and utter blackness by night.

Kelly broke free of the haze after what seemed like ages and the ship's external lights automatically woke, illuminating huge wisps of sulfuric acid, drifting lazily along their paths. At twenty thousand feet above ground level, the lights of the mountain base came into view and the communications module crackled to life.

*"Legacy Two, this is Outpost Three Command. Give link up and pilot ident, over."*

"Captain Kelly Winterfield of Legacy Two, Venus bound from Earth." He read the identification codes on his thigh board and waited for confirmation.

*"Welcome to Venus Captain."*

The Legacy vibrated and shook as the outpost's tracking system took control, directing the hauler to a docking bay built into the side of the mountain.

The first thing Kelly noticed as his ship glided smoothly toward the hangar was the grunge built up along the outer walls of the base. Eversteel was immune to sulfuric acid but grimy deposits, collected over time, gave a disgusting appearance and covered it like a mossy shell.

The winds had also picked up. Fifty-five miles per hour to be exact but the base's auto guidance system kept the ride stable, and when he finally entered the complex, the shaking of the cockpit ceased.

\*\*\*\*\*

Fifty minutes later, Kelly stretched his cramped muscles and leaned against the headrest of his seat. This would be over soon. In the next three hours, he'd be back on Earth with his family and five hundred million credits richer.

The communications console lit up.

*"Legacy Two...shipment has been received, you have clearance for startup."*

Kelly responded "Legacy Two copies clearance for startup."

He jumped back into the pilot's seat, strapped in and ran through the sequence that would ready his ship for the trip home and as he hit the ignition switch, violent streaks of gunfire lit up the massive hangar outside his viewscreen.

An out of control wrecking ball thumped within, as Kelly's heart slammed against his chest. Tracer rounds shredded men and women in mechanized suits and mercilessly blew apart ships and armored vehicles. The Legacy II lifted gracefully from the landing pad, glided its way through the cavernous space and into the strong gusts outside. Without the station's auto guidance system to keep the ship stable, Kelly had to rely on natural reflexes honed by years of experience; nothing he couldn't handle.

The scene before him was unreal. A lone, military grade, walking battle tank tore the place apart as an unmarked transport ship nearby loaded cargo into its hold...his cargo.

Heart hammering, hands trembling, head swimming, Kelly sent a distress signal to Earth and adjusted his angle of ascent, then rocketed skyward wanting nothing more than to escape the madness below. He never saw the four missiles streaking toward him. Then in a bright flash of fiery debris, the last thing he felt was horror.

## FACT

Kedenians were among the first to leave for the stars. Originally, they settled on Nema, a Goldilocks planet in a system five light-years from Earth and after fifty years of disputes known as The Splinter Wars, Earthfront expelled the rogue clan, banishing them into unknown space.

Twelve years later, the Kedenian warlord Amir Kedeni and his supporters stumbled across a rich, desert planet eight thousand light years from Earth...and time passed.

As humanity colonized many systems throughout the Milky Way, large corporations, governments, and various organizations rose to rule it all. Earthfront, the leading authority in most of our Galactic Domain, is the largest governing body in existence. Yet as peace reigns throughout known space, Keden, it seems, would forever be a hostile world to Earthfront.

## CHAPTER 1 - IRON FIVE

My MAV is part of a five-man team on patrol across this barren Kedenian dunescape. I am Alpha Dog, call sign Huski. On my right, is Dachshund and Pitbull and to my left, Akita and Terrier; names chosen by us based on what breed of dog we have on our respective home planets, it is one of the worthwhile things we all have in common.

MAV's are the most widely used gear when it comes to military operations, Mechanized Armored Vehicles; walking tanks so to speak, and just like the rest of the team, mine is a Light-Class Mecha.

We are Legs Dangling at forty feet above Artificial Ground Level and heading east at seventy miles per hour. My Heads-Up-Display shows me the sandy terrain and all its contours as they intersect with the computer's generated lines. These lines keep us clear of obstacles but below dune peaks and off enemy radar. Our mission is simple. Patrol the Outlands and report any anomalies, lifeforms and or threats. We are to remain on our side of the fence. For no reason, are we to go beyond the digital and imaginary lines, which separate us from the locals. At no point are we to go weapons hot unless fired upon and some more blah, blah, blah. Personally, this being an unfriendly world and all, I think this is bullshit, but it's our mission according to SysDef, the System Defense Administration; our Diplomatic Relations Bureau stationed on this rock, eight thousand light-years from Earth.

Our Unit is here to assist these slackers because these weekend soldiers wouldn't know what to do if the Local Guerillas stood on the borderlines and stared them down, let alone declared a full-scaled attack. The only solace these pushovers have is the fact that the Kedenians know the repercussions of such

an act but as history has taught us so very often; it only takes one maniac to take the plunge.

So here we are, servants of SysDef for the time being however, we don't take orders from them. Our directives come from General, Alexander 'Hawk' Madison; one of the many heads of Earthfront Galactic, the military might and arm of our home planet spread out across the Milky Way. Our real mission, as far as our General is concerned, is to confirm that an Earth Based contingent of rebels is here along with their leader and if they are, we are to eliminate them. According to our most recent intelligence report, a few months ago, someone attacked an Earthfront military base on Venus and all of the evidence links our targets to the crime.

Another chill runs through my body as my combat suit, the mechanical and biological link to the machine, cools my skin with filtered air. My communication module lights up.

*"Iron Five...one bar to lights out, Link and rep live, over."*

Our unit is Iron Five. One bar to lights out means one hour till sunset. Link and rep live means to contact base and report what is happening. The voice in my ear is feminine yet devoid of femininity. Her name is Mirana O'Canon and she is a genuine hard-assed, straight-laced, battle-axe woman who kicks butt and takes no prisoners.

*How in the galaxy can a woman be so unwomanly?*

I respond "...Huski to base, nothing but sand and rock out here. We're runnin' one bar after lights out before headin' back, over."

*"Roger that Captain, squawk on ret."*

The com goes dead.

Squawk on return is standard procedure when dealing with Earth-based military installations. If the pilot of any craft does not provide the proper codes when returning to, or approaching a base, the 550 millimeter auto-cannons placed around the Station would go active. These bad boys are the most feared armor killers out there, and as any pilot would tell you, respecting them is always a healthy decision to make.

*"Alpha..."* my Com flashes again. It's Pitbull on our secure channel  
*"...Keds Roving patrols on scan, seven clicks south."*

*"Okay Bull, mark 'em..."* They would show up on my scanners at three kilometers but Bull's MAV is equipped with heavy sensors and detectors that enable him to see a lot further than any of us. He is our very early warning system and because he has traded most of his heavy weapons for extra eyes and ears, we keep him well protected. *"...do we cross paths?"*

*"I've marked 'em but they're not gonna cross us...they're bugging south..."*

*"Okay maintain course...going dark in two."*

According to my Heads-Up-Display, it is 16:55 Kedenian time, which means that in two minutes; this Solar System's dimming sun would end Keden's ten-hour daylight time. By the looks of it, tonight is going to be a bit

clearer than usual and unless our readings are wrong, there won't be another sand storm for at least two days.

"Okay fellas, going dark." I throttle down, bring my engine to hover and descend until the thud of machine meeting ground shakes the cockpit. The MAV's Automatic Balancing System keeps me from toppling over and the rest of my team fall in beside me. Mentally, I hit a digital key on my visor and watch, as we all become rippling reflections of our surroundings.

When we go dark, our stealth capabilities truly come to life. Reflective Regeneration Technology allows our MAVs to blend in to our surroundings while Bull's jamming equipment keeps us off radar and other sensor systems. I half-consciously check the Neural in the lower right corner of my screen. The Neural Link is a virtual indicator that monitors the team's individual movements, locations and life forces. We feel it, taste it, hear and see it. Even now, I can feel the life of the men under my command; a sensation that is often strange, bordering on invasive even though it has become natural over time.

"Dogs you're all a go..." I wait for my check

"Alpha you're good"

Terrier confirms that my camouflage has engaged.

"Okay let's make this as clean as possible..." I turn my head toward Pitbull and the outline of his cloaked MAV shows up on my visor; all its info and stats readily available at my command "...Bull, you know what to do. Hound, you're on guard duty tonight."

"Roger that Alpha."

Dachshund's German accent is still very strong, even after all these years away from home. His job on this run is to guard Pitbull as he scans and jams our enemies. His position is one that's close enough to Bull to provide protection but near enough to us to come in guns blazing if needed. He is the right man for the job, as he has proven so often before.

\*\*\*\*\*

I approach the digital lines that divide Earthfront and Kedenian law. There is a feeling of satisfaction in our defiance as my MAV crosses it. The Dune Desert is behind me, all of its massive sand banks in our wake; I give the signal and we come to a stop at the edge of a cliff.

The drop is two hundred and eighty six feet, according to my reading, and spreads out as far as the eye can see, one broad, flat, dirt and rock landscape. The view is captivating. Ten miles into the distance a city sprawls; a colossal, manmade mountain made of buildings and endless lights, wide and low on each end and rising to a peak near the center. Above it, one of this planet's two spaceports shines like a large star in the brown sky and every so often, shuttles, like little fireflies, travel to and fro.

The drop-off in front of us could be a problem. Even with our camouflage engaged.

"Terri...I thought you said this was the best route?"

"It is Alpha. It's the most direct..."

I turn my attention toward the expanse of land beyond our position

"Bull...you in position?"

There's a flicker of static before I hear him "Dug in and watching, over."

"Hound...?"

"All set..."

"Okay boys, on go and fly." I do a split second systems check "Ready..." we move closer to the edge "...set..." I push the accelerator and the gears in my machine whine "...go!"

The three of us take a two-step run, jump from the cliff and free-fall with our thrusters cold. My head swims in the sensation of the plunge and we kill the stealth. We'll show up on every radar system within a hundred miles. My altimeter counts down in a frenzy of numbers and now, with a hundred feet to go...

"...fly!"

I ask my MAV for full power. Every heat detector in the vicinity would see us, but this slows the drop. With gritted teeth, the Sol Combustion engine jolts me into a million shudders. Our rate of descent goes from fifty-two feet per second, to nine feet per second and then I shut the thrusters down, go engines-cold and brace for impact.

Enemy radar and sensors would report our five seconds of madness as a glitch; at least I hope so. We reactivate our camouflage.

"Let's move." I give the command, with frantic fists pounding against my chest, and we begin our run toward the City.

## CHAPTER 2 - DUNAN

DZ087 is one of numerous Districted Zones located along Dunan's eastern edge. Entirely the opposite of its western counterparts, it is a rough and sordid zone where seedy taverns, rundown towns and derelict infrastructures make up a dangerous and unfriendly environment. As we approach, I notice parts of its tall, perimeter wall lying scattered on the ground in some places, while in others it no longer exists. The place looks as though a nuke hit it. Buildings that would have once been architecturally pleasing to the eyes are now rundown, empty, broken, or rubble.

My MAV steps over the vandalized fence and I give the word to deactivate our camouflage. Now that we are close enough to the city, we won't need it.

Too many signals and too much equipment now run interference on our behalf. We would be no more than the usual traffic.

Our destination is down a main road and then off through a dark and usually deserted side street. So far, the folks we've passed have hardly acknowledged our presence. Everyone seems to be somewhere else, either in mind or body. There is a feeling of emptiness here, a lack of openness and freedom. The only thing I can think of is desolation. It is in their walk, their demeanor...their eyes.

In the dark sky, void of any clouds as usual, the stars sparkle few and far apart; this is a result of Keden's dusty atmosphere and unlike back home, there is no moon. A few Air and Magnatech Vehicles parked beside derelict structures catch my eye and questionable figures enter and exit questionable buildings however, our mission has nothing to do with whatever is going on here, so we continue along.

My secure com lights up "Alpha...?"

"Terri..."

"How do we know that there are no spies here?"

"We don't. This is where we're gonna have to take our chances but I doubt we'll have that problem in this part of town."

I don't worry about anyone reporting our presence to the local authorities because there are way too many illegal activities going on in this one locale for anyone to be so stupid. No one in his or her right mind would dare bring the law here and as we get to the end of the street and turn onto another wide road, everything changes. It's a lot livelier here. The glows of dull yellow street lights and neon signs everywhere, reveal many of the district's citizens going about their nightly lives, from street-side substance dealers, to vendors, to buyers, to prostitutes, all driven by a common denominator; credits.

We come to a halt outside a well-aged tavern. Like most manmade structures on this planet, it is made of metal, stripped of its yellow paint. The guards at the front entrance seem a bit uneasy. I guess I would be too if three Earthfront Mecha came and stood less than thirty feet away with guns and missile pods pointed in my direction, but they hold their positions, admirable in a way, their guns futile at the ready.

"Bull...how's the weather?"

Static hits me "...All clear Alpha..."

"Hound...?"

"Ready and waiting..."

"Terri, Akita, if anything goes wrong, do what you have to do."

"...Will do boss." Akita's voice is steady. He knows, just like the rest of us what the risks and potential consequences of coming here entail.

I power down my MAV and hit the release switch. The dashboard in front of me hisses, as the pressurized air around is expelled, and slides downward.



The legs of the machine crouch, lowering the cockpit to the ground. My harness tightens for a second, then goes loose and I unclip it.

"Be careful Alpha...eyes open."

I won't reply but Terri knows I acknowledge his concern.

The air here is warm and dry but my Combat Suit filters it in and allows me to breathe cool and moist oxygen. My visor tells me that the temperature is a nice 32 degrees Celsius and I say nice, because the daytime temp is usually anything around 60.

I climb out of my seat and down the built-in-ladder in front of my Mecha. Three new guards join the two at the door and as I walk toward them, the sound of my MAV resealing itself ripples through the far recesses of my mind until it becomes another distant background noise.

I get to the door of the tavern and one of the guards step between it and me "Who are you and what is your business here Earther?"

His gravelly voice is like the rest of all who come from, or live too long on this planet. *'It's because of the dust and sand'* According to those who are qualified to know these things. *'Gets into the throat and lungs and over time, the human body adapts.'*

"I am death to my enemies, but I am here to see Toros, my friend." I keep eye contact and though he defiantly returns my gaze, I see a flicker of uncertainty.

"Wait here." He leaves me with the other four guards and goes through the door.

Two minutes and some pass before he returns and makes way for me to enter. His colleagues seem on edge but they are of no concern. As a matter of fact, I think that the two MAV's facing us have placed a healthy bit of fear in them; exactly what I was hoping.

The guard I spoke to eyes me suspiciously but motions for me to enter through the slanted steel doors. I go without hesitation and the world around me changes from openly wild, street-side life, to controlled and nice...an almost cozy indoor getaway. The bar is dusty and hot but lively. Its yellow lights cast a dull glow across the large room. I recall from memory the exits and windows in my immediate view; on these hostile worlds, it has become second nature over time to do so.

The big bartender looks like ex Kedar; Kedenian Special forces, and two men not far from him seem to be trading something unholy. Then there is the person sitting at a corner table with two prostitutes, a Kedenian tradesman by the look of his clothing. Tradesmen on this planet are often leathery skinned because of their extensive time in the sun. Their clothes are always long and made of patchwork that covers most of their bodies including heads and faces.

"Hello there..."

I turn toward the soft voice. A woman dressed in a very short, formfitting jumper and rugged high heels is standing next to me. She takes advantage of my silence.

"You look lost hun..." Eying me like a piece of meat.

"Sorry, but I'm here on business."

"Sorry indeed..."

Like many Kedenian women her face is rough and chiseled yet very attractive and her hair, bleached and damaged, a result of the harsh weather.

"You're here to see Toros. I'm here to take you to him."

She looks at me as though I were a strange thing that made her curious. I realize now that she isn't a prostitute and remove my helmet, attach it to the magnetic clip on my waist and follow the slinky woman through the crowd and into a hallway.

The Digital Optics covering my eyes like contact lenses, Digital Eyes, or Dees as we call them, take over and feeds me second by second digital, visual information about my surroundings. They tell me what I want to know, when I choose to want it, but nothing ever prepares me for the air. It hits me like an invisible wall of stale warmth that smells like old carpets. I hate it but have no choice in the matter; no one in the known galaxy takes kindly to people in masks and helmets, especially Earthers in masks and helmets. We walk a few steps and turn through another metal door. It opens up into a large, dimly lit room made up of split-levels where women and men of many races mingle and mix.

As I tread the velvety floor, a blue haired Kedenian woman nearby looks my way and smiles but I continue on, passing what looks like a local miner and a Rokan Woman uncomfortably embraced in a purple-lit booth. I have never been to the Roka but I know what the folks there look like. Prolonged exposure to the atmospheres on the twin planets, Roka and Rokus tend to give the skin a light-purple hue. The darker the skin, the darker the hue, in my book however, purple is purple no matter how you look at it.

My escort guides me through the mingling crowd, past two guards, through another hallway, two more guards, and now an unusually broad door stands before us. With a knock, she opens it and we step into a large office where finally, I see the man I have come to find.

"Welcome my friend!" He is falsely excited to see me but it is never a problem, because I am also falsely happy to be here. The semicircular and windowless room smells of Cuban Cigars. *How in the galaxy did he get Cuban Cigars?*

"How are you Toros?" I shake his rough hand and look into the square, chiseled, hairless face as I take a seat by his desk. My escort stands between us waiting.

"Elna...drinks!" He says it as though there is a celebration to be had, then watches her slyly as she walks away. "...Very nice girl...been with my establishment from the beginning."

His voice is rough and deep...way too much dust I always say.

"You've been hiding her. I've never met her before..."

"My friend..." he gives me a broad smile "...I have more than one places of business on Keden; surely you know this?"

"You must treat her like gold then? Good help is hard to find no matter what planet you're on..." I indulge the meaningless conversation for the moment.

"Not on Darion..." He grins, reminiscing "The service there is always excellent...you ever been to Darion, Earther?"

"No, but I know of it..." I have never been to the planet of cities, but I have seen it on flybys and walked through it virtually many times.

"...Beautiful place my friend..." Toros shifts his hulking frame and the chair beneath him protests loudly. "It's been a while since I've seen you Earther. I was beginning to think that you'd left us here on this damned rock for good."

"I'm here because I need information..."

"Ah...as always, straight to the point..." His mouthful of bright white teeth flashes a broad grin.

I relax in my chair and accept my drink now that Elna has returned. Toros waits for her to leave again and after the door closes behind her, he continues. "What kind of information do you seek my friend?"

It is Kedenian custom to not ask, but for the host to present a drink of their choice to a guest. I take a sip of the blue-ish green cocktail and it is good. "What is this drink?"

He leans heavily into his big, black, leather chair. "Pine fruit, water pears and the best Kedenian Fermentia you can find. It is good, no?"

I sip it again and nod my approval. Fermentia is Keden's version of wine and ranks in the top ten for fine wines that the Galaxy has to offer.

"I hear that a small Deepcore fleet has landed on Keden..." I search his face for any sign of acknowledgement, but there is none "Do you know where they are based?" but I see his crooked mind working; the well-oiled gears of it turning at full steam.

"You've been coming to me for a long time now Earther..." He plays with his glass "...and I've always given you whatever you ask, you know this. You pay well and that is what it's all about, no? What you ask now though, puts me in a difficult position. Do me, and you, a favor my friend and leave this one alone."

He's getting shifty so I cut him off.

"Name your price."

It is as though I said nothing.

"These guys, they don't play nice. They'll find me and end me, you must understand this Earther."

"I thought you were well protected here...thought this was your domain?"

"Domain...? Earther, to these people, there is no domain they cannot reach; they'll just send their assassins or bomb everything. They have spies...everywhere, and government connections. You have no idea what you're getting into."

"Who said I was getting into anything? I just asked a question."

Toros places his drink on the desk and looks at me. The fear in this man's eyes says it all. Deepcore is obviously bigger and more dangerous here than on Earth. A burst of static hits my ear. "Alpha...?"

It's Pitbull

"...I just hacked into Toros' logs and it appears that he has ties to Deepcore. There was a transaction of fifty million Kedenian Credits two days ago to Toros for services rendered...sending to you...now."

The info appears across my Digital Eyes. Now I know why the Kedenian opposite me is avoiding the question.

Toros is still rambling. "...and I'm not stupid Earther. You don't care if I get ended by these men. All you want is...wait a minute. You wouldn't be asking about them if you weren't planning some sort of raid..." His words trail off as the truth registers.

*I wish it wouldn't*

"...or a hit...this is a hit. You're going after them on Kedenian soil..." He looks away from me in thought "...yes, you're not here under instruction from your base. As far as I know, you are not even supposed to be here. This is some kind of unauthorized operation and you don't care what happens to me when it's done..."

"I'll double the credits Toros, and give you protection."

"Protection...? Ha!"

I don't like the look in his eyes.

"...I'm sorry Earther. I can't let you this time...bad for business, you understand, no?"

The room seems to be getting a bit too small. I hate to do this but Toros has now become a liability...no, a threat. He shifts suddenly so I draw my handgun and point it toward his face.

"Don't do this Toros. All I asked was where, are, they? Please my friend, I won't mention you, I swear."

"Friend...? Ha!" His face contorts in anger "That will not stop them from knowing that it was me. No one tolerates a rodent. I'll be eaten alive."

"Last time Toros. Where...?"

"You'll never make it out of here alive Earther."

I refuse to answer. The situation has gotten out of control. Inside, I recoil at the thought of what I am about to do. I wish it were different but now I have no choice.

"Please Earther..." The bulky, bald headed Kedenian is on the edge of panic "...do not do this...you have no idea..." and as he draws his hidden gun and shouts for help, I squeeze the trigger on my Tex's Fifty-eight. The 'Hand Cannon' as is nicknamed, lets loose its bullet with a heavy thud and I move as what was Toros' head explodes into an expanding pulp.

"I'm sorry old friend."

I reattach my helmet just as the door bursts open and slam the butt of my gun into the face that appears. The big man cries out but regains his footing and lunges toward me. I shift my weight and use his own to throw him over the desk of his fallen boss.

Another thug comes crashing through the door and my Fifty-eight puts him back through it. I need to get out of this hallway; it is a death chamber the longer I wait. I fire into the first man now rising from behind the desk and begin my run, then slow to a walk beside the metal door separating my corridor from the commingling on the other side. Pushing the button to open it is either going to give me freedom or death but I'm almost out of time; everyone in the building would have heard those shots.

The door flies open and after a quick glance, I run through the now empty space and stop once more near the hallway on the other side. No one is here either. I don't like this, it's too easy but I have to get out.

"Alpha..." Terri's is in my ear "...keep coming to us."

I suck in deep breaths of purified air, and take the passageway in long strides with my heart clawing its way out my chest. Deep breaths and a well-trained, steady mind keeps me calm and thinking straight. The door to the bar and lounge is now within reach.

*BOOM RRRRRRREEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEE*

The initial blast hits me like a thunderclap and I open the door in time to see the front end of the tavern disintegrate.

"Alpha, come on!"

Akita's MAV stands like the Grim Reaper, gun whirling and tearing up everything moving or not and I run for it, putting a hole into the chest of another guard. I don't know for sure, but it appears as though every customer that I left in here is now holding a weapon.

While I push my legs for more speed, My MAV is already opening by mental command and bullets whiz nearby as I run up the ladder.

"Alpha..." It's Bull's voice "...heavy armor in-bound on your six. I make two Rhinos."

Terrier is on the air now, "Yeah we've got company. I got em on scope. Huski let's go!"

I strap into my seat and wake my MAV's sleeping systems. Everything comes online instantly and we turn to leave the half-leveled building. Now I know for sure that Toros had dealings with Deepcore. Rhinos are the heavy Mecha of Deepcore's operations; heavy Mecha class war machines that could level a city block in a matter of seconds. This is fast turning into a 'not-good' situation.

"Okay boys, look alive, weapons hot, Bull get on it."

I activate both missile launcher pods and hear the whir as my Auto Cannon turns to lock onto my digital targets. We go back the way we came and as we come out onto the deserted main road near the broken perimeter walls, the ground in front of us and the edges of the building nearby tear up with gunfire.

"Bull, do you have them?" I hope to God his answer is yes.

"Got 'em boss..."

"Disable the bastards. Hound, hold your position."

"Holding" he replies

I imagine Pitbull sitting in his cockpit and targeting our enemies. His two hundred and twenty pound frame, taking up his entire seat is a perfect match to the monster, Long Ranged Railgun mounted above his MAV.

Bullets twang off our armor and my missile alert systems are going mad. I hear the sound a split second before the wall to my left explodes and chunks of metal and Evercrete slam into my armor, but there is no critical damage. According to my scope, the Rhinos are a hundred and twenty three meters out and closing. My warning system shrieks as it detects their missile lock again but in a bright flash...ONE...TWO! Both heavy Mecha go down, their legs, blown out at the joints. Bull's long-range assault has done its job and now, my targeting computer alerts me.

"Alpha..." Terri's voice "...I got lock..."

"Hold!" I reply

I need to make contact so I think it, and see the module appear in the upper left of my virtual Head's up Display. I select it with another thought that activates my MAV's auto-frequency-find and it scans until I have the right one.

"Rhino squad...you have engaged Earthfront military in unauthorized combat. Stand down or we will kill you. You have five seconds to comply." Eying the time on my digital screen, I wait as the milliseconds change the seconds that will eventually bring the moment of destruction. There is static on the air.

"Earthfront dogs..." his breathing is heavy and his voice like a loud whisper "...you are the ones who will meet death..."

His hoarse voice and labored breathing makes his words heavy and in them, is the sound of finality. I look at our crippled enemies and take in the shattered scene of old buildings and the empty street behind them. One of the Rhino's, using what's left of his destroyed hydraulic legs, rolls over and brings his missile launchers to bear. My warning systems light up...I have no choice.

“Fire...!”

I mentally select how many missiles I need and my finger squeezes the trigger on my control. Four of them leave me. The cockpit shudders. Their trails of grey and black smoke joining those from Terri’s MAV creates an eerie sight as the missiles track their prey. Two seconds, One second, Impact. The fallen Rhinos flare up in a brilliant flash followed by a wicked thunder and a raging dust cloud that expands rapidly outward. It is over. What is left of them is nothing more than superheated metal, melted into clumps of hard waste. The ground where they lay is now a small crater. Their debris, just more broken pieces added to the picture of this forsaken place; we turn to head back to base, I try to push Toros from my mind.

I can’t.

The time on my HUD is 17:35.

### CHAPTER 3 - FRIENDS AND FOES

We fly into base at 17:58. The massive complex is a waste of space if you ask me. Ten miles into the Dune Desert, most of it is buried below ground. I doubt that the folks stationed here take up even half of it. Lights outline the base’s circular metal dome. Windows at varying levels appear as electric-blue lines from this distance; giving the structure an eerie glow. This architecture reminds me of how far away from home I am.

“Base Control...” I read the code on my visor and then “...Iron Five on approach, over...”

*“Iron Five, you are cleared for entry. Touch down on zero seven.”* A digital line materializes on my navigation screen. It will lead us to Landing Pad seven. The voice this time is that of a young lady. I have no idea who she is though. Many new recruits and interns often get shipped out here from time to time and as they come...they go.

*Lucky bastards*

My team and I have been here for four months. Four months of crap. This rock is nothing more than a routine-filled life of boredom, as far as I am concerned, and this is the tenth time they have shipped us out here; I can’t wait to leave it behind again.

I drop toward the landing pad four hundred meters ahead. My thrusters cry as they compensate for the loss of thrust versus gravity. In my peripherals, Akita and Hound are right with me. Bull and Terri would be behind them. I switch my engines to hover and slide the throttle back, reducing power until my altimeter reads ten feet above immediate ground level. We all kill the upward thrusts almost at the same time and our MAVs touch down with a series of heavy thuds.

*“Iron Five. Proceed to wash down. Welcome home.”*

She sounds so young. Why don't these kids stay at home and enjoy their youth? But then I think of the Battle Axe who runs the base and I am suddenly more grateful for the new voice.

The landing pad; large, circular and made of dense metal is red and brown and covered with constantly shifting dust. The winds out here read at a good seventy miles per hour but our forty ton Walking Battle Tanks hold steady. While we walk, I do a thorough systems check. This is standard procedure and it will take about five minutes as my team approaches the wide opening of the outer hanger.

I follow the lines glowing on the ground ahead of me with my brain feeling the tingle of millions of microscopic neural electrical jolts. Mind and computer, linked together in a dance of pulses and waves; this stuff never ceases to amaze me. We continue, through the hangar opening and to a large chamber that seals us inside with a giant Eversteel door. Locked in now, the five of us are subjected to powerful streams of super-heated and compressed water and gas that hit our armour under extreme pressure; scrubbing us clean of dust, parasites and any other dangers that might have been picked up on the outside. I complete the systems check as every few seconds, jets of water and whatnot slam into the narrow strip of cockpit glass around me.

After our time in decontamination, we go through another set of hangar doors and stand the MAV's in their designated spaces. Each assigned space has the Earthfront E logo, and uniquely coloured lines along their edges representing rank, indicate who goes where. I log the final reading from one of the sensors on my HUD, then power down my engine and hit the release switch. A moment passes as the cockpit lights come on and my visor switches from external to normal view, showing what is really around me. Then the front section of my MAV slides downward and I climb out.

As my feet touch the metal floor of our docking bay, I remove my helmet and blink. There is a slight jab behind my eyes as the Digital Eyes adjusts to the brightly lit space and I join Bull and Akita while they wait for the rest of the team.

Standing lifelessly nearby, my MAV towers above us; its black skin casting dull reflections of lights around. I remember the first time I saw it, and the joy I felt knowing that it was mine. With its two cylindrical missile pods hanging off short pylons on both sides, and the Tex Auto-cannon mounted above and behind the cockpit, it still makes me feel insignificant.

Designed by famous weapons specialist, Gregory Tex, son of the great, General Ganton Tex, the Tex's Auto-cannon is our military's most widely used projectile weapon. It is also the Crown Jewel of Tex Contractors back on Earth.

Across the gunmetal-grey hanger, with its Eversteel floor almost reflective, small sky fighters, space shuttles, armored tanks and a few other Light Mecha class machines fill the manmade cavern. There is also a SysDef Starship here.



Our MAV Carrier, the Mirage, is here too. Originally built as a small black-ops Starship with a fully fitted weapons system of its own; she's perfect for vacuum warfare. The sleek and attractive spacecraft had been refitted to transport up to six MAVs after being assigned to us. Its primary function; to take us from space to any planet's surface and back without having to use a spaceport.

"Time to eat..." Hound says as he approaches.

"The Pitbull agrees. Nothing else to do anyways so let's..."

I have no reason to disagree with them so we all follow Bull and Hound out of the hanger and to the Mess hall.

"That was a good run guys..."

"Good run? Alpha, unless you forgot, we got no leads..."

I turn toward Terri, his black wavy hair a mess after its time in his helmet. "Of course we did..." They all look at me, puzzled "...we know for sure that the fleet is somewhere on this planet."

"But how do we know where..?" Akita jumps in.

"We'll pay another friend of mine a visit..."

"At the rate we're going..." Terri again "...you'll be out of friends by day after tomorrow. I'm thinking of unfriending you right now as a matter of fact."

We all laugh and walk toward a glass doorway that slides into the wall.

"Captain..!"

We turn toward the voice.

*Damn, it's her.*

\*\*\*\*\*

"Sit, Captain!"

She's all business. We are in her office, or prison cell, depending on how you look at it. All these enclosed metal rooms are basically the same to me, differentiated only by color and furniture. Hers is light blue with an L-shaped, blue-metal desk, two white-cushioned metal chairs, and a hidden shelving system.

I try to read her for any signs of what is to come but there are none. She's good. We sit in silence for a while. I know she is assessing me, maybe even trying to make me nervous; she should know better. Her red hair is in a tight bun today. Her eyes are livid as they scan the documents before her. There is an undercurrent there, an anger kept well in check, if I am not mistaken. On the other hand, she has what I like to call 'an unattractive, attractive face'. Even with the worn effects of Kedenian weather and the broad, painfully looking deep scar running from the middle of her forehead, down her left eye and to her lower jaw, something appealing still exists.

A Certificate case hanging on the wall behind her reveals that I need a shave. The stubble on my face, along with my black crew cut hair makes me

look a bit older than I am, but then again, that could just be the reflective glass being negative; like its owner.

"Captain Richard Victor Gant..." She says it without looking at me, snapping me from my daze, her attention rooted to a sheet of digital paper as she slides it across the metal desk. I haven't heard my name face to face in a very long time; so much so, that now I do; it seems foreign, especially coming from her. For the past few years, it has been Captain, Alpha or Huski. She must be really pissed off.

"...gives you the right to think..." Her voice registers again "...that you have the authority to carry out an unauthorized Op in my jurisdiction, on my watch?" She is looking at me now, eyes furious but her demeanour composed.

"I don't understand. I don't know anything about an Op..." The images on the translucent paper are those of three MAV's standing in place while an unseen attacker blows the crap out of two Rhinos. Outside of the current circumstances, it looks pretty cool on paper.

"I don't know what you are doing here or why you were sent, but I know one thing...this is *my* base. Your briefings and debriefings might be to General Hawk but everyone who is a part of my base is subject to the rules and regulations of *my* base..." She pauses, for some kind of effect I guess "...therefore, you are to remain *on* my base for the duration of your stay. You and your team no longer have access to the hanger bay..."

"You can't do th..."

She raises her voice "...and I order you..." Volume down and voice stern again "...to cease and desist whatever operation you are currently carrying out until further notice! Do I make myself clear?"

"Commander you don't..."

Loud again "I will have you and your squad court marshalled!" Calm once more "Now do, I, make, myself, clear?"

I return her gaze "Crystal clear, Ma'am."

Her eyes move away from mine "You are dismissed."

I stand and walk away without hesitation. We have been back and forth in arguments ever since my first time here but this time, this one could be a problem. I quickly push her out of my mind. We have a job to do, and we need to get out of here.

\*\*\*\*\*

A half hour later, I am in my cell...room...quarters...whatever it is and thinking about our current predicament. I will have to discuss it with the guys when we get together in the Mess. I don't trust talking on coms in this place. There is a knock on my door.

"It's open..."

The steel door slides aside to reveal the oval opening, and who I see standing there catches me off guard, but I don't show it. I stand and deliver an over exaggerated salute, and try hard to not show my surprise...or is it interest...doesn't matter.

"Captain..?"

Her voice is steady. She is carrying a file and obviously not in a good mood. Her manner has not changed since we last spoke. So why is she here?

"Commander..." I acknowledge her.

"I have great news..." She has not even spoken a full sentence and already her lips drip with fury "...the boots you wipe have cleared you for duty." Her composure is failing. She throws the file and it lands on the mattress next to me.

I look at it, sit up and open the shiny case.

"When your Op is completed, you are cleared to leave this planet forthwith. Good day Captain."

Her head is held high and her back, straight as a ruler. I continue to read what is before me and she turns to leave.

"Commander..." I can't help it and this is ridiculous the more I think about it, but she continues walking. "Mirana!" She stops and turns her head slightly "Wait. Please."

She turns her face away from me and toward the door but does not move.

"Captain, you will address me with the necessary respect re..."

"Then court-martial me, but before you do, tell me, what is your problem?" I wait but get no response, so I get off the bed and continue. "This makes no sense. This is the tenth time I've been stationed here and for whatever reason, of which I have no idea, you have shown me nothing less than unwarranted hostility."

"What is *my* problem...unwarranted hostility?" The words slither from her lips like poisoned silk. She re-seals the door and turns to me now "...okay, you want to talk? Let's talk." Her eyes glare like shiny hornets "...you...full of yourself, pompous sonofabitch and answerable to no one..."

I've never heard her like this before and now her cheeks blossom red...I've never seen this either

"Yes that's you. Every time your unit is stationed here, you undermine my authority. You treat the regulations of *my* base as though they are beneath you; Unwarranted hostility?" She begins to walk away.

"This is pointless..." I move toward her.

"Yes, it is pointless." She puts a hand to open the door. I hold her arm and she stops.

"I didn't mean *this* conversation is pointless. I meant this..." I gesture to the space between us "...this hate between us."

She retaliates

*Shit!*

I move just in time as she swings into me but I was not expecting it. Her manoeuvre does not hit true yet my body is still slammed against the cabin wall. She is good. I mean, I am a fully trained soldier and yet her technique against me was flawless.

"You don't ever touch me Captain!" Glaring, she holds me in place. I think about what is happening. The tension between us had been building for some time now. I always knew she hated me and that eventually our clash would come but damn, how was I to know it would happen like this? Her eyes bore into mine and I take in the intensity on her face. Her anger, hair like fire, lips like...I don't know but they are nice. I also see her scars up close for the first time. She has obviously seen battle, or maybe the wrong side of a past relationship who knows...why the hell do I care? I shift my weight, all one hundred and eighty five pounds of it and redirect hers. She releases her hold and I drive her slender frame to the spot where she previously pinned me.

"We're adults Commander." I release her now.

"Assaulting a Commander of any SysDef or Earthfront installation is punishable by..."

I back away. "I'm not what you think..."

She takes a deep breath "What difference does it make Captain?" Her emotions betray her now. Anger and frustration in her eyes and voice spill out.

"It's not easy doing this job. You should know how it is when your directives don't come from your immediate superior. You have no idea what my job entails so don't judge me based on it."

"And what? Are we supposed to be friends? Does your secretive occupation of whatever ungodly acts you do, give you the right to make me look like a fool on my own base? You obviously can't see past your objectives."

She's cold and I find it difficult to digest. "And you can?" I ask the question without thought.

"I know how to follow orders, but I also know when to show respect and common courtesy."

"I couldn't give privileged informa..."

"It's not so privileged now is it?" She's loud again. Her eyes lock on to mine, as if boring through me...this is awkward. With her voice regular again "You did not have the decency to let me, the base Commander, know what you were about to do..."

"I had no choice. You know this. You know how this job works? You know how the Chain of command works. You above many should know what comes with taking orders."

"You just don't get it..."

I cut her off "No, you obviously don't get it..." I'm annoyed now but she continues as though I said nothing.

"After you foolishly do what you come here to do, and you and your little squad leave, the Kedenians become more hostile toward *us*. They don't see us

any different from you. No Captain, *you* don't get it. We're the ones who have to clean up your shit."

She turns on her heels to leave. I don't think I need to say this but maybe I do...who knows?

"I'm sorry."

"For what? It makes no difference. You come, you leave, and we pay the price." The door opens again.

"So why can't we put this behind us and start over...move on?"

I don't even know why I'm continuing this. Maybe I do but I don't think so. I'm confused now as she stops outside of the porthole.

"I have moved on, just as I always do. I suggest you do the same." She turns and disappears down the corridor, her boots echoing on the metal floor and the door closes. I want to turn my attention to the folder on my bed, I want to scream, I want to go after her, I think of Toros...I think of her again, I need to get this mission done but for the moment, I can't do anything. What the hell is happening to me?

\*\*\*\*\*

I open my eyes. My Dees tell me that it's 4:31 am. My first thoughts are of her. This annoys me and I wish, for a moment, that there was some sort of pill for forgetfulness. Well there are pills for that but not in the way I want. I eventually forget her and remember my dream. It was of life back on Earth; I have not been home in such a long time. I wonder how much has changed. But these thoughts won't help me now; there are more important things to deal with today. I gotta get up and down to my team. We have a lot of work to do. If we want to catch that fleet, we have to be quick and decisive about it. I push her out of my mind again.

The Mess Hall is not too crowded. The team and I have been discussing our strategy for our next run. We'll be heading out in a few hours, when the sun is at its hottest. This way we should meet few, if any, local patrols. In a way, I am not looking forward to this trip. I just know it is going to be one of those drawn out and tedious ones but if all goes according to plan, we should be at our destination by late afternoon and back in good enough time.

My next contact is a Kedenian who I met during my fourth attachment here; a narcotics and weapons dealer who gives me information for credits. He is not a problem because no dealer in their right mind would risk being exposed as a snitch or worse, having an Earthfront Battalion storming their happy little world. Hopefully, he won't be spooked by my last meeting with one of his associates.

"Okay guys, we'll be mobile in a few hours so I'll let you get back to your free time."

"Thank you Alpha." Akita jumps up and without looking back, hurries away.

"What's up with him?" I turn to Terri.

"The usual. She's young this time, blue-blond and hypnotized by the Akita."

I laugh "It's the same thing everywhere we go. This is what now, seventy-something?"

"I've lost count." Hound joins in.

Terrier slides out from the table "Well I'm going to go back to my room to get some air time with the folks back home. The link up is gonna be good today."

"Do your thing Terri..." I watch him leave and think of his mother. She was like a mother to me after my parents died. I've known them a long time. "...and hey..." He turns to me. His face is older but his eyes...his eyes are still those intense brown ones belonging to that kid I grew up with. "...Tell them I said hello."

"No problem Cap."

"I'm gonna head to the lounge and see if I can get as lucky as Akita. See ya later guys." Pitbull disappears and Hound and I remain seated.

"We need vacations."

I look at Hound before answering. The big German swings both boot clad feet onto the table and leans back fearlessly in the narrow chair.

"Tell me about it."

He sighs "When this is over, why don't we put in for some time off? We've been on the prowl for so long, I can't remember what life outside of my job feels like."

"Sounds like a great Idea. I'll talk to the Hawk when this is over. I know Terri wants to go home. I also want to see Earth again."

Hound laughs "Terri? He's already had time off. He's the only one who has."

"Yeah but that was different. His mother was sick so that doesn't..."

"He spent a month with her Alpha. Way longer than needed. You know it, I know it. He got lucky and we're on his side about it, but at the same time, we don't like being overlooked either."

"Okay you're right, I must admit, but that was six months ago..."

"Six months..." He cuts in again "...a year, yesterday...doesn't matter. All I'm saying is that I too, would like some R and R. Sometimes I wish my mom would get sick."

"Okay, okay. I'll see what I can do. Pitbull keeps talking about Creus..."

"The Island planet?"

"Yep..."

"That'd be fun"

"I can only imagine. I've never been there."

“Seriously Cap? I’ve been there a few times...nothing but tropical air and seas and islands everywhere; just awesome.”

“Yeah? Well what about you Hound? Where’d you like to go?”

“Well, Akita has been telling me about Eroi Three...”

I should have known. “The Red moon?”

“Yep...sounds like a blast...been thinking of it for some time now. He says that whenever, if ever, we get off this beat for long enough, he’d show me around there.”

“Yeah that’s Akita for you. Travel a thousand light years for easy women. It’s the perfect place for him.”

We both laugh and I remember meeting Hound for the first time. We were both young recruits in the Flight Academy on Rouna, the paradise planet. We had just landed and after a small scuffle over seats in the transport, our hostilities became very evident in everything we did.

“Cap...I’m gonna go talk to the mechanics for a while. Keep myself busy so I don’t fall asleep.”

He drags both large feet off the shiny table between us. Then, standing to his full six feet five, walks away; blonde hair hanging a few inches below his crown and shifting with his walk.

“See you in a bit Hound.”

During our days at the training facility, I had grown to hate everything about Hound, just as much as he did about me, right down to his beady blue eyes and our rivalry had sprouted a separation in the camp, much to the disgust of our commanders. I remember him tracking me hard in his training MAV as I tried to get into a firing position to take him down. We had been viciously going at it for a good ten minutes and then as I out maneuvered and bested him, my MAV went critical and slammed into the ground. It was Hound who dragged me from the twisted heap of metal and wires and burning debris. The man had carried me a seemingly safe distance before the explosion threw him, and put us both out of commission for almost six months.

It was in the infirmary, on those two neighbouring beds that we had gotten to know each other, and we have been brothers ever since.

The sounds of three female voices break my train of thought. They walk past nearby and one of them flashes me a cute smile. I look at the few folks around. I have no Idea who most of these people are. All nameless faces in a place far away from home, but I have my unit...and my unit is all that matters.

I notice the time. There is absolutely nothing to do in this place and so I get up and walk back to my room.

“Captain...”

*God please, not again.*

“Commander...” I acknowledge her with a salute.

She hands me a file containing a few sheets of digital paper “These may be of some value.”

I take them from her, not sure what to make of her sudden friendliness  
“What are these?” I look at the first sheet.

“We are not the slackers you take us for. You’ll find that we are more resourceful than you think.”

I must admit, she is a beautiful woman in spite of the scars. Her red hair is still pulled into a tight bun with apparent military precision and her uniform, as crisp as ever.

“Why are you doing this?”

I’m not bothered by her for the moment. The thoughts and feelings from of our fight amazingly remain at bay.

“Because duty comes before personal issue. Good luck Captain.” She walks past me and continues until out of sight down the narrow corridor. I am still in shock but quickly regain my senses. That was bullshit and she knows it. At least I would like to think so. Duty indeed.

The file reveals information about a small fleet of ships that had entered Kedenian airspace a few days ago. I continue toward my quarters.

*Maybe she was right after all. If I had let her know of our mission, Toros would still be alive and Iron Five would have been on that well deserved vacation.*

One of the sheets of digital paper shows a map of Keden and a possible location for the unauthorized fleet. The image shows an unusually large concentration of heat signatures in a valley four thousand miles from here. I enter my room and barely register the door closing behind me. This spot on the map has got to be where they are based. They have obviously masked their position with some form of camouflage, so all the drones see are these red splotches. But I don’t get it. Why did she help us?

\*\*\*\*\*

It is 10:45am and I am in my MAV doing a systems check. The rest of my team is doing the same as technicians and electronics specialists run around beneath us prepping our gear for departure. My communications console comes alive.

*“Iron Five...”* I know the voice, it’s the Battle Axe *“...ten minutes to departure.”*

*“Alpha copies ten minutes. Ready and waiting...”*

We walk toward the outer doors of the huge hangar. I look around the cockpit before switching to the virtual display on my visor. I have always been a believer in checking any computer system manually before digitally.

*“Captain...”* It’s her again *“...drones have spotted three Heavy Mecha...Rhinos to be exact and four Light Booster Tanks so approach with caution.”*

*“Will do Commander...”*



We pass through the outer lock and then the protective doors of the outer hangar and take up positions on a sand swept landing pad. "Base...Iron Five is ready for launch." I give my engine a little power and wait.

A flash of static hits me *"Iron Five, your launch is a go."*

I increase power and the MAV fights gravity as we lift off. The sand and dust filled winds read at sixty six miles per hour, making visibility very limited but we push upward nonetheless. At two thousand feet, I give the signal and we level out, then check the uploaded flight path and hit the throttle. The vents of my thrusters shift, pushing me into my cushioned seat. My heart thumps heavily in my chest and we shoot forward. The acceleration is hypnotic. Within thirty seconds, we are pushing a little over a thousand miles per hour and should be where we want to be in about three and a half hours.

## CHAPTER 4 - KEDEN

The landscape below us is drastically uneven. Deep fissures spreading out in random directions look like gnarled fingers between massive sand dunes. These shifting mountains, in some areas, as close to us as seven hundred feet. The winds at our altitude are seventy miles per hour but rogue gusts register every now and again at a hundred or more. This is a treacherous location so I maintain our two thousand feet above Immediate-ground-level flight path.

*"Captain..."* It's the Commander. I haven't heard from her since we left base three and some hours ago. *"Link and rep live, over?"*

*"Huski to base, we're alone out here. Thirty minutes to contact."*

*"We're tracking you but the weather is getting worse...signal interference is heavy."*

*"Roger that."* I focus on the ground below as we speed by. My Sol engine is a remarkable piece of work. We, as a race, have come a very long way.

The year is now 878 TE and according to history, mankind came across Sol-technology in the year 2035 AD. I remember learning this in History class and wishing for it to end so I could go meet Rachel Sommers.

*I wonder what became of her.*

A scientist by the name of Doctor Lorenz Olivius created the first ever successful miniature replica of the sun, by igniting it within a vessel that mimicked the vacuum of space. The applications were, as one can imagine, limitless. Within fifteen years of its dawn, the Sol Combustion engine had allowed mankind to go beyond their limitations and finally reach for the stars. This breakthrough had then led to one hundred years of galactic searching and mapping and development. Then in 2150 AD our ancestors left Earth in massive Starship fleets for new homes and in doing so, a new era was born; the era of The Exodus.

“Alpha...ten minutes to contact.”

“Okay Bull, let’s get to five on deck.”

I pull the throttles back, extend all speed brakes and feel my stomach reach up my throat as my MAV slows rapidly and drops to five hundred feet. We fly past the end of the wicked looking fissures and tall dunes, and cross over a terrain covered with boulders; I kill the throttle and switch the engine to hover. The machine vibrates through the transition and we descend to a few feet above an enormous flat stone and drop to the rough surface, dislodging and kicking up rocks with a quaking thud; we immediately go dark.

“Bull...?” I wait

“All clear for one mile. Their warning systems don’t reach this far...got nothing else on scan.”

“Okay let’s move!”

I switch from flight to ground commands and hit the throttle. My MAV takes the uneven, rocky surface with ease, as we get closer to what could be another successful run, or our last mission.

“Alpha...” Its Pitbull again “...I’m picking up interference of some sort. Not sure what it is but I think we should be careful here.”

We are standing on the edge of another flat rock face. I step off, a mere five-foot drop, and onto the dusty ground of yet more desert. On either side of me are high, wind carved dunes made of hardened dust and sand. The valley is wide for maneuvering but still small enough to make us sitting ducks. I come to a stop and check my scanners; there’s nothing, but I don’t like the feeling in my gut...and if I am feeling it, and Bull feels it, then by experience, we need to be cautious.

“Bull, how’s the weather?”

“Sunny...but something doesn’t seem right boss.”

Bull hardly ever calls me boss. He is worried.

“Okay. Look alive, boys...weapons hot...”

I focus on my weapons module and make the mental command. My cannons come online with a whirl. An uneasy stillness in the air puts me on guard. It could just be a case of nerves but after a few years in this business, I have learnt that the jitters often precede a real event.

We continue our trek until the valley lies behind and another one appears ahead and below. According to the co-ordinates, this should be the place but all that is here are generators and large transformers.

“Alpha...”

The base commander on our open channel interrupts Bull. *“Iron Five...we’ve got four Light Booster Tanks and an unknown transport approaching Dunan from the south west. Drone Surveillance just picked them up. They’re two hours out.”*

“They’re runnin’. Bull, give me another scan.”

“There’s nothing but that weird interference boss.”

“Let’s fly then. We gotta catch those bastards”

I deactivate my stealth and barely notice as everyone else ripples into sight. Bull comes over my com again "Alpha, these generators are the same heat signatures on the map...so was this a decoy?"

Reality hits me like a hammer. They knew we would come.

"No..." My warning systems light up. "...it's a trap!"

My virtual cockpit goes wild. Alerts of missile launches and gunlocks assault my senses like a wildfire.

"Evasive...go, go, go, go!"

I switch to flight mode and drive my throttle all the way. My computer sends me flashes of tracking information and I almost feel the three missiles that approach. My MAV shakes violently with the sudden discharge of power, but I hold it steady as G-forces pin me to the seat while I accelerate upward.

*What type of missiles are they?*

The computer sends the answer with a barely noticeable sting. Another mental command sends hundreds of chaff spitting from the back of my machine with thousands of miniature vibrations that shiver the armor around me; but the first heat seeker is already here and hits close. The impact shakes me but my systems do not read critical.

*Thank God.*

Rising high into the air, a forty-ton bat out of hell, my Sol engine screams with the effort as I try to locate our unseen enemies. There are three of them.

"I've found those Heavies!" I shout it to the others.

"Roger, three Rhinos, northern hill top." Hound comes across calm and collective and he already has one locked.

I swing around and fly toward the Heavy Mecha that is tracking me; he is already on the move and my systems warn of another missile lock. It leaves his launcher but I am within firing range. They might have more armor and heavier firepower but we've got speed and agility. I wait, hear my gun lock onto its target, and open fire.

My bullets shred into the oncoming missile and it explodes in a vicious flash of white as I quickly close the distance. With another squeeze of the trigger my Auto-cannon spits with a flurry of fiery streaks.

The view around me, with my altimeter counting down 500FT, 425FT, 350FT, 275FT in less than three seconds, shakes and shifts on the outer edges of my vision. The smoke and lights of my cannon-fire leads me toward my target as he tries to turn in my direction; I guess they thought we would have been dead on the first launch.

My gunfire rakes a trail of superheated dents and penetrations across the ground and the Rhino in my sights. Dust and sparks erupt where my target stands and my pulse, amplified, beats wildly in my ear. I have to get high again, so I jam my throttle to full power, angle my thruster vents and brace myself as I launch back into the sky. The engine howls with the effort, and the

pressure of the maneuver squeezes me beyond comfort, but its fly or die, as every digital module goes blinking red again.

My heart hammers madly as all around, bullets slice the air and I hear, almost feel, a few ping off my armor. Smoke trails crisscross the battlefield. Explosions light up the sky and another missile comes toward me from below but it goes wide and detonates well away; I see that Bull is alive and working his magic.

“Good work Bull...”

I push over and return to the ground. The Rhino is in the air now. My systems alert me of the incoming enemy, but I am faster. At seven hundred feet, my targeting computer locks on to the rising Mecha and I squeeze the trigger twice. Eight missiles leave my launchers. The cockpit shakes with it and their smoke-trails, like black and grey spider webs, fill my vision. Gunfire slams into my armor. I activate the auto-coolant system; it will stop the overheating, and while I fight to clear the space between us, my visor adjusts in a millisecond as the Rhino explodes.

*I got him.*

My computer shouts its complaints into my senses as I roll over and force the engine to sustain the current power. I have to get down from here; I am an open target.

The other two Rhinos are busy and this provides the perfect opportunity to strike. I shove my MAV into a shallow dive and get a target lock just as another of our enemies ignite in a magnificent flash of fire and expanding energy.

“Got that son-of-a-bitch...” It’s Bull. His long-range rail gun has hit true and Akita’s barrage of missiles finishes the job.

There is one Heavy left. I see his smoke trailing from a damaged hull. He’s in the air and heading south.

“I got-im...” Terri comes over the com as his missiles trace a deadly arc through the sky. The explosion thunders through the valley as what looks to be eight warheads detonate in the distance; this fight is over.

“*Iron Five...?*” Our Base Commander is not as composed as before.

“Still standing...” I respond and adjust power, descending slowly. My MAV is a bit damaged but I keep my nerves in check “...where are they?”

“*Seven hundred miles out, and a half hour to the city...*”

I touch down “Guys...status?”

“Terri here...”

“Akita, good to go...”

“A few scratches but Hound is okay...”

“Pitbull is alive and kicking...”

I am relieved. My computer tells me that all is well except a minor armor breach; that first missile had almost gotten me. “Okay let’s go!”

“Alpha, we’ve got half hour to cover seven hundred miles...”

Bull is right, but we have to try. I push the throttle forward and lift into the air once more.

*"Iron Five, you've got twenty nine minutes..."*

"Copy twenty nine minutes...we're going for it." The ground falls away as we push toward our targets "Bull, get me locked on. I need a flight path." My tracking system finds our prey through Pitbull's sensors and gives me an intercept route. Our engines scream. The ground below becomes a blur and the speed indicator soon reads a thousand miles per hour and climbing.

At this rate, we will be cutting it close. My virtual map, courtesy SysDef's Drone surveillance, shows our escapees gunning it across the desert.

"Bull, can you get a shot?"

"Already on it and locking one now..."

"Take it when you have it. Let's try and slow 'em down."

I glance toward Pitbull's MAV and the long-range Rail gun lights up. Blue and white arcs of electricity ripple over its split rail and launch soundlessly; the highly charged projectile traveling at nearly light speed should be hitting its mark right now. No sooner than I think this, the display shows one of the Booster Tanks, as part of it disintegrates and then the entire thing falls to the desert floor.

"Good hit..."

*"Iron Five, Base is picking up heavy activity just outside of Dunan. You've got multiple hostiles about to launch, get out of there."*

"Alpha..." Bull's rail gun does not fire the next charge "...I've got em on my scan too; about twenty missile tanks and a heavy launcher."

These Deepcore people must be high profile. Missile tanks were one thing, but a heavy launcher. They launch Hunters, Cruise missiles and ICBM's.

"Okay guys bug out. Let's get deck-side."

I turn hard and drop to two hundred feet. Outrunning a Hunter missile is difficult in the air so we will be better off getting on foot and going dark till it passes but my systems remain calm. All I am receiving is an enemy lock threat; I know when I am beaten.

"Base...?"

*"Go ahead Captain..."*

"I need to know where that entourage is headed."

Static hits me "...on it."

With time against us, the ground rushes by at a thousand, eight hundred miles per hour; we must get to our ship.

\*\*\*\*\*

My team and I rip pass Dunan. The sprawling city lies thirty kilometers off to my right while directly ahead; our base awaits us some fifteen away. I reduce power and jam my emergency brakes to full extension. The large rectangular

slats would rise up and out at different angles and immediately cut most of my forward momentum. The powerful displacement of energy from this maneuver jolts me violently as my MAV slows hard. Then we descend without much thought.

"Huski to Base Control..." I read the code on my visor "...Iron-Five on approach, over."

*"Iron Five. You're cleared for entry, touch down on Pad Zero Five."*

We drop to the red-dusted, metallic landing zone and almost run our MAV's to the hangar. After decontamination we are all docked and grabbing gear from our quarters while large machines load the MAV's onboard our Starship. With gear in hand, I head out and down the corridor. My helmet, attached to my waist hits my leg with every stride and as I pass Mirana's office...

"Captain..."

I stop and turn to see her approaching. She's all business-as-usual. "...what are you doing here? The briefing has been uploaded to your system...we have..."

"I'm trying to get to my ship is what I'm doing."

She raises an eyebrow "Captain, there are shorter ways to your ship. That Deepcore fleet launched a half hour ago."

What in the galaxy is wrong with this woman? I take a deep breath "I gotta go..."

"Then Go."

"You stopped me..."

"Captain..." Her voice is steady "...if you lose these rebels, all of our efforts would have been for nothing."

*'Our efforts'...What the hell did she do to be a part of this?*

I wait in the silence. Of all the women in the galaxy, why does this one get under my skin? She opens her office door and closes it. I hate not having the last word. Why do I even bother? I begin to move again until the cavernous hanger finally comes into view.

\*\*\*\*\*

"Alpha, the weather's about to get really nasty, we've got about twenty minutes before everything goes to dust."

I'm strapping the X shaped harness across my chest after sitting in one of the rear seats of the cockpit when Terri informs me of this.

"Okay we're a go." I give the order and he rolls us out of the hangar and toward one of the launching pads outside. As we transition from within the base to the open air of Keden, I notice that the weather is a bit worse than when we had just arrived. Red and brown dust whips past the windshield of our Starship, with winds reading from sixty to seventy-five miles per hour. Thanks

to Magnetic Technology however, it'll take a bit more than this to make our liftoff a problem.

*"Base...Iron Five has window, all is a go, over."*

Terrier is our Starship Pilot. I'm the communications officer and Bull is our Co-pilot and weapons specialist. Akita and Hound are the engineers who make sure that all the mechanical aspects of this bird run problem free.

*"Iron Five, Base copies your window. You are cleared for launch..."*

She sounds no different from the norm but the channel stays open. I choose to ignore it.

The cockpit shakes as Terri begins our lift off. The Ship leaves the pad and the sensation of our thrusters counteracting the planet winds makes my head drift a little. I check the uploaded information concerning our Deepcore buddies. They went off world forty-eight minutes ago in a ship named Deep six. What type of ship though? The Intel doesn't say.

*"Good luck Iron Five..."*

Pitbull and Terrier turn and look at each other. I am sure we are all thinking the same thing.

*Since when has she ever cared if we had good or bad luck?*

The Base and ground are no longer visible. High altitude dust and sand obscures it all, so I relax and let the G-forces glue me to my seat. I feel the ship angle more steeply. Everything outside of my window is becoming distant and shrinking further behind.

I smile to myself. We are leaving this Rock.

*She's back there. Who cares? I do, and I hate the confusion of it.*

The air clears now. A few flat clouds rocket by and disappear behind us. The sky becomes darker. Our engines rumble and the sound of it grows deep, and deeper as we rise. It seems lodged somewhere in the back of my head and echoes throughout my mind. Then the sky grows black and Keden's spaceport is now visible in the distance. A huge disk shaped station with lights moving around it; and then it is gone.

We are about to go to Hyper Light and I want to make contact again, but why? What reason is there? I want to think of a plausible one yet it eludes me. I force her from my mind and let these thoughts fade away as we enter the vacuum of space.

*"Iron five..."*

I listen to Mirana's voice with mixed feelings. Maybe I am a bit embarrassed by our fight...or a lot disappointed that we didn't fix it. I hate feeling confused.

*"...you are now out of our airspace and hand over to Starport Command is now in effect. Link and Rep live, over..."*

Starport Command is the communications deck on any local Starport. While space stations are the access points to and from planet surfaces, Starports are the stations that launch travelers from solar system to solar system. Each

inhabited or utilized solar system has one Starport or more depending on its population and, or, purpose. This system, K-1, has a single Starport along with three inhabited planets, five mining worlds and an F1-III class sun, which simply means a Yellow-White Giant.

*Why is she on comms?*

"Iron Five is good to go and copies hand over to Starport Command..."

I hate having to talk to her...no I don't.

"Switching on next transmission..."

The com stays open. I wish she would say something. My hand slides across the digital tab that would disconnect us from Keden.

*"Come back in one piece..."*

For some unknown reason, I am annoyed at her for these words. Why didn't she say this to my face? My finger hits the key and we all listen to the new sounds of K-1 space traffic control.

"After all the thousands of years that men and women have co-existed, we're still baffled by them."

Terrier's smiling face beams in my direction and I can't help but add a groaning grin to this awkward moment. "Shut up and drive."

Everyone's laughter hits me at once while Terri works his magic, and in a moment, we clip our helmets in place and the familiar tug on my senses takes control as we accelerate to Hyper Light speed, and punch through the fabric of space at eighty three point three-three-three times the speed of light.

\*\*\*\*\*

Engines on any standard spacecraft all come equipped with an Eon Drive. The Eon Drive is just a larger and more amped up version of the original Sol Combustion Engine, the difference being the scale of the output when it comes to power. As we all know, Sol Combustion powers our galaxy, from the smallest of planetary machines to the massive Jump Gates on any Starport.

The lights of stars in the distance are blurs, and two hours and some minutes later, we come out of Hyper Light and rocket toward the massive outline of K-1's lone Starport.

I always hate this part of the trip. As soon as Terri engages our braking system, we hit a cushioned, invisible wall. Everything slows down so rapidly that no one in existence has ever been able to resist throwing up the first few times, except infants for some long-winded reason.

This effect, known as a Bio-Magnetic Reaction, happens because of Magnatech, or Magnetic Technology. Magnetic Technology is the reason we don't go careening off into space like in the old days. Gone are those historical days of tedious calculations and intersecting an object or planet's trajectory at just the right time. Through Magnetics, powered by Sol Combustion, we are



able to maneuver in space, speed up and slow down, change course on a whim and more.

Weapons used in space also rely on Magnatech. Missiles, being the most widely used in vacuum, use Magnetic Technology to track targets. However, as great as this breakthrough was and is, it's the, getting used to it, that makes it rough on the human body.

Two billion miles from Keden, I select the communications module "K-1 Traffic Control...Captain Richard Gant of the UNA Mirage requesting docking."

UNA...The United Northern Alliance, is home to Earthfront Galactic and me...but is it still my home? I feel disconnected.

"UNA Mirage..." The voice is male, and professional "...Docking request acknowledged, cleared for entry, you have Guidance on link. Welcome Captain Gant."

I check the linkup and Terri sets us on autopilot in order for the Station's Magnetic Guidance system to pull us safely in. There is a slight jolt as the ship goes from manual command to auto. In all my time of space travel I still haven't gotten over the fascination of all this.

"Now to catch these bastards..."

"We'll find them Cap..."

Terri's visor hides his expression but I imagine the look of determination on his face; I know him well enough.

Outside the ship, the awesome picture that hangs there is astounding, as the massive complex appears to slide closer. The monstrous, flat, half-disk-shape, made from Immix; a Kedenian bluish metal, reflects the solar system's sunlight with a shiny azure glare.

"This Port reminds me of those in the Glebe System."

Pitbull's words pull me away from outside.

"Your home system..." Hound responds.

"Yeah..."

Terri chimes in "Paiz right?"

"Yep and thanks to you guys, I haven't been home in over four years."

"Welcome to the club, my brother." I jump in.

"I knew a girl on Paiz..." Akita thrown in his own, as usual "There are some truly beautiful women in that system too..."

We all laugh and chant him about this until the conversation fizzles off and we each go back to our own thoughts. Stars and spiral Galaxies millions of light years away display the vastness of space beyond us, but what I see directly outside is also just as spectacular. Thousands of windows in perfect lines, like rows of colored lights set against the black expanse of deep space, glimmer. A movement draws my attention; a monster Hauler, floating slowly away from one of three very large rectangular docking bays below us. Opening up into the nothingness of space, they are the entrances and exits for thousands of ships on a daily basis. This hauler, moving past us now, is a Titan a few hundred times

our size. Pitbull had told me that he once worked on a freighter. As for me, I have never done time on an Ore Ship but I have heard many a story from the people that do. Theirs is a life of just as much adventure as any military pilot.

The com breaks my train of thought. *"UNA Mirage...you are cleared for Docking bay T-seventeen, enjoy your time with us."*

I give the required reply and let the smooth sailing of the Autopilot take us in. I think of the thousands of ships docked here; some leaving, some just arriving, others parked indefinitely, and owned by those who make this port their home. In reality, we are just another droplet in the galactic bucket.

Looking out my window, I wonder about our Deepcore friends. Where are they? When is their jump? Where are they going? If we lose them now...Mirana's words replay in my ear *"All of our efforts would have been for nothing."* Why do those words sting me?

*"Alpha...?"*

I turn toward Terri

*"...we'll get em..."*

It's as if he's read my mind.

*"Yeah..."* It's Hound now *"...Let's get on deck, snoop around, and catch our prey."*

*"Leave the snooping around to me and Akita."* With a raised palm I quiet their disappointment *"...we'll get more done, and done quietly if it's just two of us."*

*"Okay Cap...I have no problems with that."*

*"I knew you wouldn't Hound. You could go have some fun and wait for us. More than likely, they're not gonna be making a jump within the next twelve hours."*

The lights from the Starport Jump Gate flash. Out in the distance, one of its colossal, two mile-long cylinders, separated from the complex but connected via powerful magnetics, undulates with blue energy and in about a minute, a light exits the mouth of the monstrous barrel and disappears into space.

Jump Gates use Sol Technology on a scale much larger than any other mechanism in galactic use. The power this one generates is equivalent to a class V sun and sends a starship to any other solar system along its targeting trajectory at the speed of eighty three point three-three-three light years per hour.

I've asked a million times about the calculations and how they came up with this number, but the mathematics concerning it has always been way above my head, and like I've often said after asking every time...I don't care, as long as it keeps working.

What we have to do now is no easy task. We need to get to a travel desk in the terminal first and figure out how to get the information we need from an agent even though it will be against policy. In these times, nothing beats a face

to face. It is never safe to work the system via computer when it involves breaking the rules.

The rippling energy from the Jump Gate grips my attention again. I know all too well, what being shot out of it is like and the strange part about the entire ordeal is that you don't feel a thing after the initial jolt.

It will be about twenty minutes before another jump takes place, as the Gate has to recharge and recalibrate for the next destination. As far as I know, this jump point only sends you to one of three systems, the trick will be finding out which of them our targets intend to visit.

## FACT

In the past, the idea of jumping from one solar system to another had always been a fascination of men. Could we build a Starship with the ability to do it without the aid of a Jump Gate? The problem however, was never just the inability to outfit a ship with an Eon Drive capable of eighty three point three-three-three light years per hour, but was also navigating the area between systems.

Known as The Verge, these uncharted areas of space are often rife with anomalies and obstacles that could prove catastrophic if disturbed.

Like projectiles that are launched by weapons in vacuum, anything shot into space, be it by collision or expulsion, becomes a possible doomsday missile for space craft, stations, or if big enough, even planets. Without the Jump Gates and their computer-generated trajectories, we would all be shooting through space blindly and without any way of knowing what was in our paths; imagine the chaos.

## CHAPTER 5 - DESTINATION SOLACE

After leaving the ship behind, we walk through one of the terminal's many corridors. The brightly lit walkway is wide and through its large windows, the expanse of deep space looms. Stars flicker against the inky blackness and billions of light-years away, three spiral galaxies complete the portrait. So much, so vast, but on the inside, the human traffic here is sparse. The reason comes as no surprises, as this terminal used primarily for military and government business, unlike the more populated areas on the other side of the station. The Freight and civilian terminals constantly buzz with hectic workers, tourists, business folk and anyone else with enough credits to burn.

Our ship is in a private, air-locked hangar and after docking, I made sure to acquire the usual security code, ensuring its safety from any unwanted guests. As any military pilot would tell you, pirates don't just steal civilian ships and cargo. Selling military grade parts can be an even more lucrative business if you have the right connections.

Stepping out onto a wide sidewalk that runs along a busy street, we go over our plans before splitting up. Bull, Terri and Hound head off to find us proper lodging, while Akita and I continue toward the departures terminal to look for answers. We all agree to meet back at an obscure bar and grill; should be about an hour or so.

This Starport, while different in shape from most, reminds me of many others throughout my travels. The monolithic, manmade, floating-in-vacuum city, complete with vehicles, streets, housing, hotels, businesses and whatever else it takes to make the clockwork run smoothly, has an appeal unlike that of any planet surface. Like all Starports, the lower you go, the more industrial and mechanical it will become while the higher, the more open and touristy. The sidewalk and street where we stand is also a part of the terminal; a wide and long circular link that connects the three ports of entry. Each of these docking bays and terminals in their entirety is as, or maybe even larger, than the city of Dunan.

Angry voices fill the air as two cab drivers hang out of their respective windows cursing. I see that stealing each other's passengers remains a popular sport, and as the debacle escalates to what might become a physical confrontation, we move on. Traffic here is just as busy as I expected. K1 is a popular system. Many corporation and government envoys and agents come to do business with its wealthy planets while tourists show up for all sorts of reasons. It is also a well-known pirate hub. K1's laws allow for off-the-book transactions that might appear questionable elsewhere, making it the perfect breeding ground for illegal substance dealers and the like, to thrive in relative safety.

Then there are the freighters, heavy haulers that make hundreds of millions in credits on each run. Finding our Deepcore agents here would be like looking for a needle in space; a daunting task.

As Akita and I walk on, I take comfort with the weight of my Fifty-eight, tucked away near my waist. I can change it from single action to semi-auto with the flip of a switch. I hope that I won't have to use it. As for the rest of the team, every man has his preference when it comes to a sidearm, except Pitbull. Even with his dual guns, he rarely ever uses them. His fists and raw power often gets the job done.

Entering the departures terminal, we take our time here and move carefully through the bustle.

"Okay..." I turn to Akita "...let's do our thing."

Standing in the busy open space as the sea of people moves around us, we search for our target. In all the years of humankind looking to the stars for extraterrestrial life, it is amazing to see that the only inhabitants of space as we know it, turned out to be just us.

“Right there...” Akita nods toward his quarry.

His gaze leads me to an attractive travel agent behind a desk with a fast moving line, and we walk casually toward it. Akita follows two people behind me. If my efforts are unsuccessful, then he is all we have left. My fingers slide across the edge of the Credits card in my pocket. Bribery is not my forte' but if it comes to it...

The line moves steadily. This tells me that she is efficient. Her stance is strong and well balanced; shoulders squared, back straight; she is methodical. Eyes focused, her reaction time is fast and she speaks with confidence...a trained thinker. This might be a bit more challenging that I thought.

I forget the travel agent and search our surroundings. I wouldn't know a Deepcore agent even if I saw one. They could be standing right next to me and I'd have no clue. All we have is the name of a ship, but this is good enough for me; I arrive at the desk.

“Welcome to K-1...”

Her brilliant smile lightens my mood

“...and how may I help you?”

She has a nice voice. Her eyes sparkle and her hair is perfect; another clockwork clone in my book. I pass my fingertips across the scanner on the flat of her desk and wait.

“Hi...” I return the smile; I hope it is radiant enough “...I am in need of your help.” She shifts her head slightly in acknowledgment and I continue, “I'm not booking a jump as yet. I am an Earthfront agent in need of information...” I wait, but she says nothing “...a ship docked here not long ago. I need to know where this ship is going, when it's set to jump and who's on it. Can you do this for me please?”

“Captain Gant. I'm sorry...” It's as if she had the answer at the ready before I decided to ask the question “...but it is against our regulations and laws to give information of this nature to anyone without the proper authorizations.”

I absorb her smile, almost robotic.

“I understand, but its Earthfront business. We are tracking known criminals and this information would go a long way to ensure...”

“I am sorry Captain Gant, but it is against policy...”

I slide the credits card across to her but keep my fingers on it.

“Twenty-five thousand Creds, all I need is the destination, crew and time of launch.”

She doesn't even look at the pre-programmed card. “Captain, if that would be all, I kindly ask that you please step out of the line.”

This is over. I know when I've hit a brick wall so I nod courteously and move away; it is up to Akita now. I take a walk and then sit in a plush chair at a distance.

"She's by the book..."

"Don't worry Cap...I've got this..."

Even on coms, I can recognize his intensions. He is next in line and I wait...

*"Welcome to K-1, how may I help you?"*

"Hi..." Akita's voice, but he doesn't give his fingers to the scan "...I was standing in line, thinking about whatever it was I was thinking, and then I saw you. And I decided that unless you have your next meal with me, I'm not leaving this terminal."

There is no sign of amusement on her face *"You don't remember what you were thinking before you saw me?"*

She's not buying it.

*"How could I...what is there to remember after seeing you?"*

I don't believe it; she's smiling.

*"You're good..."* She says *"...I'll give you that. But I can't."*

*"I don't mean you any disrespect. Please, I hope you didn't take my compliment this way..."*

*"No, it's not that. I can take a compliment...but I'm already spoken for."*

*"You're married?"*

*"No, I'm engaged."*

*"What's your name?"* Akita plows on.

*"Why do you want to know?"*

*"A beautiful girl such as you must have a beautiful name. I must know it."* and as Akita waits for her answer, he yet again, mystifies me.

*"Riara..."* she says it softly.

*"I was right..."* Akita continues without missing a beat as another smile lights her face *"...seriously, when do you get off work?"*

*"I don't even know you?"*

*"How could you, if you don't get to know me?"*

*"You don't even know me?"*

I think she is at a loss for words now.

*"I know, that the lights O' Galactic, astronomical the more, I bespeak you visit mine, and to yours invite, that I explore."*

What the hell was that? Was that poetry? When did Akita start quoting poetry?

*"I get off in two hours...coffee and sandwiches, nothing else."*

*"Coffee and Sandwiches...that's more than gold as long as it's with you."*

*"I'll meet you at The Vienna. It's a café not far from here. If you are the kind of person you appear to be, you should be able to find it."*

*"What do I appear to be?"*

*"I'll let you know if we meet again."*

I remain seated and after Akita walks away and out the main doors, I follow.

\*\*\*\*\*

I stretch my hand and a sticker-covered yellow taxi, hovers to a stop in front of me...thing looks like a flying ad-board.

"Gascloud Nine..."

The driver, no more than eighteen, sticks a wild looking head of lime green hair out the window "Eighty creds man!"

I get in and in a moment, we're off. I've left Akita at the café to do his thing. With a little more than luck, we will have the information we need and be on our way in good time. How he does it, I wish I knew. It's some kind of natural gift, I guess, or maybe it's his eyes, green and bold, or the hair, shoulder length, shiny-black and straight. It couldn't be his build because we all have that. Whatever it is, he has more of it than the rest of us.

I am on my way to meet up with the team. Until word from Akita, we are stuck here so I might as well enjoy it while it lasts.

*"You know what I love about our job?"* Is what he told me before I left him at the café *"...Even though we're always on the go, we can still find time to enjoy the finer things life has to offer."*

I looked at him and saw nothing more than the anticipation of having yet another woman to add to his trophy wall. It is the same with him every time. He had given me that sly grin of his and I couldn't help but laugh; what else could I have done?

\*\*\*\*\*

It has been six hours since I left Akita at that café, but I received his message a half hour ago and now, I'm in the cockpit of the Mirage with Holoscreens up, and information about Deepcore streaming across them. I wonder what Mirana is doing. I wonder if she's wondering about me. I can contact her, but as much as I want to, I don't. What would I say? It is times like these I wish I had Akita's gift with the opposite sex. Of all the people I have ever known, none could win the heart of a woman as easily as he, the difference between us however, is that he does not know how to keep it.

The onboard system alerts me that the airlock is now open. One of the Holoscreens shows Pitbull, Hound and Terri on their way up and as usual, when we make port for more than four hours, Akita is not with them.

The door of the cockpit cabin slides open.

"Brought a little something for you Cap..." Terri hands me a bag full of Kedenian chocolates. I smile and pop a Pine fruit Mocha in my mouth.

"I forgot how great these taste."

"I know you and chocolates bro...I got your back, but you still owe me."

Terri's laughter instantly transports me back to a time when the most urgent thing in our lives was getting home on time so our parents wouldn't go ballistic.

"Hey Cap..." Terri again "...you remember the mochas we stole from Colin Simpson?"

I grin with the memory "Yeah, he cried and blamed his brother while we ate them all on the roof of his house, how could I forget."

"You were a bad influence on me you know that?"

"And now the roles are reversed so we're even." I pop another chocolate in my mouth and savor the smooth sensation of it, gliding like honey-coated happiness along my tongue.

"Cap...no eating before the jump..."

"Yeah, yeah..." I put the bag of goodies away.

Shortly after eating, I had left the team at the bar and couldn't bring myself to indulge in the usual pleasures of making port. Not even with Nilani, the very beautiful and interested Hostess offering her services.

*What is wrong with me?*

"Where's Akita?"

"At the hotel with his newest victim, *Riara*..." Pitbull deliberately bends the name for added effect "Said he'd book us out when they're finished."

"Well he'd better be finished soon, 'cause time's running out."

We all get to work. Preparing the flight systems for launch would take five minutes but in forty-five, we are going to have to get moving in order to secure our holding slot. The volume of traffic passing through this Starport has every ship making a jump, lined up in the queue three hours before launch.

I wish I had contacted Mirana. Once we leave this system, communication will become difficult. An underlying current drives the urge to hear her before we leave, but duty...or is it fear? I prefer duty. Duty forces my attention back to the task in front of us, and then the door opens, Akita stands there smiling; it is time to go.

\*\*\*\*\*

Deep six is due for launch in two hours and forty minutes. Their destination is Solace Five; an industrial ice planet in the Solace system roughly two hundred light years away. They are a crew of four, made up of a Commander Pierce Larson, Captain Juno Gallagar, Sergeant Mark Riley and Captain Janet Barlow, and quite conveniently, Riara has booked our jump right after theirs.

I cannot help but be awed by Akita's achievements, and just like the rest of the crew, what I want to know, is how he did it.



The Mirage's engines are online and awaiting our command. In a few minutes, the outer airlock would disengage and we will be on our way to the Jump Gate. I look around the cockpit. These are all good men and even more...great friends...brothers, and after six years together, I could not have asked for a better unit.

"So Akita, you know what we all are thinking, spill?" Terri asks the question before I do and Akita gives the usual grin and then tells about his time at the café. How he talked her into showing him around the station. Their common interests and the like, their spark of chemistry, according to him, and her willingness to spend some quality time at the hotel.

"I thought she was engaged?" I just remember this fact.

"Not anymore."

Akita burns a hole in my mind yet again. How the hell does a stranger get a beautiful, intelligent woman to hook up with him and break off an engagement in less than twenty-four hours?

"I offered her a better life."

"What life? When are you going to see her again?"

"When we get back to Keden..."

"What makes you think we're going back to Keden?"

I should not have asked this. They all look at me with funny eyes and Pitbull jumps in.

"Two words Alpha...Mirana O'Canon..."

I ignore their smart-ass grins "Okay let's say we do go back to Keden, are you saying that you're giving up your life of womanizing for this girl?"

"Yep..."

Everyone reacts to this with individual expressions of "*not-this-again*" and while I thumb through the virtual keys in front of me... "Well forgive us, but, I gotta see this to believe it. It's not exactly the first time we've heard this declaration."

"Believe me Alpha, I mean it this time..."

"What was the poetry thing about?"

It's what I've wanted to ask ever since he recited it. It turns out that it was from a book he saw on her side of the desk.

*"Poetry is a hobby"*

None of us believed him. What's interesting about Riara though, is not that she gave Akita her private com-code, but the fact the he gave her his. This relationship will definitely be an interesting one to watch.

We put on our helmets after the laughter fades and as our flight suits seal them in place, the ship shudders when the artificial gravity outside is replaced by vacuum. The conversation dies. The main lights in the cockpit go out and all that remain are those from our Holoscreens.

With gentle touches and jolts, Terri and the Semi-Autopilot, guide us out of the small hangar and into the tunnel system of the Starport. Ships of all classes

bearing various flags and emblems representing nationalities, corporations, alliances and the like, fill the spaces in their respective hangars. Some behind sealed airlocks and others either docking or leaving. One ship, an imperial transport vessel making port not too far away, boasts the symbol of the Raiku Dynasty across its hull. The red and black Starship, labeled Raiku IV, belongs to one of the few known empires in the galaxy, if memory serves me correctly, about fifty or so thousand light years from earth.

Through my window, the dense Eversteel floor of this monstrous, manmade chamber glows with thousands of well-lighted grooves. Five hundred feet below us, it slides by as our computer system, now on full autopilot, guides us via Digital Magnetics; a computer generated magnetic field that enables our ship's AI to work in unison with that of the Starport.

According to our flight data, we'll be arriving in Solace via the Starport Argos and by the calculations on my HUD; our time in hyperspace will be two hours and forty-two minutes.

Based on our history books, Hyperspace in the movies of old was as simple as hitting a few buttons and strapping into your seat. If only it was that simple. Unlike Hyper Light, the forces at eighty three point three-three-three Light Years per hour are so astronomical, that no human body would be able to survive it without Magnatech. Every flight suit uses Magnetic Technology to keep the wearer in gravimetric stasis. In other words, no one is ever conscious during time in hyperspace, be it for a few seconds or many hours.

My com alerts me of an incoming transmission.

*"Starship Mirage...K1 traffic control has you in sync for launch in forty minutes; stand by for guidance on link."*

*"Starship Mirage copies stand by."*

No one ever gets accustomed to the anticipation of the jump. Although you don't feel the trip, that initial jolt as you enter the slipstream of hyperspace always gets you. Outside, as we exit the docking bay, the expanse of deep space fills my vision yet again. Most of the complex and its many bright windows lie behind us and the Jump Gate, even though it reads four miles away, still looms above us like a monstrous cylindrical mountain. Blue, red and white electrical surges arc and split along the surface of the gate, giving the appearance of an oversized Rail gun. Now that I think of it, I guess that's what it is in actuality. This is an interesting revelation because if it is indeed a giant rail, that would make us, the destructive projectile.

Our cockpit lights up in dim flashes as the highly charged currents ripple more and more rapidly across the barrel of the Gate. Then without a sound, it spits our Deepcore targets from its mouth in a flash of light, and they are gone. My com crackles to life.

*"Starship Mirage you're cleared for taxi. Twenty minutes to jump."*

My heart gives me that unusually large thump. "Mirage copies twenty to jump. We're ready for taxi, all is a go."

*"Control acknowledges copy, stand by for loading."*

The world around us glides by like a dream as our ship is ferried toward the Jump Gate. The ride is flawlessly smooth. The station is no longer visible from our windows and as always before any jump to another system, I often wish there was another way.

*"Here we go..."*

None of us responds to Akita. The looming structure before us has our minds in its hold. The red lights that line it in some areas, the monstrous yellow K1 painted on its base, the undulating energies that crawl along its surface, the giant opening that awaits us as we begin the loading sequence; it just never gets old. Were it not for the cooling system in my suit, I know without a doubt that I would be sweating rivers right now. Goose bumps rise and fall across my flesh even though I try hard to remain calm. The gate gradually changes from vertical to horizontal as the Magnetics alter the ship's angle of approach. In actuality, we are the ones who are changing angle. Slowly, eventually, we get to the open rectangular chamber and slide sideways into place; The groan of the gate's giant mechanized doors fill my ear as they begin to move and then our ship finally comes to a stop.

As the massive doors seal themselves shut, darkness envelops us. My eyes adjust to the computer lit cockpit. All is quiet. Every man at this point would be preparing, in his own mind, for the sensations to come; so why am I thinking of Mirana?

*"Mirage...Control has you ready for launch to Solace via Argus, rep live."*

I look toward Terrier and he gives me a thumb's up sign. I respond.

*"Control...Mirage is ready for launch, all systems are a go."*

I make the extra effort to keep the nerves out of my voice.

*"Control copies all systems are a go. Jump is initiated...twenty seconds."*

The com goes dead. Here we go. There is no turning back even if we wanted to. The silence is mentally deafening. I imagine the crazy arcs of electricity that run up and down on the outer skin of this cannon. There is no countdown to zero, just the fact that at some point within the next twenty seconds, we will be in hyperspace.

A hammer slams into my chest. I think it's my heart but it's not. The sudden movement catches me off guard and the ship pushes me further into my seat. A single strand of blue electricity surges through the tunnel ahead, lighting up the cockpit in a brief flash.

*"...BLAM!"*

It's the last sound I hear as the sensation of being electrocuted grips and twists the insides of my stomach, and everything goes black.

## CHAPTER 6 - SOLACE V

The cockpit, and all in it, is a blur while my seat automatically returns to its inclined position, and my muscles tingle as blood-flow in my body becomes normal again. The Starport Argus is nothing more than a hazy shape to me. A very unpleasant heaviness saturates my being as the magnetics from Argus slows us rapidly to a crawl. This ungodly and tormenting sensation feels like an unwanted hand moving around in my stomach. I hate it.

The rest of the team is in no better shape than I am. The cockpit's auto induction system whirs into action, a little late, and fills the space with an odorless gas that clears the effects of our jump.

*Why couldn't they invent something to drink before the jump?*

Well, according to "them" whomever "They" are, we should always eat and drink at least, four hours before any jump. The forces in hyperspace could cause undigested food and drinks to flow back into the lungs...enough said.

The induction system shuts off with a noticeably loud click.

"We need to get that fixed..."

"I agree buddy..."

Hound and Akita stop their chatter as the com lights up.

*"Mirage...Argus Control has you...link and rep live."*

I find my tongue. I think it was hanging around somewhere near my chin, but I'm not entirely sure. I'll definitely have to get the Induction mechanism looked at when we get back to base.

*"Mirage copies Argus. We're a flyby to Solace Five."*

*"Argus Control copies Mirage flyby to Solace Five. Link out."*

I close the coms and pull up a map of the system. We are ten point eight AU's from Solace Five; one-point-something billion miles, and it will take us one and a half hours to get there. I punch in the co-ordinates and Terri aligns us for Hyper Light speed.

I open the com again, "Argus Control...Mirage is ready for high-light to Solace Five."

I wait as they run our trajectory through their systems. I am hungry, another aftereffect of the jump. The com goes active again.

*"Mirage...Argus Control copies your flight. You're a go for high-light."*

*"Control...Mirage copies go."*

I kill the com and Terri hits the throttle. The scene beyond the windshield stretches a bit, and then stretches some more and all sound in the cockpit vanishes. I am pushed into my seat and the lights on the outside become blurs as we vanish into space.

\*\*\*\*\*

The blue and white, more white now than blue, ball of Solace Five takes shape ahead of us. It looks like a distorted sphere as we exit the warp stream. My mind seems to have arrived first but my body catches up not long after. It's a rush.

"Terri, go dark. Bull, give me a scan. We need to find them."

The cloaking device used on the *Mirage*, gives us the appearance of invisibility by using the same reflective regeneration technology as our MAV's. It's just one of the many toys onboard.

"I got 'em in planet airspace, heading north."

"What's ahead of them?"

The image increases in detail as Bull checks the data. "I've got a mountain Base about ten miles from their current location."

"Terri, get us down there."

"When all this is over, I'm gonna buy the first round."

"Bull...when this is all over, you can buy all the rounds, how about that?"

Laughter fills the cabin. The ship's cloak deactivates and the thrusters push me into my seat as we begin our approach for atmospheric entry.

My tracking module tells me that the Spaceport belonging to this planet is on the other side of its thick ice rings, and would be at our position in twelve hours. This is a good thing. It means that our presence here should go unnoticed.

With its lack of structured law enforcement, the risk of tracking or interception by any authority won't be a problem on Solace Five and unless we encounter pirates or security from the local mining companies, we should be on the deck and still undetected in about twenty minutes.

Almost three times the size of Earth, the bright surface of Solace Five fills the windshield until it is all that is there and the cockpit shakes as we enter atmosphere. Outside, the skin of our ship superheats to over two thousand degrees Fahrenheit and flares crimson but on the inside, other than the minor shaking around us, it is a relatively comfortable entry.

The planet surface shifts and shimmers but becomes clearer as we descend. I make out mountains and the gaseous clouds that surround them. Made up entirely of ice, frozen gases to be exact, this world has a temperature, according to my reading, of a lovely minus five hundred and fifty five degrees. I remember this place well.

I had been here once in the past, but that was a recon mission when I was a rookie in the corps and hungry for a little action.

"Bull where are they?"

"Fifty miles north of our drop zone...they've stopped."

"Terri and Bull, stay with the ship and wait for my orders."

"Aye Cap'n..." Terri comes back.

I remove my helmet and unclip my harness. The metallic scent of the ship hits me. Its cold scent reminds me of winter nights on base back on Earth. I miss home. It has been a long time...too long.

"I can't wait until we're back on Earth and getting a little R and R."

"I'm with you on that one Alpha." Terri answers longingly.

"It's been too long. I miss Earther girls." Akita breaks in.

We all laugh.

We're seven minutes from arrival and Akita, Hound and I are strapping into our MAV's and waiting for the thud that would signify touchdown. The old, rusty taste of a power bar in hand will silence my stomach's protests for now but as soon as this ordeal is over, I will be having some good old Thai food.

This mission is now unpredictable. I'm not sure what we are going to find out there but whatever it is, I hope that it is worth the trip.

Everything around me shakes as we impact the icy surface.

"Damn Terri, take it easy!" Hound's voice rings over the com.

"Sorry guys, the winds are a bitch."

The hiss of the ship's hydraulics connected to the Hold as it closes and decompresses, meets my ears. I hit a virtual switch on my HUD and my cockpit clamps down and seals shut as the floor beneath us rumbles and begins to lower our MAV's to the ground outside.

"Bull, scan and jam."

"Bull copies. Scan and jam."

"Terri, keep the engines hot."

"The fires will be lit boss."

I push the throttles and the machine begins to move. The three of us step down from our platforms and touch the frozen surface.

"Let's go."

My com lights up. It's Bull. "Good hunting guys..."

\*\*\*\*\*

With this system's bright white sun directly above, we push our MAV's across and over the rough but blindingly white, icy surface and were it not for our Digital Eyes, we'd be blind in a matter of minutes. The ground rushes by forty feet below at one hundred miles per hour; we should be arriving at our destination in seven minutes.

"Okay guys, on foot from here."

I pull the throttle back and reduce speed. My mental command initiates the air braking system and I remain suspended for a moment in time, between positive and negative G. I switch my engine to hover and drop vertically.

Akita comes to me "I've got three light Mecha and a Heavy on scan, two miles out."

"Okay let's disappear."

The three of us ripple into the surroundings and vanish from sight. We'll run-walk it from here. There is no telling what we are getting into. My warning system goes haywire.

"What the hell is that?" Akita shouts over the coms.

"Terri Get the ship in the air, we've been compromised!"

My scope shows the three light Mecha and one Heavy along with an unknown. This changes things.

"Alpha I can't get a read on the new guy. Where'd he come from?" It's Akita again.

Hound breaks in "Must have been cloaked."

I link with the ship "Bull keep us undetected all the way in."

"I'm trying Alpha."

My com comes alive with a rush of static "*Earthfront Terrorists...*" His words are sharp and clipped "...*You are within a restricted zone and are therefore in violation of our laws. I order you to immediately cease your advance and power down your machines.*"

I switch to our secure com "How are they detecting us?"

"I don't understand it Alpha..." Bull's confused voice echoes across our channel "... I'm blocking with everything I've got."

Solace Five's blue and white, uneven ice carpet rushes by on the edge of my vision. "Guys we're weapons hot, I repeat, weapons hot."

The calm but angry voice comes through again. "*Earthfront Militia, you are to stand down immediately or die.*"

I think for a split second about making contact but I get rid of the thought all the same. Our mission is to destroy that fleet. We will need another man.

"Bull, get over here. Terri, get the ship to us and give air support..."

"Already on my way..."

"Hound, Akita...track the heavy and get rid of it first. Bull...you out there?"

"Coming to you, boss...got a tally on those Lights."

"Hound...flank, Akita...high ground, I'm going after the unknown, Bull, take a shot when you have it."

My targeting computer tracks and locks on to the strange Mecha just beyond the last rise ahead. Warnings of all sorts bombard me now. I pull the trigger and rocket low, fifteen feet to be exact, above the terrain. The familiar vibrations run through the space around me as five missiles pull away and mark a smoky path toward the enemy machine in the distance.

*What the hell is that thing?*

I've never seen anything like it. It looks like a forty-foot metallic man. I wait but two of my missiles hit air and three explode before impact.

“Hou...lee, Boss, you see that?”

Akita’s comment helps to free my mind from the minor trance.

“...That thing dodged five missiles!”

“Akita, go for the heavy!”

I’m barking into the com, my eyes never leaving my target. I switch to hover and ground controls, and drop to the planet surface. The sensation is crazy, like hundreds of ground quakes rushing through my stomach all at once. My MAV hits the planet surface running. Large chunks of ice split apart under the tremendous weight as I engage the unusual Machine in close quarters combat.

My tracking systems alert me of its lock-on. I shove the throttles forward for more power and watch the distance between us close. Every sensor on my HUD that can, warns of enemy radar and weapons that are targeting me but I ignore them, maintain my mad dash, switch to guns, squeeze the trigger and hold it.

RRRRREEEEEEEEEEE

Somewhere on the outskirts of my mind, I hear my Auto-cannon erupt. Tracer rounds light a path to my target and the cockpit trembles with the kickback, but the bullets hit nothing.

He jumps into the air and rockets straight up; the ice beneath him cratering in his wake.

“Look at him go.” Akita’s voice in my ear

I switch to flight mode in my run and push for every ounce of power my MAV can muster. The engine howls and the G’s push me hard into my seat. I leave the ice but my finger does not release the trigger and my gun follow’s its prey in a deadly arc as he tries to outmaneuver me.

“Guys I’m airborne and engaging the unknown. Terri, keep tracking us just in case.”

“Gotcha on scan Cap, be careful.”

I level off at fifteen thousand feet and cut in toward the enemy machine as he doubles over and plummets back to the planet surface. He’s fast, and agile. I’ve never seen anything like it. My tracer rounds never stop. I’ve got to get him.

*Almost...damn, I was so close.*

I’ll be out of ammo soon if I keep this up. In my head, I activate both missile launchers and along with blazing gunfire, four Hammerheads speed away from me.

*This pilot is good.*

His Mecha easily avoids the attack. I hit the speed brakes, roll over and pull away hard. The unknown machine just stopped, almost instantly.

“Alpha, what’s going on?” Akita screams into my head.

“That crazy sonofabitch just dead stopped me...almost had an air to air.”



I strain against the forces that are trying to rip me apart. My speed brakes retract and just as I add power, the warning systems go red. A missile is speeding my way. He's toying with me, and getting under my skin, but I refuse to back down and so, push toward the oncoming projectile.

800ft

700ft

600ft to impact

I center on the approaching killer and squeeze off three quick bursts of tracers.

The missile explodes as I pass a hundred or so feet away. My warning systems alert me yet again and I realize that the strange Mecha is behind and above me; a killing position. With a movement of eyes and hands, I enter a mind-bending dive. I hope my pursuer is foolish enough to follow...apparently he is.

The planet surface dangles beneath me. Thirteen thousand feet, twelve thousand feet, ten thousand feet, nine thousand, my enemy's tracer rounds track off and ahead of me but none of them hit true.

"Bull, are you jamming his tracking?"

"Gotcher back Boss."

That's a relief. *Where is he?* I don't believe it. The unknown has already freed itself from the insane plummet and is trying to intercept me from another angle. My warning systems go mad again and he has me locked up. I drive full power to my thrusters and enter a stomach knotting turn and burn to approach him head on, engine screeching, guns blazing. I hope to catch him off guard as the superheated streaks leaving me, bridge the gap between us. My com comes to life just as the strange Mecha drops below me and out of sight.

*"Earthfront dog...It's time to die."*

Every warning light comes alive and screams madness in my ear. I can almost smell the chemicals in the oncoming exhausts as no less than ten missiles, Nova class, now track me. I've got seconds before I become ash and dust. Mentally I command the vents on my thrusters to yaw and as my MAV spins and I face my ten demons, the vents in front of my machine obey me now, driving me backward.

Digital numbers on the upper right of my HUD tells me that I'm pushing past Mach two. I center the reticule on my pursuers and squeeze the trigger as my heart, beating the life out of me, feels like it's trying to claw its way into my gut, but I keep it together taking deep breaths; I got this.

I barely hear the Auto-cannon, but the lines carved by it through the sky finds their prey as, one, two, three missiles are no more. My thoughts are rapid and ever changing in the moment. Pulling a hard left turn, I roll inverted and drop, back first, still flying backward, toward the planet surface now twelve thousand feet below.

Guns spitting and chewing up the sky, I select my MD's and deploy a large load. Looks like frenzied fireworks going off in my trail as I turn yet again and push hard on the power.

Unlike chaff for heat seekers, MD's or Magnetic Decoys draw weapons guided by Magnatech away from their intended target. Six missiles register now on my HUD as neutralized; the MD's have done their jobs disrupting the onboard tracking systems and fooling the miniature computers into thinking, they had found their targets.

The sky in my line of sight, lights up as the missiles detonate and in my head, the focused thought of climbing higher changes my course with only one thousand feet to go.

As I shift to the right, the clear sky vanishes and the icescape below comes into view. The last missile is still tracking me and my Cannon is almost out of ammo. I am now reduced to short bursts, but the wild and erratic evasive maneuvers, coupled with flying backwards makes it difficult to center on this target. I see the missile clearly. My computer tells me that it's five hundred feet and closing.

The com comes to life. "Alpha I've engaged the unknown and I'm...oh God!"

Hard static hits my ear. I twist my machine hard, roll over at twenty thousand feet, and drop into a suicidal plunge. I say suicidal because it is against everything I have learned, to enter a backward supersonic dive.

"Terri!"

I shout into the com. The missile is still tracking hot on my trail.

*Damned Magnatech things never stop.*

I'm sure that was Terri. A gnawing sensation forms in my stomach and chest that I haven't felt in a long time. The Neural Link between Terri and me is gone. The effect of this, like a hole dug in my gut shakes me. I hate it. I want to scream, or cry but I can't. I must keep it together.

"Alpha, we've engaged the unknown..." Akita's words are quick and his voice strained as though in a high G turn "...He got Terri, and now the bastard's on my six."

The chatter increases as Hound comes through. "I'm on him, just hold it together..."

"I can't shake him, Alpha, get down here!" Akita's Auto-cannon is going mad in the background along with his shrieking engine. It means that he's backwards flying too.

"Hang in there I'm on my way!"

My gut cramps as though held in a vice. I can't wrap my thoughts around what Akita just said. A proximity warning goes off. The missile is closer now. I've got to get into the fight.

"Bull..." I roll out of my crazy dive and try to outplay the incoming projectile "...where's that rail gun of yours?"

"I can't get a lock Alpha. This guy is either a magician or he's that good."

I kill the evasive and drop straight down. The altimeter hits seven thousand feet and shows me six thousand in two seconds. I've got twelve seconds before I become a permanent part of this planet.

The missile closes but I wait for the digital crosshair to move into place. A little bit more...almost...I squeeze the trigger and hold it. I can feel the ground not far below. The last of my ammo leaves me, and the line of tracers end with the explosion of my pursuer. I shift my vents again, they spin me around and I begin moving forward once more.

My MAV comes out of the dive with a murderous cry and a hundred and fifty feet to spare. I'm hard pressed to my seat and my vision dims around the edges, but my suit does what it was designed to do and prevents me from passing out. Akita's signal is five miles south of my current position so I hit the throttle and watch the indicated airspeed push beyond the speed of sound.

"Bull, where are you?"

Static

"Trying to kill this thing without hitting any of our guys..."

"Why was Terri in his MAV? I told him to stay with the ship."

"He jumped in to back us up. I wish I had told him no."

I ignore Akita's pain as his gunfire saturates the background of my com.

"Hound...?"

"In the heat boss...wuw! This guy is crazy!"

"Hold on I've got a fix and I'm burning hot..." I hit the speed brakes so as not to overshoot the action going on below and fight a wave of nausea as the reading goes from one thousand seven hundred, to five hundred miles per hour in five seconds.

The battlefield looks like something from a bad dream. The three, enemy Light Mecha are all nothing but melted piles of black metal. The Heavy is in pieces not too far away...looks like it fell out of the sky, and a large lump in my throat drops into my stomach along with a hundred stones. Terri's MAV is spread across the ice and burning in large and small pieces.

I shove it from my mind; I'll have time to deal with it later. My engine burns hotter as I force my MAV higher.

"Where's that bastard?" I see him now "Hound, Akita, keep him busy."

"Not a problem boss."

I track the unknown Mecha as he pursues Akita and evades Hound. They too should be running low on ammo by now.

"Bull, get to the ship and be ready for anything."

Static again

"On my way..."

After climbing to five hundred feet above the action, I push my MAV into a shallow dive to catch and match the speed of our Deepcore opponent. Akita has him following his evasive run in a large, seven-mile circle, perfect for my

intentions. Just a little bit more...almost there. I can't fire my remaining missiles because he's obviously able to detect them early and steer clear, but for what I'm about to do...for Terri and the rest of my team...he will never see it coming. I push my engine for more power and drop toward my enemy.

"Akita, get out of the circle and lead straight."

Without question, he obeys. "Alpha, I'm in the open and that bastard is locking me up."

I watch the Deepcore Mecha zigzag Hound while keeping a bead on Akita.

"Hold Akita, I got him."

My team trusts me as I drive full force toward the unknown...all of my proximity warnings alerting me.

"Terri...this one's for you buddy..."

"Alpha...!" Hound's voice "What are you doing?"

Five hundred feet

Four hundred feet

Three hundred feet

Two hundred feet

One hundred feet

At fifty feet away, I switch to ground controls. The machine fights me but I hold it, extend and then shove the titanium legs of my MAV forward.

*Impact*

The collision is monumental. Beyond anything I have ever felt; it shakes me to the bone. Every joint in my body feels unhinged. My head snaps back violently and I know that were it not for my seat's protective brace, I would be dead now. The sounds of metal bending and twisting against metal, bombards my ears as the thin strip of bullet proofed, protective glass around my cockpit shatters.

With the last of my mental capacity, I switch the controls to hover and initiate full power. The MAV hits the ice with thunder. Ice and snow rush by and onto my visor and everything around me, fades away.

## CHAPTER 7 - AFTERMATH

"Hey Alpha...?"

I open my eyes. The room is bright with sunlight and a gentle breeze brushes my skin. I sit up on the couch and see Terri in the seat opposite me.

"Terri...I thought..."

I can't remember what I thought.

"It's okay Rich. Everything is okay."

He hasn't called me that since we were teenagers. There is something about the way he says it that makes me think...about what? I have no idea.

"How long have I been out?"

"The guys are preparing to launch so I thought I should remind you. I know you wouldn't want to be left behind."

Suddenly I remember that we are supposed to leave this planet. I look closely at my childhood friend. He looks younger.

"Damn, I forgot. Thanks, let's go."

His eyes keep me unmoving. They are soft. His face is sad but happy. How is this possible?

"I'm sorry Cap, but I'm not flying with you guys this time."

We look at each other and the strange feeling that passes between us is unnerving.

"Why can't you go with us?"

He smiles "Good hunting Alpha."

His voice echoes into the distance. His face becomes a transparent nothing and instantly, the room around me disappears, replaced by a frozen ground littered with bits and pieces of a MAV...Terri's MAV.

I open my eyes and feel warm tracks of tears run down my face. The soothing sound of the Mirage's engines in space flight comes first. Then the sterilized scent of the medical bay, and now I see Bull sitting across from me with a semi-automatic in his lap.

I exhale hard and try to free the fixed harness holding me in place.

"Alpha..." Bull rises at my sudden movement "...take it easy Boss."

Holographic modules remain suspended all over me as I lie on the floating bed, monitoring every vital sign that I produce.

"What happened?"

He sets the gun down and sits beside me. "We lost Terri."

He says it as though he doesn't want to believe it. That fist in my gut is back and it's heavier than before.

"I know. Did I get that sonofabitch?"

"Yeah you got him, but he's not dead."

I begin to rise but Bull stays me at the shoulder and my head returns to the pillow with a pulsing ache.

"We have him in the brig."

"That explains the gun."

"Yeh..." The big Military man seems lost "...You screwed him up good though. I didn't think we'd find you alive but the Neural told me otherwise."

"Where are we?"

"...Short-docking at Starport Vycen Three, and waiting."

"How long have I been out?"

"About seven hours."

"...Seven hou...Where're we going?"

"Rouna..."

"Rouna...?"

“Yeh...got the order from Earth a few hours after the battle. Hawk says that we are to go to Callican and resupply, repair and await further instructions.”

I exhale heavily. I feel my headache subsiding.

“Has anyone spoken to the Deepcore pilot?”

“No. The General gave us orders not to interact with the prisoner until on base at Rouna.”

“Well that’s bullshit. We’re gonna interrogate the bastard here and now...”  
The headache is back “...are you guys with me on this?”

“We were just waiting for you Cap...”

“Then let’s not wait any longer. Deactivate this thing and unhook me.”

\*\*\*\*\*

The walk to the Hold through the very narrow corridors of the Mirage has me feeling as though my legs are not my own. Effects of the jump through hyperspace coupled with the collision. I run through what Bull has told me. Vycen Three is one of four Starports in the Vycen system, six thousand light years from Earth. Rouna is one of two planets here, two of the most beautiful known to humanity. Paradise is what Vycen translates to from the language once spoken by the original inhabitants on these worlds; and they were right about it.

“Good to see ya Cap...”

Akita is not himself. I pat him on the shoulder.

“I assume that Hound is at the controls?”

“Yeah...”

“Okay let’s get this done...”

I walk into the room, head no longer pounding. The serum Bull gave me has acted quickly. I feel almost one hundred percent again.

Our Deepcore prisoner is naked and in a sitting position, strapped to the only chair in the space. Stale vomit paints his mouth, chin, and chest. From his nostrils, a thin line of blood oozes, tracing a path along his body and ending beneath his chair where it pools.

“I take it this man wasn’t inducted after leaving hyperspace?”

Akita looks to Pitbull “I thought you activated it?”

The mock tone is entirely void of amusement and Bull responds.

“...thought you did...”

I approach the sitting pilot and hold my hand toward Akita. He moves toward me as Bull positions himself against the wall behind the seat. I take a vial from him and administer a serum to the groaning man. I hate seeing another human in this state but in this case, I make the exception. We wait a few minutes until the pilot is fully conscious and aware of us and then he stares at the floor.

“Deepcore pilot...” I hold a split second but he does not acknowledge the statement “...under our orders we are to extract information from you using any means necessary and place you dead or alive into the custody of our agents on Rouna...”

Still no response

“Who are you?”

I signal to Pitbull. The big soldier moves forward, grasps the pilot by the back of his head and forces him to look at me.

“...Easy or hard way, your choice...”

Still no response

“I’m not in any mood to play games. Who are you?”

I remember Terri and now anger replaces the fist in my gut.

“Have it your way. Bring me The Gun.”

Akita leaves the room immediately. I return to the Deepcore man before me.

“You will answer by will or by force. Who are you? Why were you on Keden? Why were you on Solace Five? What are the plans of Deepcore and their interests in Keden?”

The man keeps our eye to eye after Bull releases him and with a concentrated effort, responds

“You don’t scare me. If I told you what I know, you wouldn’t know your right hand from your left.”

The door opens and Akita enters the room again. I turn to the man in the chair. “What do you mean by this?”

No answer

Akita hands me The Gun and I turn once more toward the chair. The tool in my hand named simply, The Gun, is a modified handgun that shoots Truezine into the bloodstream. This truth serum, frozen in the form of a small needle, dissolves once lodged in the body. It can kill its host if they are not in the best of health.

I point the gun to the neck of the naked man in the chair.

“Do you know what this is?”

No answer

“This is Truezine, and you know what it does. Now who are you?”

No answer again.

“Did you guys strip his tech?”

“Yeah, nothing much...” Akita steps forward

He removes two plastic packs from a slot in the counter nearby and hands them to me. In one, is a broken locator and in the other, a pair of Digital Eyes which I take from him.

“Get rid of the locator...”

Terri’s final words echo in my head. My finger squeezes the trigger and the man flinches as the red dot in his neck shows where the serum has entered. His

eyes begin to water and his sudden cry is pitiful as we wait for the drug to take effect. His eyes roll in their sockets. His mouth curves into a playful smile.

I ask again "Who are you?"

The smiling man looks happily at me "I am Captain James Hiram..."

"Why were you on Keden?"

"To remove the obstacle..."

I turn to Akita and he shrug's in ignorance.

"What obstacle?"

"You..."

"You were sent to Keden to remove me?"

"Yes..."

"Who sent you?"

"The man..."

"Who is the man?"

"The man..."

"Who do you work for?"

"The man..."

I turn again to Akita. "Who the hell is, The Man?" He raises his shoulders and shakes his head.

"What are the intentions of Deepcore on Keden?"

"Protect it..."

"Protect it...from who?"

"The man..."

"This conversation is going nowhere. How could you be protecting it from the man you work for?"

No answer

"Why were you on Solace Five?"

"To kill you..."

"How did you know I was going to be on Solace Five?"

Silence

"Who ordered you to kill me?"

"The man..."

"Where is The Man?"

No answer

"Where is The Man?"

Still nothing

"What were your orders after killing me?"

"Rendezvous on Keden and lock it down..."

"What do you mean, lock it down?"

The man's face suddenly contorts. The after effect of the drug is taking over. I need more time "What do you mean, lock it down?"

His smile and bright eyes vanish, replaced by a menacing look. "Keden will fall..."



"What?"

"You stopped me..." His voice is becoming a coarse but loud whisper

"...Keden will fall...Earth will fall."

"Why will Keden and Earth fall? How...?" I immediately think of Mirana.

The pilot's eyes roll into the back of his head and I shake him back to consciousness.

"We will lock down Keden. Take the Cyclones. No one can match them."

He's rambling now.

"What are the Cyclones?"

"You destroyed mine..."

"He's talking about his Mecha." Akita cuts in.

I turn back to the dying man "There are more like it?"

"Ten..."

This is not good. One was hell but nine? "Where are they?"

"Keden..."

"When is Keden going to be locked down?"

"Keden is...locked...d...d...d..." And with that, the man spasms and froths at the mouth as what's left of his life leaves him in a shallow breath of foul air.

My mind is in hyper drive. I pocket the Digital Eyes and force myself to turn and walk away.

"Store him and let's get to Rouna."

This simple search and destroy mission has just become something else. Who is, The Man? Why did he send these men to Keden to get rid of us or was it just me? How did they know we would follow them to Solace Five? What the hell is going on? I leave the room and stumble through the corridor to the narrow ladder leading into the cockpit. If Keden is on lockdown, how are we to get back undetected?

*Is Mirana okay? Is she alive?*

"Terr...Hound..." The reality is numbing. Terrier is not coming back. There are so many emotions running wild and unbound through me that I don't know how to feel. I must keep it together. This is bigger than Terri or me.

"Yes Alpha?"

"Get us to Rouna."

## CHAPTER 8 - ROUNA

We exit hyperspace and the paradise planet called Rouna comes into view. Its thin, white asteroid ring passes by below us and the Magnatech kicks in. My stomach tightens and feels like it is about to come up through my throat, but it doesn't bother me as much as usual. I watch Hound sitting in Terri's seat and wish my buddy were still here. I don't even have a body to take back to Earth.

*What am I going to tell his folks?*

The rich-blue world in front of us, almost twice the size of Earth, is a mind-blowing sight. Entirely covered by a beautiful blue, salt sea under a perpetually calm, tropical atmosphere, it is a paradise indeed. It has been a long time since I've seen Rouna. Almost every pilot in Earthfront military service would have passed through here at one time or another. Being entirely under Earthfront control, it plays host to one of the largest Earther military training bases in the galaxy.

One of the three spaceports orbiting the planet is now in view. The mammoth diamond shaped complex hangs suspended in nothingness like a brilliantly lit, white city. The coms come to life.

*"UNA Mirage...Argyle Spaceport Control has you on approach, go auto and state Intentions."*

*"Argyle Traffic Control...Captain Richard Gant of the UNA Mirage, requesting docking. In need of resupply and repair under order of General Alexander Madison."*

*"UNA Mirage, one sec..."* The voice is female and almost robotic. Five seconds pass *"...request acknowledged, cleared for docking, you have Guidance on link. Welcome to Rouna Captain Gant."*

I check the linkup and Hound sets us on autopilot.

I wish more than anything that Terri had stayed in the ship.

The station's Magnetic system shakes us as it takes over.

*Why did he go against my command?*

I'm angry with this sadness, and with him. On the other hand, any one of us would have joined that fight and died for each other if necessary. I should have killed the unknown in combat. Why couldn't I kill it? The wreckage of Terrier's MAV flashes through my head and I blink back the tears.

The Communication Module flashes.

*"UNA Mirage, docking at Bay, F seven, five, three."*

*"UNA Mirage copies Bay F seven...five...three..."*

I turn to Hound and he looks my way. Under his visor, I don't see it, but I feel his sorrow. There are no words to express it so our silences remain. My fingers find the digital Com panel and I enter a code that would give me direct access on a secure link to our superior. His image comes up on all of our holographic screens as Argyle's Magnatech pulls us closer.

General Alexander 'Hawk' Madison appears. He looks older, but just as mean and hardened as ever. His greying head, proud eyes and hawkish nose looks through me as though I were a rookie all over again.

I acknowledge him "General..."

*"Iron Five..."*

*"We're on approach to Argyle..."*

*"And, Terrier...?"*

*"Gone, Sir..."*

*"Do you have his body and his Dees?"*

*"No Sir, there was nothing salvageable from his wreckage."*

I'm not sure what I see in Hawk's eyes when it comes to his sympathy, but a look of annoyance is clearly visible.

*"I'm sorry about Terri. He was one of the best...and not just pilots...I know he was a brother to you. How are you holding up soldiers?"*

He's not genuine. I've been around the man long enough to know what formality and protocol is supposed to look like.

*"We're holding well sir."*

*"Good. You have the bastard responsible for it and that's what matters. Right now..."*

*"Had him, sir...interrogated him with Truezine and got some valuable Intel before he died."*

It is funny how the General, as far back as I've known him, could go from zero to ballistic in the same split second, just like the good old days of Hound and me at each other's throats.

*"I gave specific orders not to interrogate him until on base at Rouna! You disobeyed a direct order soldier!"*

*"Sir, with all due respect, I felt it right to carry out the interrogation. After all, it was us who suffered and lost in order to bring him in..."*

*"You know full well the consequences of these actions. As of this moment, Iron Five will remain decommissioned until further notice. You're lucky that you and your team are not on a ship to Earth by morning."*

My guts feel as though sucked into some deep hole within "But sir...we have valuable Intel that I think might make a..."

*"My orders were clear, were they not soldier? Yet you disobeyed the directive and in doing so, lost us our only link to Deepcore!"*

I remain silent. Maybe I've pushed it too far this time, but we need to get to Mirana and it is too late. We'll never be able to break free of Argyle's Magnatech now.

*"What did you learn from the interrogation?"*

The look on the General's face is dangerous. He is a hardened man, by the book and void of emotion, but I am angrier than before and no longer willing to talk to him. Yet, as my commanding officer, I have no choice in the matter. I tell him about "The Man". He is unusually silent about this. I think it has caught him off guard. He is also equally puzzled about the Deepcore fleet being on Keden to get rid of Iron Five.

*"That's a farce. How could they have known that you would have been sent to Keden to find them?"*

*"Either way it almost worked. They got Terri." My voice is not my own.*

*"...And you got all of them."*

His words sting me. There is no victory in this fact. I lost my friend, my brother. I could not care any less about some Deepcore imps getting away to live another day, as long as Iron Five remained, Five.

*"...must be a mole in the ranks..."* The General is talking again *"...Someone is obviously leaking information to Deepcore."*

I go on about what the pilot said about Keden and Earth falling. I remember Mirana again. My stomach rolls over. I have a screwed up sensation in my gut that just won't go away. I mention the Cyclones and what they might be capable of but it doesn't seem to impress him.

*"As of this morning we received a coded message from SysDef's base on Keden. The base has been attacked, all air and space travel has been shut down and the Commander and her men have been holding off a siege for the past eight hours..."*

I sit up in my seat...I'm sorry buddy...and push Terri from my mind.

*"We need to get back. We're only two thousand lights away. We could be there in..."*

*"Negative Captain. You are to report to Station Commander Brice and remain on Rouna until further orders. I won't court-martial you for your disregard of my command this, but one more strike Alpha, and you and your team, are out..."*

We look at each other in a moment of silence and then he continues

*"...Earthfront has dispatched a Starfleet and will have the Keden crisis under control in a matter of days."*

Mirana won't last that long

*"General Madison, we're twenty four hours away from Keden. We can get there ahead of Earth's forces and..."*

*"And what soldier?"* He's the man I remember now *"What...Four ill-disciplined soldiers in Light Mecha will just walk onto Keden and win the day? I understand you want to avenge your brother-in-arms but you, as countless others, along with Terrier, knew the risks, and how to deal with the losses, so deal with it soldier or you will be deemed unfit for this service."*

I've already avenged his death and I want to prevent another from happening, but I can't say this or I'll definitely be on my way back to Earth in a military shuttle by nightfall. I've zoned out again.

*"...understand me soldier?"*

*"Yes sir. I was just caught up in the loss sir."*

The General softens again, *"We all have been at some point son. Get it together, and get some rest."*

The connection vanishes and the thud of the ship connecting to the docking bay brings the surroundings to my attention. We all feel the loss. I have known Terrier ever since we were kids. Mrs. Andrews had brought a then six year old Carlos to play with his next door neighbor while she and my mother prepared for the family barbeque; we've been best friends ever since.

The walk through the suspended corridor is a hard one. The last time I set foot on this station, it was Terri and I, fresh out of flight school and ready for training on Rouna.

Through the large, almost floor-to-ceiling windows, Rouna, the stunning blue orb many miles below, is breathtaking. Two doors ahead of us hiss and slide smoothly into the walls and a large, busy terminal, filled mostly with tourists dressed in tropical wear and toting luggage, children, or both, now replaces the paradise world.

Not far away, two kids slip out of sight and begin switching their parent's bags while their guardians talk to a travel agent. I remember the first time Terri traveled with my family. It was the beginning of summer and my parents were taking us to Titan. We would have been no more in age or size than these two bag-switchers.

I follow the rest of the team into an elevator and come out three levels above. The guard behind the desk nods us toward an office with a large oak door, and we enter.

"Have a seat, gentlemen."

Station Commander Arnold Brice, the man behind the voice, is a powerfully built soldier and the commander of Earthfront Galactic on Rouna. He has allowed no time for salutes and protocol so we take our seats.

"I am disappointed in your lack of discipline but at the same time, I commend you on your recent achievements and sympathize with your loss...Terrier was a good man..."

It's as though he just stuck that last part in for effect. His beady, but focused eyes stop at mine.

"General Madison has asked that I be lenient with you on this however, I run a tight ship and any soldier who has trouble following orders will find themselves a little short of being ejected into vacuum. Are we clear on this?"

We all acknowledge with a quick "Yessir" and he continues.

"The Deepcore pilot on your ship will be removed and your MAV's will be resupplied and repaired. However, you are to board a shuttle and get planet-side for debriefing and some good R and R. I'd say you almost deserve it."

His squared jaws become squarer as his broad mouth cracks a slanted smile. I don't think I've ever heard a more clinical and one-sided conversation in all my life. Not even with the Battle Axe.

"Sir, if I may?" He seems a bit put off but allows me to speak "We were ordered by General Madison to resupply, repair and await further orders..."

The man behind the desk looks menacingly at me "These, are, further, orders. As you know, Keden is now entirely under Deepcore control. Our forces should be arriving there in four days and along with the Kedenian Government, this minor problem will be solved."

“Permit me Sir...” I can tell that he’s fighting with himself now “We’ve seen what our forces would be up against. You’ll need pilots who are experienced in dealing with this threa...”

“You are ordered to get planet side and stand down Captain. Now unless you’d rather spend your time in paradise, in a cell, I suggest we end this meeting here and now.”

I return his cold stare for a split second.

“Yes Sir, thank you sir.”

I stand and the rest of my team follow, then issue the crispest salute I can muster and he nods his head in approval.

\*\*\*\*\*

“That was bullshit!”

We’re walking through another corridor and toward the shuttle bay while the blue planet below us fills the space through every window again.

“Coming from you Bull...that’s saying something.”

We all laugh at Hound’s reply but the laughter is hollow and without substance. In fact, we haven’t really spoken to each other since Solace. I have got to let this go. Somewhere in the back of my head, I know that it makes no sense to lose what I have for what is gone.

We pass through the retractable corridor of a bridge extending outward and away from Argyle, connecting the complex to our shuttle. Unlike Starships, planetary shuttles here don’t dock in-station.

The low ceilinged, cozy cabin of the shuttle brings the memory of sitting in tandem with Terri the first time to Rouna after my scuffle with Hound. We had both wanted window seats. I walk to where he would have been a little over eight years past and strap in.

*God, that’s not so long ago.*

The flight today would be just the four of us but back then, it was jammed with young pilots ready for adventure. Terrier and I hadn’t met the rest of the team yet, in fact, we wouldn’t meet some of them until almost a year later.

I relax and settle into the formfitting, memory cell seat. The material shifts as it takes my shape and I look through the oval window next to me. Our view is now the white of the space station’s outer shell and the black of space beyond the edge of it.

With a deep breath of the chilly cabin air, I look around me. The cramped space feels cozy, almost homey and soft lights add a nice ambiance to it. On the overhead Holo’s above and behind every seat, a counter counts down to launch...fifteen minutes to go.

*“Welcome aboard Iron Five...”*

The thought of us being five a few hours ago and only four now, stings me.

*"...I am Captain Benn, along with Co-pilot Galeno, and we'll be planet-side in forty five minutes. The weather at Callican is a balmy twenty-seven degrees with crisp chips, cool breezes, pissed off generals and hot chicks. Strap in and enjoy the flight."*

The com goes silent. I see that the cabin announcement hasn't changed much. If anything...I'd say that it's gotten a bit cleaner since my last visit. The room is weirdly quiet save for two seatbelts clipped into place. We are all lost in our own thoughts. On another day, in another time, this trip would have been exciting and just what the doctor had ordered. Today however, there are no words to describe what we all feel. I see Terri's face again. He's concentrating while landing on Solace Five and I leave the cockpit to go strap into my MAV, never to see him again. I see Mirana telling me not to let the Deepcore fleet escape before going into her office. I hear her voice *"Come back in one piece..."*

There is a thud and the cabin shudders as we undock from the space station, breaking my reverie. The ship drifts backward for a short while. Everything shakes a bit more from the pilot's slow, deliberate magnetic interactions with Argyle and then we begin a flat spin, until the planet is ahead and below us and the Giant Spaceport drifts behind.

More small vibrations ripple through as the four thrusters behind us begin their push.

What will become of us now? How will our actions regarding our prisoner affect the future of Iron Five? *Iron Four*...I wish I could scream, shout, curse. What kind of soldier am I? For God's sake, how many times have I seen death? Too many to count and yet here I am, like a child who has lost his brother.

Through my window, the black of space fills every corner as Argyle disappears. The forces of the shuttle's thrusters press me into my seat but comfortably and while we rapidly accelerate, Rouna's atmosphere begins to embrace us.

The blue planet slowly changes color, from rich blue to almost white, to orange and now red as we burn through the sky at more than ten times the speed of sound. The ship's rhythmic hum is almost soothing. Out and below my window, red to light red to light blue to dazzling blue, we enter Rouna's airspace.

Lazy white clouds drift along their paths and take shape. Within minutes of entry, we pass through a few and leave them above and behind. The shuttle's low rumble triggers memories of a time when the world made sense and every problem met its end through a Mom or a Dad; memories of traveling by aircraft to countries unknown on vacations never forgotten; of spaceports and holidays on moons with views of deep space with my friend...my brother...

The Spacecraft tilts on my side and Callican reveals itself in the early morning sunlight. Every eye looks my way but there is still nothing to say so I return to my window.

Callican's first spire appears now that we're a few thousand feet above the tropic blue and I remember the first time learning about them.

*"Picture this..." my teacher had said "...the planet Rouna is like a ball of tightly wound fiber. These fibers, made up of rock and metal break free of each other over time, millions of years, and give the planet, land, in the form of towering, straw-like landmasses."*

I remember her saying this while standing in front of the class wearing a short skirt and high heels. I don't remember what else she was wearing, as a matter of fact, most of the class, as ten year old boys, nearly missed the whole lesson because of that red and white skirt however, the image of what our teacher had used for a visual has always remained clear. In her hand, she held a ball of straw, and after making a few cuts across it, pieces of its fibers stuck out at odd angles. I remember her short skirt again but the com brings me back to reality.

*"Iron Five...welcome to Rouna."*

We are now only six hundred feet above the ocean and the view outside my window is marvelous. Over thirty spires, some separated by a few miles and others, close enough to each other to almost touch, jut out of the water and angle up and out, all in the same direction.

The land at its highest point, according to my Digital eyes, hangs around five hundred feet above sea level which puts us only a hundred above the nearest one. The information, appearing before me in visible colors that adjusts to the light, also tells me that the spire off my side of the shuttle, is about a half mile away. Around its base, where it and the sea connect, is a broad, white-sand crescent beach linked to the rest of the landmass by a narrow road.

I take a deep breath. The shuttle has slowed considerably; seventy knots and as the clear blue waters move smoothly below, the tip of the spire is much closer now. On its edge, the Spire's highest elevation, a glimmering city stands like a crystal mountain. The mixtures of light-blue, white and silvery glass buildings make it blend into its surroundings, but the shuttle tilts again, replacing the city with the sea and we begin a gentle turn toward our destination.

*"It's been so long."*

I turn to Akita as his voice comes to me. It's good to hear.

*"Yeah, it has..."* Pitbull jumps in now *"What do we do now Alpha? I know when they're lying. Once we set foot on Rouna, we're grounded."*

It's as though they were just waiting for someone to break the ice. The thought of 'being grounded' had indeed crossed my mind.

*"We'll figure something out but first, we all need to get some rest and then come together with fresh minds on this."*

*"Hey Alpha..."* Hound now *"...let's cut the crap. We've got to get off Rouna, get to our ship, get out of this system and back to Keden. It's as simple as that. So the first order of business is...how do we get off Rouna?"*

Silence



I think hard but come up with nothing "Rouna is not just an ordinary world where we can just come and go. It's one of the most secured locations in the galaxy, bested only by Earth."

"I know a way..."

We all turn to Akita now

"...I know someone who might be able to help us."

"Who do you know on Rouna?"

"I girl I met a few years ago when I was stationed here, not long before I met you. We had a thing for a while but then...well you know...it didn't work out."

"...Should have known that it'd be one of your trophies."

"No, not a trophy...she was the real deal, but time and distance and...you know?"

"No, we don't know..." Hound smiles.

"Seriously guys, she's heavy into the underground, the best mechanic you'll find and a damned wicked pilot to boot..."

"...Pilot? I must admit, I'm curious now."

"Yeah, she was a test pilot for the Galactic nine..."

This is interesting. The Galactic nine is a Syndicate made up of nine major, Corporations from nine different Solar Systems. Their pilots are some of the best, Galaxy-wide and the Air and Spacecraft of the Galactic Nine Syndicate, rival even the technologies from Earth. They are supposedly one of the very few organizations outside of direct Earthfront control.

"So how's she gonna help us get off this world?"

"I'm not sure Alpha, but if there's a way off this planet, she'll know it."

## FACT

In the year 2150 AD, the International Computer Network, was at its peak in performance and information availability, but after a hundred years of space exploration and migrations, the Inter System Network was established and as the Internet evolved into the ISN, computers and the way we interacted with them changed to suit.

Holo-screens, lenses, modules and micro-consoles quickly replaced tangible screens, keyboards and CPUs and though these worked wonders in their time, mobility and convenience remained insatiable creatures. Laptops, tablets and the like were no longer enough and so, in 151 TE, digital paper was born; a transparent, disposable sheet of computerized paper that did everything their predecessors did and more, but without the cost of upgrading and maintenance. Yet this too, lacked what most space travelers required until four

years later, when the introduction of Digital Eyes revolutionized the industry and changed the way we saw forever.

## CHAPTER 9 - CALLICAN

The shuttle slows to a crawl, almost a hover and glides gently to the landing pad beneath us. We barely feel the touchdown as the hydraulics dip and adjust to the weight of the craft settling on them.

*"Iron Five...Welcome to Callican. It doesn't matter whether you enjoyed the flight or not but know that we wish you an enjoyable time here, as long as you're not headed to the brig, if you are, then good lu...oh who are we kidding, you're screwed. As always, Thanks for flying we don't give a shit airlines, you'll most likely be traveling with us again in the future so don't be an asshole. Thank you."*

The com crackles and then goes dead. Buckles unclipping fill the cabin with their noise and when the door opens it hisses.

"Welcome to Callican..." Akita mimics the pilot "...welcome to prison is more like it."

"Let's just get Base-side and see what's what."

I lead the team through the exit and into the bright sunlight outside and my Digital Eyes adjust to suit.

"Thank God for Dees..." Akita again "Man, this place is paradise."

We step from the ladder onto the tarmac and a cool, constant breeze hits my face. I am conscious of my helmet attached to my waist as it bumps against my thigh with each step. At the same time, my flight suit filters the warm air and keeps me cool in the morning sun even though I don't need it to do so; the temperature here is perfect.

I think back to what Toros had said about Deepcore having Kedenian government connections and that there was no place he could hide from them. Then the Deepcore pilot onboard our ship. Who was *The Man* he had mentioned? Somehow, I know that the answer to this question would unravel everything we need to know but time is not a luxury we have. In my head, I see Mirana O'Canon but I don't like the thoughts that come with her image. She's been holding off a siege for over eight hours.

*What has become of her?*

The urge in my gut tells me that come high or go low, we have to get to Keden but reality stabs me like a knife; we are stuck here until only God knows when.

The sky is an incredible blue ceiling that stretches into the distance where it merges with the massive military tarmac. The Base is so huge that I can't see past it and from what I do see it'll take us at least an hour to walk to the other end. Not far away, an Airtruck awaits and its driver is the only welcoming

party we have. The sounds of shuttles and other military aircraft either taxiing, taking off, landing or parking seem to be everywhere. For a so-called peaceful paradise planet, the military presence here is astounding.

In the distance, and if I didn't know better, I would have found it hard to believe that if you kept going for a few miles, the ground would get steeper and steeper until it fell away and curved under and around to the other side of the spire. It's like living on a very broad and large straw, sticking up out of the sea, bending into a curve...amazing no matter how many times I see it.

"Welcome to Callican...Private Avery...here to take you to base sir!"

I return the young man's firm salute and board the vehicle with Akita mentioning something about a Claudia to Hound. Our seats vibrate with the rumble of the Airtruck and the feeling of my stomach staying on the ground while my body rises from it embraces me. I've always enjoyed the sensation.

The back of the truck is covered, but not enclosed, by solid windows. The air rushes in freely, whipping past my ears with a constant ruffle and I take a deep drag of the freshness. I notice Pitbull looking at me, smiling at the way I took that last breath.

"Man that feels so good."

He shifts to throw his voice over the sounds of the wind and engines "You're late. I've been sucking up this air is high doses since we got off the shuttle." We both laugh

"Hey Cap, check that out..."

I scan the scene and in the distance, find what Akita is showing me. The city sprawling and rising like hundreds of crystal knives all perfectly lined up, their pointy ends to the sky. Then everything gradually disappears and I leave my stomach in the air as we begin to descend.

*Terri...you should have been here.*

\*\*\*\*\*

We leave the Airtruck and its driver behind and enter, with our new escort, a building made almost entirely of Evercrete. The new man, in standard Earthfront military fatigues, leads us through a wide passageway lined with doors, and then into another as the sounds of our boots echo loudly on the hard floor. From here, we enter an elevator that shoots upward, almost enough to give me that gut feeling that I like and within a few seconds, the small lift slows rapidly and stops at level fifteen, according to the digital screen on my Dee's and the one next to the door as it slides open.

We follow the unnamed soldier into a wide, carpeted and brightly lit corridor. The off-white walls on both sides showcase paintings of old military craft of all sorts. I recognize the MAV's of years past and aircraft belonging to a time long hundreds of years before me; they look alien.

The soldier stops and opens the door for us. It is an oak door...*looks like Earth oak*...and we enter the room. I stare at the man behind the desk. He's writing on a sheet of digital paper.

"Please, gentlemen... have a seat."

He is a man of authority, but the door had no symbol or sign to indicate who this man is. Nevertheless we all sit, wait and watch as he hits the button that will send his note to whomever it is intended, a button, like most digital screens today, invisible to the naked eye, but with my Dees, as visible as daylight.

He looks at each of us now and then stops at me...fingers decorated with heavy gold rings...didn't realize that this was allowed in the military. I guess the rules change with rank.

"You all have done remarkable work but I will not tolerate insubordination on any level..." He pauses "...I am Commander Walborough...and it is my duty to handle your debriefing..." he eyes us all like an angry schoolteacher "...now...your Dees please..."

I don't like parting with my Digital Eyes. *Since when did a debriefing require us to remove them?*

"Sir..." I wait for him to permit me to speak. He barely nods and I continue "...I've never had to remove my Digital Eyes for debriefing. Where's the scan..."

"You apparently have a penchant for rebellion..."

*Who the hell is this man?*

"...I am to retrieve your Digital Eyes by order of General Alexander Madison and it will do you well..." His voice has gone from authoritative to menacing "...to follow it to, the, letter."

I look at the rest of my team and they return my gaze. "I apologize Sir...I was just curious and decided to ask, Sir."

He doesn't answer but leans back in his leather chair. I slide my fingers across my eyes; I hate doing this. It's a weird feeling when the devices unlatch their tiny fingers from my eyeballs. My team follows my lead as I hand over my Dees to the superior officer before us.

"These will be returned to you in due time...that will be all, you are dismissed. Get some rest and await further orders."

I think of the Dees in my pocket. The one's from that Deepcore Pilot. Idiotically, the thought of handing them over passes through my head, but common sense takes over in an instant and I leave them safely tucked away. The sounds of weights shifting on chairs, and boots shuffling along the carpet fill the room. We all rise, salute the unknown man in front of us and walk away.

"Oh, and men..." We turn toward him "...we have overlooked your actions relating to your Deepcore captive. Due to your commendable past and present performances, General Madison has seen to this, but I warn you, one foot out of line on my base, and I will not be so lenient."

\*\*\*\*\*

"What the hell was that about?" Akita's anger is no longer contained as we sit in the truck once again. We are in the air and on our way to a military housing complex on the outskirts of the base.

"I've got to admit. I have no idea."

I have never had to remove my Eyes for a debriefing. It is always the Dee-Scan; a high-level program designed to extract everything we've seen, heard, felt, tasted...even smelled, for all the times logged.

Akita's voice again "Now that bastard has my data, and there's no telling what they're gonna do with it. I'm telling you Alpha, something's not right here."

"I know...that wasn't even a debriefing. Why make us go all that way just to hand over our eyes? I know something's off but there's nothing we could do about it now."

It's been my gut feeling ever since Bull told me about the General's orders to interrogate the prisoner on Rouna. That was unlike him and after all, he's the one who taught me to look for irregularities in the pattern.

"They wanted the Deepcore fleet dead. What difference does it make who interrogates the prisoner? It's not as if they expected us to have him alive. I don't like it Boss..." Pitbull shouts into the conversation now.

"Something tells me that we need to get off this world ASAP."

"Or we could all just be paranoid and stressed..." Hound draws our attention toward him "...I'm just saying...We all feel the loss of Terrier...you Cap, lost your best friend and possibly your woman..."

*She's not my woman*

"...Bull...you're always suspicious, and Akita, the restrictions here simply limits your horny escapades..." Akita opens his mouth but Hound silences him with a palm "...however, I do understand what you're all saying. We all lost something and this situation does seem a bit odd but let's not lose our heads here."

"He's right..." I jump in before Akita can retaliate "...let's keep our focus. Akita, you said you know a pilot who can get us off world?"

"I *knew* a pilot who *might* be able to get us off world."

"That's good enough for me. When we get surface side, we'll pay her a visit."

"If she's still there..." Pitbull now

"She'll be there. I know her well enough. She settled here and business, as far as I know, was and still is booming on Rouna and wherever the credits flow, there she will be."

My stomach lurches up my throat again as we begin to move downward and we all kill the conversation for the time being. Using the sounds of the

engines and wind while flying to mask our words would have given us all the privacy we needed while on base, but on the ground, especially in our quarters, nothing is ever a hundred percent secured.

As we touch down, our pilot waits for us to grab our gear and with a nod, lifts off and fades into the distance. I push my sunglasses further up my nose. Without my Dees, the sunlight gets to me. We walk across the small landing zone just outside of the Base perimeter fence, across a two-lane roadway and onto a sidewalk.

It is beautiful here. Long clean sidewalks, separated from the roadways by wide strips of grass. Trees transplanted from Earth over two hundred years ago. Cool breeze, sparse traffic. It all comes together nicely.

The large housing complex made up of apartment buildings and houses that spread out for what looked, from the air, like six or so miles, remind me of home. Our assigned residence is about a mile away, so we hail a passing taxi and a purple haired girl behind the controls looks through the window after sliding to a halt nearby and before I can open my mouth...

"One twenty seven, Norbrook Drive..." Akita is already on point.

She eyes him with what looks like curiosity "Two Hundred Creds..."

The team and I squeeze into the cramped rear of the vehicle and the automatic gullwing door closes. The design of the Aircar is nothing like back on Earth, as we hover down the street at a good clip. Obviously designed for three passengers of average size and clearly not four bulky soldiers, it's a tight fit. The front seat however, is the only one in that space because the car slants inward on either side, forming a curvy triangle, the curved point where the front bumper of a car on Earth would be.

"First time in Callican...?"

She is young but not that young. I trace her gaze in the rear view mirror to Akita. *How does he do this?* By experience, no one answers but him.

"No, but it's the first time seeing you. How old are you?"

*Here we go, and just like that.*

The rest of the team looks at me and I try not to laugh by the sight of it. We're all crammed in here. Hound looks like he's about to pop. I smile and try even harder not to laugh when I look at Bull.

"...twenty six...how old are you?"

"...Old enough to have a great time. Stop by the house later on, we can get to know each other better."

*This is ridiculous. It can't be that easy.*

"I get off at eight..."

Akita returns a broad smile "I'm thirty two, what's your name?"

"Karen, what's yours?"

"Neil, but everyone calls me Akita..."

Our driver laughs and it's a nice laugh, I must admit. "You guys get in from Argyle?"

"Yeh, how did you know?"

"I know that most military flights come through there. My brother is a Traffic Controller on Argyle...says I should aspire to be more but I love it planet-side, and it's not like I'm not aiming higher."

The taxi turns a corner and I'm now between the conversation inside and the sights outside. The houses along this street are larger than the ones we've seen so far. This must be where the soldiers with families live.

Akita continues in the background, "...you work for a company?"

"Yeah but I'm getting ready to branch out on my own."

"That's great..."

The weight of the others press me a bit as we round yet another bend and then head straight for a while. The houses in this new section, unlike the large ones a while ago, are all of the same design. Their lawns are also noticeably smaller but each has its own driveway all the same.

"...eight thirty..." The driver's voice registers as we slow down "...I'll be here around then."

We're now in front of a small, split leveled timber house with a well-kept lawn.

"It's a deal..."

I cut into their conversation and hand the girl a credits card with three hundred Credits programmed into it

"We tip for good service."

She looks at me as though I've done something great "Thanks..." and then back to Akita "...see ya."

He waves and follows us to the house while the Aircar speeds away.

I can't wait to get this off my chest. "Akita...?"

"Alpha...?"

"What about Riara?" I get the desired reaction. He looks from me to Hound to Pitbull and we all laugh.

"I knew it..." Hound waves a hand between us and walks away.

"No, that's not what I meant..."

Pitbull adds his piece. "Who cares what you meant. We all know The Akita very well. Riara was just another notch in your belt."

"No...I was serious about Riara..."

"I know you were. Serious enough to have a go at Karen..." I follow Pitbull to the front door.

"I'm just inviting her over, you guys."

"Yeah whatever..."

"No...this is not...guys?"

\*\*\*\*\*

Its two thirty in the afternoon in Callican and the team and I are speeding along an Evercrete road in a military issued Airvan and heading toward the city. A half hour behind us is the huge housing complex where we are now staying, and ahead of us, Callican City appears sprawling and beautiful as the sunlight plays in colors off the many glassy buildings there. Where we are head though, is not into the metropolis but near it; about seven miles from it to be exact, to a place where village life meets modern life, meets farm life, according to Akita. He was right, but he had also been blabbing nonstop about Karen ever since we left the house and the only way I could have shut him up was to ask about Riara again, so the van is quiet now, and I don't mind it.

The road is mostly straight at this point and through the big, glass windows on either side of us, are shrubs and grasslands that follow the gentle curve of the spire. In the distance and far below is the vast blue ocean of Rouna. More spires, some near and others far, rise from the sea in similar form to ours. Life here is amazing. This world is truly like no other.

"This is it."

Akita breaks my daze and ahead of us, as we turn off the Evercrete road and onto a dirt path, a farmhouse about a quarter mile away appears. Passing rows and rows of corn and potatoes and fruit trees and now animals in open fields, reminds me of home. The nostalgia is weird. The flashback of life on Earth brings Terri to mind. We had played in fields like these when we visited his uncle in the summer, but the house ahead of us looks nothing like the one back home.

It's huge, a little old-world architecture spliced awkwardly with the new. The farmhouse looks just that...a farmhouse. Brown-trimmed and off-white painted timber siding, wooden veranda with full-length steps, complete with rooster wind vane. On the other hand, Magnatech windows opening outward and up without any solid connection to the building, and an Everglass garage with four vehicles hovering in it adds a whole other dimension to the picture.

I feel for the pair of Digital Eyes in my pocket. I'm glad I brought them for some reason; I just thought I should...call it a gut feeling.

"Let's hope she's still here."

"I thought you said that you knew she'd be here. You said you knew her well enough." Pitbull eyes Akita warily.

"I know I did but now I think of it...who knows?"

He brings the Airvan to a stop a few feet from the front veranda and the light brown dust below blows out from either side of us. The engines whine down until they become silent and the sliding doors open silently, letting in the warm but breeze-cooled air of Callican.

"Okay let's get this over with. Akita you take point."

I jump out of the van and notice that the light brown dirt beneath my boots is a bit soft...dry...but soft.



"I'm on it..." Akita swings around from the driver's seat, slips through the two-foot wide aisle and steps onto the ground beside me. Then we're off, he in the lead, all of us in breathable clothes and military boots behind him and spread a few feet apart.

"Akita?" He keeps walking but acknowledges my voice "What's this girl's name?"

"Maria...Anna Maria but she prefers Maria."

*"I'm glad you remembered, you slimy snake-minded bastard!"*

We all stop, Akita on the veranda and the rest of us, feet on the stairs. A dark haired, beautiful, fiery-eyed woman with a Hispanic accent standing off on our right is holding what appears to be a Bullhorn shotgun.

"Maria!"

Akita's voice does not betray his nerves but he doesn't move and so do the rest of us.

"What do you want Neil?"

She lowers the gun, and he begins to walk slowly toward her.

"You want the truth or do you want to hear what you want to hear?"

"Don't be smart with me..." Gun raised again "...spit it out!"

"Seriously Maria, put that thing away. We need your help."

She eyes the rest of us suspiciously. "Who is "we"?"

"My team, it's a long story." She doesn't move "Mariaaaa, come on, let's go inside, have a drink, talk about what we need..."

"No, let's go round back and talk about what I get in return..."

"Yes...and what you get in return."

"You sonofabitch..." *I like her accent* "...you tell me one thing, do another, avoid me and then disappear..." *The way she clips her sentences* "...now, you're here what...five years later, telling me you need my help?"

"I'll explain everything once we go inside and you calm down."

"Oh believe me Neil, I am calm."

I smile, and the others fight to stifle theirs. If I were to guess, it seems that Akita had met his match five years ago, ran from it and now, ended up right back where he started.

Maria shoulder's the weapon and walks past us, but not before staring us down.

"Names...?"

"Huski..."

"Hound..."

"Pitbull..."

She turns around "...and Akita...Dogs..." then walks through the front door, rambling off in her native tongue, only God knows what.

I linger behind until Akita is near me "Nice one..."

"...just a little misunderstanding, she's harmless."

"Riiiiight..."

\*\*\*\*\*

"So you want *me*..." Maria mumbles something in Spanish "...to get you off Rouna, so you can get to your ship...a ship that is guarded by *Earthfront Military!*"

We are in her back yard under an open shed and some large trees where what looks like a severely modified Aircar, sits with half its body parts missing.

"We need you to smuggle us into Argyle and we'll do the rest."

"And what's in this for me?"

"Credits..."

She looks toward me as I say this

"...lots of credits."

"How much of these credits are we talking about?"

"Two hundred thousand creds..."

"Make it two million, Earth credits, and we have a deal."

The team and I exchange looks. I think on this for a split second. "Two million credits? I don't even know if you can get the job done."

"Then get your asses off my property and find your own way." She readies the Bullhorn.

"Okay...two million credits...*if*, you get the job done."

"No...two million credits, *when*, I contact you before we go anywhere."

She's a tough one but we have no other choice "Deal..."

She looks at me as though I'm crazy and then stares at the ground, Spanish under her breath again while pacing.

"I can get you to Argyle but how do you know that your equipment will be ready?"

"If they're not, then I know where I can get them fixed."

"Okay, I'll get organized and we'll get on the move in twenty four."

"Twenty four hours?" Akita jumps in now

"You want to fly with a rocket up your ass to Argyle, or do you want to travel comfortably?" She's ballistic again.

*Akita, what did you do to this woman?*

I intervene. "Maria. We just need to get off world undetected. Then once we're on Argyle we'll be able to get to the ship, undock and leave the system before any red flags can be raised."

"You are all insane. Even if you get to your ship, and I'm not saying I believe you will, you'd never get out of the system unnoticed..."

I cut her off "You leave that to us..."

"They will know that the ship is no longer docked..."

"Not if the computer tells them it still is..."

I see understanding register on her face. Her eyes light up but they grow hard again. "No one...no one, has ever cracked Earthfront system security..."

"Who said anything about cracking it?"

She's puzzled and so is the rest of the team. "Um...Cap...now I don't get it..." Pitbull speaks for the first time since we've started this conversation.

"Karen said she had a brother who's a Space traffic controller at Argyle..."

"Who's Karen?"

Akita eyes me like a bird of prey.

"A girl *we* just met here on Rouna..." He answers her quickly.

I jump in again "She's the taxi driver that got us to our place. She told us that she had a brother who works as a..."

"...and why, would she help four men, *she* just met?"

I think of Terri, I hear his final transmission and see Mirana with a gun in her hand holding off the inevitable. "Akita, get Karen in on this if you think she can be trusted. Find a way to convince her to get her brother involved...I know..."

He begins to protest but I cut him off "...but this is the only way we get off this planet and right now, it is all that matters."

Maria looks to Akita and then back to me "Hmm, so you've found yourself another victim..." It's not as much a question, as it is an accusation "...well I don't care. I just want you all gone and my life returned to the peace that it was. I'll help you but when I'm done, we're done."

"There's one more thing..."

The annoyed woman eyes me warily "What?"

"I need to know what's recorded on these." I remove the small pouch with the two Digital Eyes from my pocket and show them to her.

"There's no place on Rouna outside of Earthfront Military that has the technology to read that, but I'll see what I can do."

"Thank you baby..."

"Neil...if you call me baby again..."

"Okay there's not much time..." This feud is going to cost us everything so I have to cut in "...We'll wait for you to make contact. You have my Com Code. Let's go guys."

As we walk around to the front of the building, I take a deep lung full of air. It's fresh and clean and feels the same all the way through. I hear Akita pleading with Maria and her voice rising, accent even thicker and switching effortlessly between English and Spanish. I join the rest of the team in watching the fun but I sense something. Pitbull and Hound both feel it too. We turn toward the Airvan and then without a doubt, I see it, a barely noticeable ripple in the perfect picture. My heart pumps more blood into my system and new energy surges through me.

"Hostiles...!"

I shout it as the first assailant appears, no more than three feet from me, knife drawn and moving like lightning toward my throat. Instinctively I shift, deflecting his thrust with my left hand while the right draws my Fifty-eight, brings it to bear and I pull the trigger. The assassin tries to vanish but after the

first powerhouse slug hits true, his suit's Regeneration Technology fails, so I put another one into him for good measure and watch what's left of his twitching corpse fall to the ground.

Across the yard and down the iron sights once more, I pause on the trigger. My new target is now in the air as Pitbull's hulking frame stands tall, with his attacker held at arm's length high above his head and then with a sickening crunch, he merges the combat-suited man with the dirt below.

The dead man is now a twisted heap in Bull's wake; the suit, arms and legs and neck, all bent at awkward angles, malfunctioning and going from visible to semi visible.

I jump to my feet and squeeze off two rounds in Akita's direction, breaking his opponent's focus just long enough for the martial artist to drive his knife to the hilt through the enemy's throat. The blood sprays but Akita is already on the move. I scan the area for any more signs. Their suits would keep them invisible only if they move very slowly or stay still but I don't sense any more threats.

*BLAM*

The sound jolts us all into a moment of confusion. I turn to see the lower half of the last attacker slam into a post of the farmhouse veranda, splitting the timber in two and Maria's Twelve Gauge smoking as she lowers it. Then she spits and begins cursing in her native tongue.

"There will be more. There's no time to get our gear, the house is no longer safe..."

"Alpha, what the hell is going on?"

I look at Pitbull and then to Maria "Someone wants us dead that's for sure. Maria, we need to get off this planet and by the looks of it, so do you."

"And where am I to go eh?" Anger in her voice "Everything I've invested in is here. Where do I go?"

"You can come with us or fight the next wave alone, make your choice."

We check the corpses but there are no symbols or any identifications marks on their suits. Even their faces don't register as I scan them.

"These are high end killers..."

"...Deepcore...on Rouna?" Hound asks

"Could be Earthfront for all we know..." Akita now

"Whoever they are, we won't find out if we stay here." I give the signal and we run toward the Airvan. I check my pocket to make sure the bag with the confiscated Dees is still there, and it is. Akita pleads with Maria for what seems like the last time and then as he walks toward us, she goes into the house.

"She says that she'll help."

He enters the vehicle and jumps into the driver's seat. Maria reappears with a crate hovering behind her and Hound and I get out of the van in order to help put it in the back. In it, are automatic assault weapons and a few high explosive

grenades; I must admit...I like this woman. We jump back into the Airvan and Maria enters after.

"Get out!"

Akita, with a quick glance in my direction, unbuckles himself after I give the okay, and moves to the other front seat as the curvy woman in her green jumpsuit and military boots slides into the driver's side.

Without pause, Maria guns the throttle and then we're off, but not back to the road. Instead, we cut a path across one of her wheat fields and then enter into a tree line that will supposedly take us off this spire and to the underground network on Rouna. I do as she suggests and hand out the weapons in the now opened crate. In my hand is an M-8 or the Mate as is generally known. I haven't seen one of these in a long time and they are hard to come by however, its accuracy and high velocity, high impact rounds does the job right the first time and more than make up for its unusual weight.

"Those were Earthfront assassins..."

"You may be right Hound..."

"Something seriously full of shit is taking place here boss and we're in the middle of it..." Pitbull now

My mind races with new thoughts "I know. Maria, what's the plan?"

"We get to a friend of mine and he gets us a flight off Rouna. We're obviously not going to get your ship from Argyle..."

Hound cuts in "I was really hoping that was still an option..."

Maria looks at me in the rearview mirror "What kind of idiot team do you have Captain?"

Hound retaliates but I stop him quick. "I'd appreciate it if you showed a little more tact. We're in this together whether you like it or not and we've got one shot so let's get it done right."

She remains silent for a second or two. "I have a friend. His name is Manny, if there's anyone who can get us off this world, it's him..."

"How do you know that this, *Manny*, will help?"

"I know because I know. Unlike some of the bastards I've come across, *he*, is a man of honor, he'll do as I ask." She ignores Akita's stare and he doesn't reply.

The ground below the Airvan suddenly becomes steeper and rockier. The drop goes from gently sloping hill to ninety degree, boulder-ridden incline and now we're high over the beautiful blue once again.

"Who's Manny?"

"What's it to you?"

I intercept this new argument. They are going to have to put their differences aside if we are to be successful in this venture.

"Guys..." Silence now "...Just drive Maria..." Akita looks at me "...and shut up Akita." And I put up a hand to silence him as the sparkling blue now passes under us, less than twenty feet away.

\*\*\*\*\*

Half-hour later, we land between some trees on a spire very near the water's edge. This one, by the look of it and from what I remember from my days of geography class, still has a few thousand years to go before it leaves the sea entirely. We all exit the vehicle. The breeze is cool and the air, crisper than in Callican. There is not much here. The land in every direction can't be any more than three acres, give or take a few meters; we are definitely in the middle of nowhere and far from prying eyes.

We follow Maria silently, guns at the ready, down a rocky path and through a dense line of wiry brush. These plants that snag our pants and shoes have adapted to the salty air and water and rock covered surface of this Spire and in doing so, have become almost as ridged.

We keep walking until we meet a small clearing where she stops at a patch of grass, stoops down with one hand in the ground, and pulls upward. A hidden metal cover slides aside and gives way to a ladder that leads down into an abyss, but there is no time for hesitation. I wait as my team follows, and climb in behind them.

The ladder takes us to an empty room. We then pass through a metal corridor, our footsteps echoing loudly and down a set of stairs. Through two doors now held open by our guide, we enter what looks like a command center. With the sound of the doors slipping shut behind us, I turn to Maria and we lock eyes. In the dim light, hers glimmer and her face, void of emotion worries me. Her dark hair flows to her shoulders and if it were another time and place, I might have asked her to dinner.

"Welcome captain, to my home away from home."

She turns and walks toward the nearest computer console. The rest of us follow and the room lights up as she hits a switch and Holoscreens appear.

"Manny?"

A man's face appears on the Holo and the computer's male voice fills the room. "Hello Maria. What color is the sky today?"

"It's okay Manny they're with me, it's safe."

A sound of gears moving, almost silently, causes me to look up. I hear someone gasp. High above us, embedded in the stone roof of the cavern are about a dozen narrow metal tubes hanging off the ends of a dozen wicked looking Auto-cannons. We would have been dead and not heard a single shot.

"Now, before I help you..." Maria looks at me coldly "...tell me this...What the hell is going on?"

Her sudden outburst takes me by surprise, but the memory of the Auto-cannons overhead and the sociopathic looking computer named Manny makes me answer.

"To be honest, I don't know."

“Manny?”

The emotionless voice comes to us again “He is not lying.”

She looks to me “Then what’s so important on Keden?”

I’m between a rock and very hard place. I breathe deeply, this will calm me enough and without interruption, I tell the story of our ordeal from the start, from our encounter with the Rhinos on Keden, to Mirana and to our current plight.

Almost ten minutes have passed and I finally shut my mouth. I’m thirsty, but I can do naught about it so I’ll wait and see where we go from here. Maria looks at me, no doubt processing everything I have said and deciding if we are worth her troubles or not.

“You’re risking your lives...” She looks from face to face and then back to me “...You’re risking *their* lives, for a woman who has no attachment to you?”

“Look...” I lean forward on the console and hear the gears above us move, but I don’t care. “...We need to get off Rouna. It’s either you help us, or we find our own way. No bullshit, just results and if this is too difficult for you, then I’m sorry for getting you into this but you go your way and we’ll go ours.”

It’s now or never. Maria’s next move will decide whether I walk away from this place, or we benefit from her help. She turns away and goes back to her computer-generated man.

“You must really love her...”

Her statement hangs in the air and the silence is not as awkward as I would have imagined it to be. I’ve never thought of the possibility of it being love. I don’t know what it is really. All I do know is that I can’t stand the thought of Mirana captured, or dead. I don’t know what I feel, I don’t know for sure. I haven’t felt it in so long and yet to say I didn’t recognize the signs would be a lie.

“Manny, I need to hitch a ride on a ship to Keden. Are there any leaving today?”

I keep looking at Maria but she turns away. The humanoid face on the Holo blinks and runs through the data. His shockingly green eyes no longer move but shimmer and flash with millions of files and bits and pieces of information. The speed at which Manny processes is unbelievable, not because of how fast he gets the job done, this is the norm with computers nowadays, but because I have never actually seen the info physically moving with my own eyes.

“The Anon...” A holographic image of a monstrous deep space barge appears “...leaves for Keden in two days, outside of this, there are no ships heading to that region.”

I join the conversation “Are there any ships heading out of this system that we can hitch...”

"He won't respond to you Captain..." Maria cuts me off with a smile and then a frown "...And now that I think of it, even if you do get to Keden, you won't have your gear. How do you expect to be of any use there?"

I did actually think of this, ever since the reality of not getting to our ship had hit me.

"We're resourceful, we'll get it done."

"No...you're foolish and not thinking straight, and will get yourselves killed..."

She turns back to the image floating nearby

"...Manny, we need to get to Adula and fast. But we must leave this system undetected."

"Adula...? Adula is...only a jump away from Keden. Something like, four hundred lights...but what's on Adula? It's a mud planet, we can't land there...we'll never get off."

Maria stares into me in a way that makes my words seem foolish "Adula is a mud planet yes, but it is also home to a base we once used..."

"The Galactic Nine...?"

"There are ships there and Mecha that can get the job done."

"How do you know that the Syndicate hasn't scrapped it all by now?"

"Because the underground stretches far beyond Rouna, and needs every foothold it can get, besides, you want to read those Dees, right? Then Adula is the place."

I don't have to think about this for long. We need to get off this planet and we'll be doing it without our gear or our ship.

"Okay let's do it."

She turns back to the Holo "Manny what do you have?"

"The Jamavin is set to depart Mayreau for Adula in five hours..."

An industrial class ship replaces the Barge on the Holoscreens now.

"What's its eta?"

"...Seven hours to Adula."

A seven-hour jump and then at least seven more before we get off Adula...we'll be on Keden in twenty hours...hopefully, a little more than forty eight hours before Earthfront forces...that's good enough for me...as good as it's going to get anyways. I nod my approval and Maria gives the computer the command.



## A few months before Iron Five's deployment on Keden

### MIND GAMES

Year: 878 TE

System: Sol

Planet: Earth

Location: New York City, United Northern Alliance

Carlos Andrews walked into an upper class restaurant in downtown Manhattan. At seventy floors up, the view through the glass wall was mind blowing. Sky scrapers of silvery Everglass rose majestically from hundreds of rows of unseen streets, and copper colored transport hubs floated on thin air, filtering steady streams of traffic at varying altitudes.

Subdued music and soft chatter filled the room. A woman in a fitted, flowing azure dress approached and led him across the thick carpeted floor to a booth where a broad man in an exquisitely tailored suit sat alone.

"Terrier...Welcome...Sit." The man's voice was strong and brutish

"Thank you Sir."

Across from them, at a table for four, three men appeared deep in conversation but Carlos knew a bodyguard when he saw one. Sleek and stylish, they could have easily been passed over for high-level lawyers or traders, but the eyes, the eyes never lied. A soldier was a soldier regardless of his dress code and it was always the eyes that gave him away.

"We think the mole might be implementing something big, and soon..."

The big man stuffed his mouth with a forkful of meat before continuing "Your friend, you say that you are certain about him?"

"Huski is loyal to Earthfront, I'll bet my life on it."

"Then it must be one of the others."

"They are all good men sir and I still don't think this is right..."

"I understand your loyalty to your team. I understand how difficult it is to even imagine one of them in this light. But facts are facts and all evidence points to Iron Five. We know it's not you, and you swear for Gant, but you can't, to this day, be absolutely sure about the others."

Carlos was silent and the man continued.

"Look, if your team is innocent, then there's nothing to worry about after they've been investigated. But if not..."

There was no way around it. Iron Five was under surveillance and there was nothing Carlos could do about it. Regarding this mole however, that wasn't the case. He had long decided to find the person responsible for his team's scrutiny and expose them by any means necessary, and if he was lucky,

by the time the rest of the guys found out, they'd be more than willing to forgive him for not giving them a heads-up.

"...get to Kona immediately..." The big man was still talking "...and await further instructions. Your next Earthfront op will re-deploy you on Keden. I have arranged for your team's arrival there within the month. With patience and a little luck, we should prove Iron Five's innocence, root out this traitor and put an end to this madness."

"Yessir..." Carlos replied

He had been forbidden to talk to his team about the matter and with the threat of disbandment, court-martials, and jail time hanging over their heads; he thought it best to follow orders, for now.

A slight wave of the older man's gold ringed fingers told him that he had been dismissed and without further ado, he left the room.

\*\*\*\*\*

Carlos stepped onto a sky-deck outside the fancy restaurant, and beyond a metal handrail that separated life from death, a parking assistant brought his Dragonfly to rest against the edge of the open waiting area. With a few quick steps, he slid into the driver's seat and let the gull-winged door seal shut. Then in the blink of an eye, the sleek Aircar fell away from the building and blended seamlessly into a flowing river of traffic below.

Miles of sky lanes crisscrossed the city and millions of people sped back and forth in them. The Dragonfly's navigation system kept it moving in sync with the tide and after fifteen minutes, Carlos ascended an off ramp, invisible to the human eye but clearly indicated on the cockpit windscreen, and continued his climb toward a monstrous disk that capped one of New York's busiest spaceports.

Within minutes, he was parked and walking through a vast, bustling terminal where the sounds of technology and endless multitudes filled the air with an overwhelming, never ending hum. But implants made it possible to control the sound bombarding his ears by merely desiring it, just as his Dees provided information in the form of holographic images at the speed of thought. Everyone had them in a variety of models, unlike the average civilian however, Carlos' implants were military issued.

Fifteen minutes later, he exited a lift that brought him to a private hangar on one of the highest levels of the complex and boarded an automated transport cart. The robot ferried its passenger to a ship a half a mile across the cavernous Eversteel room where rows of starships and other spacecraft slept peacefully in their slots. These belonged to New York's most influential families and corporate heads; billion credit technology that none but the crème de la crème could afford.

Once aboard his ship, the Vanon; An Earthman Industries, Liberty Class vessel, prized by many for their easy space to surface capabilities, Carlos initiated the computer's start up sequence and opened its digital communications module.

"La Guardia Space Command...Captain Andrews of Starship Vanon requesting departure from A-Deck to Vacuum."

A flawless female voice responded "*Captain Andrews of Starship Vanon, you are cleared for departure. Link up and go auto.*"

"Copy clearance and link up...going auto."

The spaceport's auto guidance system took control of Carlos's ship and the dull-grey, hundred ton, forward wing machine lifted effortlessly from the floor.

"*Starship Vanon, you have guidance on link, window to Karis is open and rocket to station is a go. Please confirm.*"

"Vanon copies rocket to Karis."

Over the lively city and into the clouds, the Vanon shot skyward until the Earth hung beneath it like a beautiful marble and the floating city that was the Space Station Karis rushed into view. Carlos let the autopilot take him toward it but he would not be docking there.

"*Starship Vanon...*" his com came alive "*...Karis Command has you on guidance...state intentions.*"

"Karis Command...Vanon requests clearance for flyby to Triton."

Five seconds passed

"*Vanon, you have guidance for hyper light to Triton. Set course and sync up.*"

Carlos activated his navigation module, punched in the co-ordinates for Neptune's most popular moon and then the Vanon disappeared from Earth's orbit. Three hours later, he came out of the warp stream fifty thousand kilometers from Triton. Below and off to his right, the stunningly blue gas giant that was Neptune dominated the blackness of space but with a few quick adjustments, he took manual control of the ship and changed course to Proteus.

The Vanon approached the irregular moon and came to rest on a landing pad beside one of its many massive craters. Here, he would wait at Kona, a decommissioned Earthfront military storage base until he received his orders.

## CHAPTER 10 - ADULA

The Jamavin is an impressively large vessel, measuring roughly three thousand feet long by five hundred feet high and eight hundred feet wide. Emptied of its cargo on Mayreau, one of the Starports in Rouna's System, she is now on her way to Adula for another pickup. The cargo, billion-credit stones, minerals, and whatever else that is to be churned and extracted by the miners.

The rumble of its fifteen colossal engines fills the cabin with a constant hum and the scents of oil and grease hang ever present in the air. It is my first time on an Industrial ship and I hope to God that it will be my last. Greasy pipes, running in many directions, line the glossy white metal walls around us. A few very small windows and compartments, housing wires and whatnot, make up the rest of the space, as dim white lights along the roof flicker.

Above and in front of us, is a long-dead Holo-screen unit, a relic of older times.

This ship is one of the very few left that run on both Sol Technology, and Oiled Mechanics, which means that the Jamavin must be over three hundred years old.

*It's Amazing. Of all the Industrial ships throughout the galaxy to choose from for my first flight, I had to end up on a clunker.*

Maria had lived up to her promise. After leaving her underground lair and the psychopathic looking Manny behind, we ditched the Airvan and traveled by speedboat to an old-world looking Spire group called Richmond. With its closely packed, colorful brick and limestone houses, bakeries and market squares, it wasn't difficult to blend into and move unnoticed through the fishing town as just another group of tourists taking in the scenery.

Once in Richmond, Maria led us through a maze of sidewalks and alleys to an almost hidden pub, tucked away in one of the many back streets. There we met her contact who, even though a bit suspicious, knew well enough that our presence there was none of his business and so, helped us along our way. I must say, Maria impresses me; Akita definitely lost a good one, but that was a little over nine hours ago, and now we are here, safely tucked away in a small passenger compartment behind the cockpit of this ship and approaching Adula.

\*\*\*\*\*

The Jamavin shakes as we pass through atmosphere and enter the Mud planet's airspace. On my right, through a little oval window, the clear and bright blue Adulan sky is dazzling. The ship jolts again and miles beneath us in every direction, thick grey clouds span as far as can be seen. Below them, all is mud; one very giant ball of perpetually shifting muck and rain and because of this, life cannot exist here without the proper facilities or equipment.

Known for their massively high yield of precious stones, minerals and valuable deposits, mud planets are rare. Miners from all over the galaxy travel to these worlds under the protection and banners of major corporations that are a part of the Galactic Super Credit Industry. It is quite fitting really, now I think of it, to hide a Galactic-Nine secret military here. I just never had a reason to think about it.

"Maria?"

She is sitting in the aisle seat to my left and her eyes meet mine  
"Where exactly is this base?"

What I've seen through the tiny window next to me ever since entering the thick cloud cover, is nothing more than a mud ocean and heavy rains that limit visibility to less than a quarter mile.

She raises her voice over the rumble of the ship "It's beneath the docks where we're headed. We'll have to be careful when we land though, the last thing we need are suspicious miners asking too many questions."

I nod my understanding and return to the bleak world outside.

*What has become of Mirana? Is she alive? Where is Terri? Is he happy?*

The Jamavin slows to a crawl and the outline of what looks like a mountain range comes into view. The sight is unreal. What might have been soil-covered ridges and valleys thousands of years ago, are now bare rock and monumental boulders all wedged together.

"We're here. Stick to me and don't talk to anybody."

Acknowledging her with nods and grunts, we have no choice but to do as she says. The reality of our situation has fully sunken in and if there is nothing on Adula then we are definitely going to be up the creek without a paddle.

The Starship banks and turns as we fly over an Eversteel complex that floats above the deep mire by way of Magnatech. The power it generates to stay afloat must be enormous. The mining docks and facilities slide closer and closer and with wicked jolts and rumbles, the ship touches down; shocking me physically and mentally until the immense shakings and noises cease, and after a few minutes, die out entirely.

Maria unbuckles her harness. I stand as the rest of the team unclick from their seats and follow her through the constricted corridor. Looking back at the cockpit, the pilots are nowhere in sight.

Walking is uncomfortable and all attempts to avoid chaffing seem no less difficult than when I first put on this flight suit. It's bulky and rough, both inside and out but it's all I've got for now. We received them when we boarded and by the look and smell of mine, it has been used way too many times and not been cleaned nearly as much, but I'll manage.

The smell of oil and grease is even stronger here in the confinement of the passage and were it not for the periodical blasts of recycled air overhead, my lungs would be in need of serious cleaning.

We keep walking, down narrow stairs and through a sliding door to the cargo hold. As we enter, I survey the scene. There is nothing here but a few crates in a corner strapped to the not so shine floor, just a monstrous room of nothing.

"When we leave the ship, speak to no one. You follow me and do exactly as I say..." Maria looks toward Akita and then back at me "...are we clear?"

I speak before Akita does "Let's just get this done."

This back and forth between them is wearing my patience thin. I had to break up their heated arguments twice during the trip. The hiss of shifting hydraulics fills the air as the lights above and ahead goes from green to red. I put on my helmet and let the auto-clasp seal it to my suit. All sound temporarily disappears and there is a split second of not being able to breathe, then the suit's air filters kick in and what was greasy and oily scented, is now clean and fresh. Sound comes to me again but just a little better than muffled. The large cargo doors pop out, slide upward, and as Maria moves forward, so do I.

\*\*\*\*\*

The team and I follow our guide across the Eversteel deck of the floating docks. There's barely anyone around and the few we have seen, seemed unaware of our existence. The air on this world is very dense but breathable; however, the muck is all around us microscopically. The thickness of this is enough to clog a human's lungs to the point of death within minutes, so I enjoy my filtered air and continue in Maria's wake.

Across the large platform and toward two, three story structures, I absorb the sights and my conclusion is, that this planet is what hell would be if it were made of mud. The rain slams into us like sheets of iron droplets. Without a suit, this pelting of droplets would definitely be a memorable experience, if I survived to have the memory that is. Finally, I have a reason to appreciate this smelly suit. Its bulk and coarseness has its purpose.

We continue onward against the sheet rain as the thick, roiling muck below, swells and dips like any ocean on Earth; it is a sight I would in no way soon forget. Low hanging, thick, black clouds shroud the mountains we flew past earlier and the rain is getting worse.

*How in the Galaxy can it get worse?*

Between the two, three story buildings now, what looks like a construction MAV sits abandoned beside a row of old iron crates. One of its legs are missing, a pitiful sight, as though it had beating heart, sitting maimed and helpless.

We round a corner and approach a doorway of a third building. Maria motions for Bull to open the dense door and after he turns the locking mechanism with powerful arms, we all trail her inside. In an instant, the room illuminates with the glare of red lights, projected from about a dozen or so bulbs in the ceiling.

"Close the door, and for your own good, keep your helmets on."

Pitbull pulls it shut and turns the lever that locks it. Almost everything on this facility remains manually operated. There hasn't been one digital interface up to this point and the reason behind this had made itself clear ever since we set foot on this complex.

Maria leads us through another opening and into an elevator.

Perpetual muck and rain of this magnitude is no friend to electronics and the heavy moisture here would eventually destroy any form of Digital technology in a short time.

*I see why an old bird like the Jamavin would be the perfect ship for its job.*

The elevator shoots downward with a gut-wrenching lurch and then rapidly slows to a halt. My innards force themselves back into place and the doors slide open. Pacing Maria, we move out of the lift and through another passageway. Our boots echo dully on the floor of the wide, red-lighted corridor and in our silence there is tension. There are questions to ask, and answers I doubt we would get but for the moment, all words remain contained.

Maria takes us to the closed doorway of a room not far from the elevator, then punches in a few security codes on a rubberized keypad, gives her thumb, eyes and voice to the scanner, and the door opens. White light engulfs us as the doors seal shut behind and after squinting for a few seconds, our surroundings become clear. We are in, what looks like, a class or conference room, filled with chairs and desks, all facing a small platform. On this platform beneath a low ceiling, a narrow, waist high computer console stands like a sleek silver pedestal. Maria immediately goes to work, waking the sleeping system, and then removing five sheets of digital paper from a shelf nearby, she passes them to us. After hitting a few keys on a digital keyboard only she can see, the familiar Dee-Scan interface appears on the translucent sheets in our hands.

“Captain...”

I remove the bag containing the Deepcore Pilot’s Digital Eyes and hand the lenses to her. Then, with anxiety threatening to overtake me, I wait as she places the pair of Dees; face up, on the flat, thin glass plate of the computer’s scanner. After the program begins running, images of the ceiling above us appear on our papers.

“Go back, before the battle on Solace Five, we’re looking for the moment he received his orders.”

I think of “The Man” according to the dead, enemy pilot. I know in my heart that if I find this person, I will find everything. The computer scans its way back in time and brings with it a group-felt pain.

I watch as the battle that took Terri’s life rewinds before us through the eyes of our opponent. I see him maneuvering, after and before Terri’s MAV explodes in a wicked fireball. Buried thoughts and feelings surface, but anger and a drive for vengeance replaces the pain, and yet I find myself blinking back emotions threatening to overtake me. The war on the Ice Planet rages on. He is now on my tail and locked in combat with me. It’s strange seeing myself in the form of my MAV flying in rewind, but it is over quickly and eventually, the Deepcore pilot is alone and in an underground bunker on Solace Five. A day flies by, and then another, and after two more trips to the bathroom, a desk and Hologscreen comes into the picture.

“Slow it down...”

Maria gives me what I want and I wait...but not for long.

"Stop it..."

Everyone's exclamations merge with mine as we stare into the face of the impossible.

"Play at normal speed..."

The voices grow gradually until the volume is right and the conversation fills the room.

*"...No, he won't stop. I know him and he hasn't gotten soft. The ambush your men have set up won't work. This is why I've sent you there. If Iron Five survives Keden, then they must come to you on Solace. The Light Mecha would be no match for a Cyclone and this way, there will be no questions or investigations into the matter. Kill them all and get to Keden. Lock it down. Take the Cyclones. None can match them. Keden will fall and then Earth will follow. You must not fail, and do not delay..."*

"Pause it Maria..."

Terrier's face stares into mine. Words escape me. The world makes no sense. Everyone remains speechless until Akita swears, breaking the dumfounded silence. I suspect now why Hawk wanted the pilot interrogated on Rouna and us to have no contact with him. The General must have been in on it. Who else could have sent the assassins?

"Can somebody tell me what's going on?"

"I don't know Hound..."

I'm still searching the recesses of my mind for clues, for anything that might have been a warning sign overlooked.

"Why the hell is Terri giving orders to kill us?"

Akita answers Hound with a question of his own "Why would he want the downfall of Keden and Earth?"

Bull answers, "Whatever this is, it's a mess and we've become expendable, and the funny thing is...none of us knows why..."

"Let's take this one step at a time..." Everyone turns to me now "...we know that those Deepcore Heavies on Keden were sent to lure us into a trap and destroy us...the question is, why? The answer was, according to our prisoner, to remove the obstacle. So we know that we were a hindrance to whatever plans they had."

The thought of my brother becoming my enemy in such a short space of time, cuts deep. Everyone nods in agreement

"...the second question was, who is this 'Man' that Captain Hiram was talking about, and now we know it was Terri. As for General Hawk, we don't know for sure where he fits into all of this but those were more than likely Earthfront assassins who attacked us on Rouna, and after the way we were treated there, it is safer to assume that he is behind this, at least until we gather more information. There is something else too. Deepcore somehow stabbed them in the back..."

"How do you figure this?" Maria asks



"The pilot we captured told us that he was ordered by "The Man" to kill us. He also said that he worked for him, but when I asked what Deepcore's intentions on Keden were, he said, to protect it..."

Maria again "Protect it from?"

Pitbull now "From the Man, I remember."

"So then..." Hound jumps in "Terrier was not supposed to die on Solace, but they killed him anyway."

"Exactly..." I continue "...and the unrest on Keden must have been deliberately provoked by Earthfront..."

Hound cuts in "Then that means...the Earthfront fleet that's headed to Keden is not a helping hand..."

"No...it's a full scaled invasion..."

Pitbull's words send shivers up my neck. I retrieve the Dees and store them once more

"The Kedenian Government and Deepcore must have discovered Earthfront's plans and so united against a common enemy. We need to get to the hangar. There's not much time."

"Huski...?"

I turn to Maria. It is the first time she has ever addressed me by this name

"Does it make a difference if you go to Keden now? I mean..."

"Iron Five is headed to Keden...you may go where ever you choose from here, but right now, it's where we need to be."

"I didn't mean it that way...I'm just looking at it realistically..."

"Maria..." Every second wasted here seems to add a few pounds to my shoulders "...Get us to the hangar."

"Wait..."

She hits a few more buttons and a hidden shelf on the wall opens. From it, her palms open and in them are five pairs of brand new, still-sealed-in-plastic, Digital Eyes.

"Unregistered Dees...you will need them."

"Does this mean that you're now a part of Iron Five?"

"I have nowhere to go, and I am definitely not going back to Rouna anytime soon."

I take a pair from her and so does the rest of the team. After a bit of fuss and cheering over getting them in place and seeing everything extraordinarily again, we follow Maria through a hidden doorway, along a few corridors and down a very long ramp.

\*\*\*\*\*

Three minutes later, we enter a vast room made up of dense Eversteel walls, and a perfectly flat floor and roof. The place lights up and relief...joy...or is it hope? Maybe all three...etch a ridiculous smile across my face. Ten MAVs, I

count them again just to make sure, all standing in line not far away. I have never seen anything like them; similar to the one we fought on Solace Five but remarkably different.

"What kind of MAV's are these?" Pitbull's voice echoes eerily across the hangar.

Maria walks toward the closest one and runs a tender hand along the sleek frame of the sleeping machine.

"These are not MAV's..." She turns to us "...They are Dynamic Automated War Gear...DAWGs."

This is too good to be true and after a moment of gathering our thoughts, we all break out in stupid grins.

"I knew you'd like it..." She's grinning too.

"Dogs..." I get her attention "...perfect..."

"These are the Galactic Nine's response to Earthfront's Cyclone project."

"I'd never even heard of the Cyclones before that pilot mentioned them...how..."

"Not everyone who works for Earthfront belongs to Earthfront, Captain." Her eyes tell me that she knows a lot more than any ordinary pilot should.

"Who are you?"

She smiles "The proper question would be; what do I do for the Galactic Nine?"

"So how can you be a part of us, if you still work for the Nine?"

Maria glances toward Hound "I am a freelanced Tech-head. I maintain, prepare and repair computer systems, test fly, design programs, program, and re-program anything that needs to be. Whenever they are in need of my expertise, I'm there, the pay is good and the benefits are...well, you can see for yourself."

You said that it's a response. I thought Earth and the Galactic Nine worked hand in hand?"

She turns to Akita "You surprise me Neil..."

I cut in and Akita refrains from whatever it is that he was about to say.

"Are they better than the Cyclones?"

"Based on our tests, both virtual and physical...no...the Cyclones are technologically more advanced however, a machine is only as good as its pilot."

"Well said..."

The skin of the mechanical monster is strange beneath my touch, rubbery but as solid as metal, almost reflective, almost chrome but not quite. I have seen it before, back in the day while training on Rouna, not in reality but virtually. Still, I am curious to know if I'm right.

"What is this tech? It's not Reflective Regen..."

"It's not. This is Lizard Skin Technology."

"I've heard of that..." Pitbull joins us. "...Takes the color and patterns of its immediate surroundings, but not as effectively as Reflective Regen."

“It might not be as effective, but it gets the job done...”

Hound chimes in “Is the Camo automatic?”

“Yes it is...”

As she says this, it becomes clear to me that the reason for the machine’s almost chrome appearance is that the floor, walls and roof of this place are the same color. Based on the T-Rex design, its legs are fashioned after those of the king of dinosaurs.

“Let’s see if they work...” I turn to Maria “Open this one...”

Opening to a Holo-console nearby, her fingers slide through a sequence of digital keys and a high-pitched sound builds until it surrounds us. Then in a matter of seconds, the DAWG next to me hums as it becomes active.

“This is awesome...”

Hound is obviously excited, but I choose to remain calm. I need to see these things work before I celebrate. With a loud hiss, the front of the machine splits in half and slides apart on either side. I walk around it to get a better view as what appears to be a man shaped gurney, hangs vertically between the two open halves. Then all motion stops, leaving nothing more than a whirring hum.

Maria motions to me where to get a flight suit and I move quickly to grab one. I’m extremely glad to escape this bulky, funky smelling getup from the Jamavin, which by the way, takes forever to get out of, but eventually I break free. Careful to keep the Mecha between us, I strip to my underwear and let the new flight suit slide onto my skin. The motion is smooth and almost refreshing.

*I’ll need a bath soon.*

“Remember...” Her thick accent echoes “...these are not MAV’s. There is no pilot’s seat. You are the machine. Whatever you do, it will do so let the interface take you and don’t fight it.”

*‘Let the interface take me?’ ‘Don’t fight it?’ What the hell is this thing?*

After stowing the Deepcore Dees in my new suit, I walk carefully toward the cockpit and between its two open halves. The man-shaped elevator-gurney-thing is more like a vertical metal sleeping cot covered with memory-cell material. There are no wires, computer screens or interfaces either, just thin strips of light that outline its edges and the like. It is awkward but I step onto the slightly angled seat, if I can call it that, and lean, back first, into it.

The memory-cell padding adjusts to my body shape and weight with ease and thoughts of sleep threaten to overwhelm me. It’s as comfortable as any plush bed I’ve ever slept on.

“Captain, are you ready?”

Maria’s shout sounds distant. My nerves are overtaking me.

“Yeah...!”

The gears around me hiss again. She must be running the startup sequence. An unseen force sucks my helmet onto the headrest and prickly, needling fingers pass through it and into my head, my brain...my mind. At least that’s

what it feels like. The initial invasion of my thoughts is frightening but I go against all natural reactions and relax, letting the machine, *take me*.

"Close the cockpit Captain!"

*This is weird*

I do as she says, the only way I can think how, and before the thought even registers clearly, the two open halves of the cockpit slide shut and while they do, my memory-cell cot-thing lifts me up and into the so-called cockpit.

Darkness surrounds me. It feels like being pressurized and wedged into place. My legs bend at the knees and for the moment, I am actually in a sitting position...or a squatting position...at least I think so...I'm not sure.

A split second, needle-stabbing pain passes through the back of my eyes as my Dees connect with the machine and they Sync up. The onboard computer links to my suit and the merger is mind twisting. Like electric ants inside my skull, the tiny ripples of energy tickle my scalp from the inside with a pinch here and tingle there and after a few seconds that feel like an hour, the mild torture ends and I become one with my DAWG.

"Maria..."

"Yeah...?"

"Am I moving with the machine, or is this all in my head? Cause if I'm moving with it, I'm gonna get tired pretty soon."

She laughs "It's all in your head Huski. The computer and your mind are now one. Whatever relevant command you think, the machine will do it. Your physical actions are for basic movements only, but don't fight it...go with the flow..."

"I can live with that. What about weapons for this thing?"

"We'll load up after you both get to know each other..."

The large hangar is now visible to me and I turn my head to see what is in this direction, and then the other. What's funny about all of this is that I'm standing, yet I feel completely at ease. I look at the other Mecha sitting on their haunches nearby and notice that there is no cockpit glass. It hits me that where I am at the moment is more like a sealed, metal coffin. It is definitely not the place to be if you're claustrophobic.

"Guys..." Maria's words come clearly to me, as though she is literally in my ear. "Suit up and pick a DAWG..."

The rest of the team grabs their new flight gear and gladly discard the old ones. Akita is the only of the group who changes his suits in plain sight but to my amusement, Maria refuses to look his way. I think of my weapons systems and in front of me, appearing in transparent but very visible outlines are modules for missiles and guns. I'm currently unarmed but the computer gives me hundreds of selections from missile types and ammunitions, to load out options, and what to do with them.

"Iron Five..."

The name slaps me with the hard truth of Terrier never being a part of us again, but these memories and emotions have no place on the battlefield. If I want closure in this mess, then I would achieve this by not getting the rest of my team killed.

Maria comes over the comms again, "I'm going to have to get us all in sync so the computers can recognize and respond to each other without any problems, so close your cockpits and wait for me."

The sounds of whirring and whines fill the manmade cavern as Akita, Hound and Pitbull become one with their Gear. My mouth is dry. I have not had anything to drink since the tainted mineral water given to us onboard the Jamavin, but I ignore the thirst and turn my head in order to look at Maria. She is busy at the console, doing her thing, and even in her non-appealing flight suit, she is still attractive.

I continue to watch when she leaves the computer and head off to grab a flight suit. At this point, I know that we are all watching and I'm sure she knows too.

"Perverts..."

Maria leaves the room after accusing us and enters a changing area nearby. The collective protests from everyone make me laugh, however, with a thought, I see her through the metal walls, but quickly change from it as I focus on something else. The speed with which this thing processes thought and information and action is unreal. I will have to be careful while I get used to it.

In about a minute, the now pony-tailed woman emerges from the change room and walks toward one of the DAWGs nearby. Her form-fitting flight suit, presents the perfect outline of her body and I can see why Akita was, and is still, so struck by her, then she steps into the cockpit seat thing in front of her and after a few seconds, disappears into the machine.

"Had a good look?"

There is no crackle of static over my com, just her voice as though in my head, as clear as crystal. This is awkward. Did she know that I peeked? However, I didn't. I looked away as soon as the thought crossed my mind and I realized that the computer had granted the unintended wish.

"What...? An outline of a translucent you and your ten million muscles and veins...? No, it wasn't a good look."

It's Akita. I should have known.

"You'll never change..."

"Why change a good thing?"

I cut in "Okay guys, let's get synced. Maria, do your thing."

With a jolt and a zillion images flashing past my Dees, we all merge in computerized minds and bodies. The Neural Link on these machines is similar to what I am accustomed to but larger and of more depth. How this is possible, I have no idea, but it goes beyond feeling the rest of the team...I am the team.

"Hey Maria...?"

"Yes Dachshund...?"

"...Ever owned a dog...a real dog?"

Everyone laughs with that last part and we all wait for the answer that will determine Maria's call sign.

"Not on Rouna, but on Earth when I was a little girl, we had a Great Dane..."

"Fellas..." It's Hound again "...Maria, new call sign, Great Dane, welcome to Iron five. Owwooooo...!"

The howling erupts across the comms and I join in. Maria laughs in the background and then she attempts to add to the noise.

"You guys are crazy..."

"That we are..." I answer.

"Alpha...?" Bull's voice comes plainly to me. "...when do we get our ammo?"

"Dane...?"

I wait for her response. The name works perfectly.

"The holding slots across from us. We stand in place there and select our arsenal, but one thing at a time. Let's see how well you Earthfront boys do with Galactic Nine technology."

We all scoff at this. Instinctively, I stand from my sitting position and feel the Mecha lift itself from the floor. I am thirty-five feet above ground according to my Dees and as I look to the left, unlike my Earthfront MAV, I see a robotic arm moving with my own as I flex, push and pull it physically.

The mechanized arm is like its counterpart, extending from a metal elbow with forearms in the form of heavy hitting Tricada Vulcan Auto-cannons. Tricada, according to the info on my Dees, is the leading weapons development company under the Galactic Nine, The GN's equivalent to the Tex's Auto-cannon.

I take a few steps. They are clumsy at first but I quickly develop a rhythm. Whatever I do with my body and mind, the machine copies it. It's like wearing mechanized body armor.

*I love it.*

\*\*\*\*\*

It has been an hour since my first step in my new Mecha but now, we are all standing in our flight suits outside of the DAWGs once again. We spent the last half hour weaponizing, programing and syncing, so much so, that even though this mission of ours is of utmost importance, I am as tired as any day in physical training. "*Side effects of the digital to mental connection*" is what Maria had said. "*We won't ever feel it while connected to our Machines, but once we leave them...*"

I pop another piece of chocolate into my mouth and savor the stimulation as my strength, and focus return more and more. Maria had broken out a few

boxes of nutrient bars and rejuvenation cocktails and to our delight, there were more than enough to stock up on.

“Okay, the Mecha are good to go...”

I admire the sleek design of my DAWG again.

Maria answers “Let’s hope that there’s a ship in the next hangar or we’ll be sleeping in these machines and no more.”

“Well there’s only one way to find out now isn’t there?”

Akita leads the way across the floor and into the only other hangar in sight. In it, a lone starship stands no less than fifty feet above us and it is definitely large enough to do the job.

“She’s not the most beautiful thing in the galaxy, but she’ll do.”

Maria slaps Akita across the back of his head for his comment

“*She* is the Cala and she *is* a beautiful ship.”

Rubbing the sting out of his skull and keeping a safe distance between them, Akita replies with mock Spanish accent “The question now is...does *She* still work?”

I answer before things get out of hand “Let’s find out.”

\*\*\*\*\*

The engines on the lone Starship rumble the Airdock with tremendous force. Everything seems to be in perfect working order and after a few mechanical fixes and the shifting around of some things; Maria has managed to get the five DAWGs onboard. The Cala however, has no defense mechanisms, not even one auto-cannon installed, so Vacuum warfare is an absolute no-no, but I doubt the possibility of meeting any hostiles in vacuum...at least I hope so.

“Okay let’s go over this one more time. Maria, where are we going?”

I shift in my seat at the communications console to get a better view of her as she turns toward me.

“We’re going to find Artac Nine. As long as it’s still there, I can get us to K1 undetected and without any problems.”

“Artac Nine...how long?”

“Not sure but if it’s where I think it’ll be, then give or take three hours.”

Artac Nine is a Galactic Nine, System Gate. Unlike Starports, System Gates have no docking facilities and remain fully operated by computers. Used by major planetary organizations or corporations, Jump Gates like Artac Nine often lie hidden in various Solar Systems with their locations and codes accessible only by ships affiliated with their owners.

Through my visor, I look at Maria as she prepares us for lift off. In an instant, I see Terri sitting there instead, and wonder what our current predicament would have been had he not betrayed us, but the blast of rain that hits the windshield as the hangar doors slide open breaks my train of thought.

Maria guides us out of the dock and the thick, moving mud currents below, steal my breath away. To fall into it would be a one-way ticket to the great beyond but she leaves the deck easily and takes us out of the large structure, over the tumultuous sea of absolute death and into the dense, raining air of Adula.

The ship tilts, accelerates and begins its climb. Through my window, a Starship, a Colossus Class Hauler judging by the size of it, is also beginning its lift off sequence. The tera-ton Eversteel Beast is all lights and uneven grooves that trace blinking lines along its impressive rectangular hull. The insignia across the stern is a sun and moon, the flag of New Zion; a System of wealthy worlds over twenty thousand light years from Sol. In another few moments, the behemoth vanishes amidst the rain and fog and so does Adula's mud ocean, replaced now by dense clouds that flash with wild lightning. The ship buckles in the turmoil but Maria holds the controls steady and after ten or so minutes of shaking and battering, this too fades away.

The glare of bright sunlight in the blue sky hits my visor as we break through the cloud cover. Then we rocket skyward, until dimness sets in, haze now, then darkness and the fuzzy looking orb behind grows distant as black space embraces us.

*What happened to you Terri? Why did you betray us? Did I do something wrong?*

My mind overloads with too many questions as a few tears threaten to spill from my eyes. The loss of my friend saddens me, but he left us to die at the hands of a Cyclone, yet he came to our rescue. Did he have a change of heart? Was his sacrifice, one of repentance...a clearing of his conscience? I would never know. I don't know what my emotions are. They are foreign to me. I miss my buddy, but I am hurt at the same time. I worry about his parents; they are better off no longer fooled by his charades.

*I wonder what awaits us on Keden.*

After we get there, we will have about thirty-five hours before Earth's forces arrive. *Is Mirana still alive? Have they captured her? Can I get to her? Am I leading my team on a suicide mission?* I push newer thoughts into my head and ignore the negatives. *If she's still alive, what if we can get in, get her and get out?*

I snap back to reality. The sights outside stretch and blur as we go to Hyper Light speed.



## CHAPTER 11 - KILLERS

Twenty-Two and a half hours before Iron Five leaves Adula

System: K1

Location: Keden, Dune Desert

Time: 0330 Hours Local

Base commander Mirana O'Canon hit the Eversteel floor hard and it felt like it had hit her back. Another explosion rocked the domed complex and brought more glass and Evercrete crashing down around her. What she had seen was madness and if it had not been by her own eyes, she might not have chosen to believe it.

Six of the strange looking Mecha, bearing Earthfront insignias surrounded the base while a seventh cut a deadly path through the outer and inner hangars, devastating everything in its sights. Nothing in Mirana's arsenal could have held their ground. Every MAV that engaged the unknown now laid in pieces, and the armored Tanks never even had the chance to fire a single shot. What puzzled her was that while the machines carried the Earthfront logo, the foot soldiers bore the red and black insignia of the Raiku Dynasty. The implication of this was mind blowing.

As Mirana dragged herself from the floor, she could still hear the two Auto-cannons of the killer in the distance. Everything and everyone was gone, save her and the frightened girl trailing behind. The men and women on her base, with their lives snuffed out in an instant, hung like a weight above her head. Guilt gripped her and bile rose into her throat but she forced it back; she would deal with that later.

Knowing she would never have made it to the starship in time, her orders across all coms were clear...leave without her, but as she ran across one of the upper corridors after escaping the control room, a blast of expanding energy shook the walls and shattered windows. She was powerless, and could only watch as the four hundred and fifty ton starship returned to the planet surface in a hail of fires and raining debris.

"Let's go!"

She yelled it to the scared girl on the floor. Twenty years old and fresh out of communications training

"We've got to keep moving."

Mirana had not long arrived on the ground floor level of the base, when she spotted the frozen cadet crouching beneath a broken table. The weight of her Tex's Semi-automatic M71 hung heavily on her shoulder but she ignored the temptation to be relieved of it. She had used it to end the lives of those wretched soldiers storming her base just over seven hours ago, just as her father had done when she was seventeen. He died saving her that day and she had

escaped because of it. The hostile takeover of her father's base on the moon of Karin eighteen years ago served as a reminder of how desperately wicked the hearts of men were and still are. They had tried to take her but she'd fought, the way he trained her to, and for it, they had marked her for life. Her scar was a permanent reminder.

*Richard Gant*

Why was he in her head? She knew that he had taken a good look on more than one occasion. What did it reveal to him? She chose yet again not to care. She had worn her mark proudly ever since that day.

Mirana looked at the scared girl and vowed to save her, even if it meant making the same sacrifice her father had. She and the men and women who had stood against these new invaders had done well, but then the machines came, and now only she remained. The thought of this cramped her throat but she pushed on until reaching the debriefing room. A pang of desperation lodged itself into her gut like a boulder. Her office was only a corner away, a mere hundred feet or so.

The complex shook violently again and the girl behind her stumbled but used the commanding officer's outstretched arm to regain her footing. The hammering had intensified. They were bringing the place down and the reason evaded all thought. She had been nothing but loyal to Earthfront, and a duty-minded soldier for Earth ever since she could remember. What could have caused this? Her mind drew a picture of the only possibility it could conjure. Gant...Captain, Richard Gant and his Iron Five. She knew deep down that somehow, somewhere in all this chaos, she would find them in the midst and right now, she hated him for it.

*That self-centered bastard...what right did he have to bring this on her...but what if she was wrong...what if he had nothing to do with it...? Why was she even thinking of him?*

She ran on feeling conflicted and to her relief, her office door appeared. The walls shook and the floor suddenly turned to jelly but Mirana launched herself inside and to the wall behind her desk. The girl, following, whimpered but her commander remained calm. She had to do this right the first time. Slowly, but deliberately, her fingers tapped out a sequence on the keypad behind her gold trimmed certificate. In a few seconds a hissing sound filled the room and a doorway, half on the floor, half on the wall opened and she grabbed the young recruit by the hand and bolted down the still aligning staircase.

The entire building shuddered and groaned as it began to cave in and when Mirana slapped her palm against the button at the base of the steps, the doors re-sealed and the last thing she saw outside it, was her office folding in on itself and then darkness encased them. She wasted no time and were up and moving, her Digital Eyes adjusting almost instantly.

*"Come on!"*

The girl snapped out of her trance and followed and they both ran on.

900 hours Dunan Time

Almost two days had passed since Mirana and her young escapee had fled the fallen base. They had relentlessly navigated the tunnels, eating old tasting MRE's from a bunker a half mile or so in and now she was hungry again. Though the young girl, Sari, according to their conversations, said nothing about it, Mirana knew that the craving was mutual.

"We're here..."

The girl was much calmer now. Her anxiety and fear had faded into nothing after eating, talking and rest but that was ten hours ago and now, as natural light made the tunnel ahead visible, Mirana could only hope that Sari's newfound courage would hold out.

"Is that it?"

The girl had an untainted innocence about her, in her eyes, in her voice that had no place in SysDef, let alone Earthfront.

"Yeah..."

Mirana had not been to Dunan in over two years. The City lay in the distance, ten miles and some, as shown on her Dees. The dusty outline of it rose in the center and reminded her of a mountain near her home back on Earth. As for Earth...she had not seen Earth for over seven years; her home and what was left of her family, an aunt, uncle and sister, was all that she had.

"How are we going to get there?"

Sari's voice brought Mirana back to reality. The part of the equation that she wished she didn't have to consider, but there was only one option, and although her body rebelled against it, her mind was resolute.

"Let's go..."

Mirana, with Sari's help, pushed the brown, rusted metal grate until it moved, creaking outward. Below them was nothing more than a four-foot drop where harsh winds had eroded a long gone dirt pathway. Above them was dust and sand, hardened into a natural roof, held up by strands of weathered, rock-solid dirt columns. It took five minutes to get clear of these shelters, which were actually the foot of the cliffs marking the edge of the Dune Desert. Then they began the long walk. A trip through the open plains of dry dust with only their station suits to keep them cool.

\*\*\*\*\*

An hour and twenty-eight minutes later, Mirana ignored the fact that they had just covered barely a quarter of the distance. If she were alone, the trip would have been a short one but this girl was tired and needed a reason to go on.

"Sari..."

Maybe if she got her talking, the trek might seem easier

“You said you were from Dullus?”

It took Sari a moment to acknowledge the question “Yes, I was born and raised there.”

“I’ve never been to that planet but I have heard of it. Is it nice there?”

“It’s great, if you love...”

Sari’s voice trailed off and as Mirana turned toward the growing sound, she understood why.

Across the landscape, and approaching fast, was what looked like two MAV’s, a Booster Tank and a Transport of some kind. They were on an intercept course and based on Mirana’s knowledge of military operations, she had no doubt that she and Sari had been spotted and were about to be picked up.

“Sari...?”

The Commander put her hand on the girl’s shoulder, making eye contact

“No matter what happens today, do not run. Let’s not give them a reason to harm us. If they pick us up, we’ll be okay and if not...”

The fear had returned to the innocent eyes but Mirana had to be real about the situation. She recalled her own fears when her father had shouted for his Aide to take her to safety. It was not the fear of losing her life, no, it was not that. She had feared that she would never see him again.

“If not...then tell the Galaxy that I defended my men with my life...”

There were no other words to say and Sari knew this much and their silence was now drowned out by the small convoy slowing to a halt.

Both MAV’s took up positions a few hundred feet out, between the SysDef women and the Dune Desert and what made it interesting, was the fact that the MAV’s were facing away from them. The Booster Tank however, swiveled its turret toward her. Its sleek tank frame and Fiber Steel Armor hung suspended from the ground. The Magnatech keeping the thirty-ton beast afloat whined while spreading dust and dirt out and away from under it.

Mirana’s M71 hung loose enough to have it ready in a flash, not that it would make a difference but for the time being, she held on to hope.

The Transport; a long, wide, hovering, aerodynamically sleek and reinforced vessel, touched the light-brown desert with a quake. The engines remained running while more dust fluttered out and around it, adding to the thickening haze created by the Booster Tank. Two very thin slits of Everglass in front of the caterpillar-like machine showed Mirana where the pilots sat.

*Did this thing have any weak points?*

Mirana knew the answer and it was a disappointing one. A slot in the side of the Caterpillar opened like a large wing and five soldiers stepped out. The first noticeable thing about them was that they had no helmets, but their heads and faces stayed hidden by the same material as their combat suits. She left her gun hanging and did not grip it or appear threatening in any way. According to Kedenian law, soldiers apprehending non-hostiles are to capture and hold. At

any rate, they either were about to become prisoners, or deported to Earth, but her heart hit a bump in her chest and she forced herself to take deep breaths. These were not Keden's ordinary soldiers. By the black insignia's on their battle suits, and Keden's large red K behind it, these were the Kedar...Keden's elite.

"Weapon down, on your knees, hands behind your heads!"

The gravelly voice reminded Mirana of her own and she hated it. When she first arrived, they had warned her about this, and that her suit's filters and whatnot would keep her safe, but after five years on a planet, habits form and precautions easily disappear.

The women did as the man commanded. Mirana watched his boot clad feet move behind them and felt a rough hand lift her effortlessly from her knees and shove her toward the transport. She heard Sari whimper, as she was shoved the same but remained calm; resistance would be foolish.

Mirana was approaching the wide doorway of the transport when gunfire erupted. She heard the unmistakable tumbling of Auto-cannons and familiar fizzles of rockets leaving their launchers. She grabbed Sari and shoved her ahead and away from the transport. It would be a death trap in there and their best bet was to get as far away from this battle as possible. The soldiers were now too busy to concern themselves with the women and as Mirana looked back, she saw one of them gesture for her to run, and then he and the transport exploded into a billion pieces.

\*\*\*\*\*

Mirana left the darkness and opened her eyes to a bright expanse of dusty air. Sari was shouting in her ear and explosions and gunfire erupted nearby. She saw the melted transport and remembered what had happened. The blast must have knocked her off her feet and thrown her to where she now lay. She allowed Sari to help her to her up and both women huddled together, powerless in the face of what was happening around them. What she saw now was imminent death. One of the strange looking Mecha that had attacked her base was here and by the looks of things, even though it was alone, it was winning this fight.

One Kedenian MAV was standing its ground while the other lay in ruins not far away. The Booster Tank was in full assault, tearing up chunks of desert as the driver maneuvered wildly to get a shot from below.

Sari screamed as the menacing Machine flew by no less than two hundred feet overhead in hot pursuit of its prey, bathing the women in a backwash of hot dust. Mirana looked on and her stomach sank. Up to this point, she had not panicked or given into fear but here, after the hope of escape had eluded her, all of her restraints gave way.

Her Father, where was he? Was he in heaven? Was there a heaven? Moreover, if there were, would she be there in a few minutes? How does one

get to heaven? She remembered going to church one Sunday, a very long time ago when the world made sense and her mother was still alive, a few months before she would pass away. Mirana must have been about seven, the pastor had said something relating to getting into heaven but it was all a blur now.

The Sol engines overhead shook her back to reality. This Kedenian pilot was good. He rolled, looped, and jinked his way out of his pursuer's claws but Mirana knew that it would only be a matter of time until the whole ordeal was over. The Booster Tank, keeping up its mad dashes made little impact on what was going on yet she had to admit, even in the face of annihilation, its driver was admirably persistent. Then it happened. The loud boom of missile meeting metal echoed overhead and the women watched as the stricken Kedenian MAV glided its way to the planet surface and crunched a deep groove in the dirt not too far away.

Mirana's heart planted a few punches squarely into her chest, as the man-like machine landed no less than eight hundred feet away. Even at this distance, it bore down on her like a towering beast, but the sound of the Booster Tank filled the air and she watched as it shot across the surface, toward its doom. The Unbeatable Mecha turned toward it and Mirana knew that when there were no more metal targets left, she and Sari would be next. The Monster lined up its prey and the Booster Tank fired futilely, then without warning, what must have been ten trails of missile exhausts suddenly appeared in the air above the enemy machine, and then the Invincible MAV exploded into a ball of crimson fire and flying pieces.

## CHAPTER 12 - BEHIND ENEMY LINES

Iron Five

System: K1

Time: 0600 Hours Dunan Local

20,000 Km from Atmospheric entry

We are flung out of hyperspace and the caramel colored Keden warps into view and takes shape. Our approach is not from the K1 Starport, but from a point in the Solar System given to us by the computer on Artac Nine. All of our warning systems go haywire.

"Guys we're locked up and it's not the Spaceport that's doing it..." Maria shouts this across the comms.

"We've got no weapons..." Bull is busy at his console trying to jam whatever it is that has us in its sights.

"Maria, get us out of here. Go to hyper..."

"Where...?"

"Anywhere...!"

"I can't. They've got us Magnet-blocked."

"Can we approach the planet?"

"Yes but not fast enough to escape."

"Get us as close as possible. You said the DAWGs could survive in vacuum?"

"Yes but the systems have never been fully tested."

"Well from the looks of this, we might be testing them real soon."

"Alpha...!"

"Akita...?"

"Look..."

We all turn toward what Akita is showing us and my breath leaves me. It's madness. Hundreds of Kedenian and Deepcore destroyers hang on the open side of the planet and one of them has its sights on us.

*"Starship Cala, you are entering restricted space and are ordered to surrender ship and crew. Keden Battle group Command requests Commanding officer ident and intentions. You have ten seconds to respond."*

I don't hesitate. It makes no sense to fight this "Starship Cala copies orders. Ident, Captain Richard Victor Gant and our intentions are non-hostile, I repeat, non-hostile. We are here to find and recover SysDef Base crew. I also request to know who has us in Magnetic Guidance..."

*"Battleship Nova Seven has you on link. You have ten seconds to surrender."*

"Request to speak with a commanding officer."

*"Request denied. You have seven seconds to comply."*

I kill the coms "Maria, get us to that planet. Bull, jam whatever they throw at us..." I turn to Hound and Akita "Hang on to somethin' boys..."

The ship shudders, as we break free of the Magnatech holding us. Unlike Spaceports, because of our distance from the battleship, we have the power to escape it.

"Alpha we've got incoming missiles" Akita confirms visually what we see on the Hologcreens.

"Maria, can we get into atmosphere?"

"I think so."

The Cala launches toward Keden and the first missile goes wide and detonates safely away. I turn just in time to see three more approaching and...

One...Two...Three

The Cala buckles and lists, and the crunching noises that I hear tell me that the ship is beginning to break apart.

"Get to the Gear!"

Frantic sounds of belts unclicking and bodies shuffling fill the cockpit. I get to the doorway and wait there while Akita, Hound, Maria and then Pitbull passes through. Without a second glance, I follow my team into the large hold behind the cockpit and run, drift, almost fall toward the opening DAWG. Then

the ship shakes violently and I lose my footing, but I reach out and Pitbull stops my fall. In a split second, I am back on my feet.

"Thanks..."

"Nothing to it Cap..."

I slide into the cockpit thing, The Brace, according to Maria, and let it suck me into the confinement of the machine. The systems come to life and I activate everything, from full offensive to total defensive modes.

"Maria...I hope you were right. Are we ready?"

There's no time left

"Let's go Cap and if not, it was an honor serving with you..."

Hound's words sink deep but Maria's fill the com now "Bullshit. You got me into this and now, you're going to get me out."

Another missile warning alerts me of our imminent doom. I lift my hands and see the robotic arms on my DAWG rise in front of me, both Vulcans beginning to spin. In my head, I select armor piercing rounds and squeeze both triggers with my index fingers. The side of the Cala tears up and disintegrates within seconds as I trace a destructive arc along it. The superheated streaks leaving my machine appear as of high-speed lights that carve and decimate everything in a whorl of sparks and smoke. Then as the intense decompression of oxygen suddenly meeting vacuum takes place "Go, go, go..." I yell it with all my heart and wait as everyone makes for freedom.

The last of the team gets to the crumbling opening and I disengage the clamps that keep my Gear in place. The sensation of the release mixed with the knowledge of the missiles about to strike, makes me push my legs like never before. I feel as though a foot is lodged somewhere in my stomach and as I make my run, the impact of the final few missiles hits me from behind and pushes my DAWG at odd angles away from the exploding ship.

The momentum carries me until I am a safe distance away, and then I shut down my thrusters, initiate the suit's Magnatech and everything stops spinning. The first thing I notice is the mixed brown of Keden below me. The caramel colored orb hangs in the black of space like a shiny marble.

"Status...?" I stabilize myself and look around.

"Bull, all good..."

"Akita's alive and kicking..."

"Hound is okay..."

"Maria is...Dane is okay..."

We need to get out of here now. The silent detonations in vacuum close to atmosphere draw my attention as the Cala splits apart and begins to drift in pieces at all angles. The front of it bends under while the center tears up into millions of burning particles. Then the stern bursts open, spinning slowly away from the blazing frame and toward us.

"Hou...lee...um Cap..."



I turn in the direction Akita is facing and the sight is incredible. From what my computer tells me, five hundred Raiku ships have appeared from hyperspace and immediately, the fireworks begin.

*What the hell is going on?*

“Alpha, let’s get out of here before we become space dust...”

“You’re right Hound. I’m on point. Team, follow through, tight formation let’s go!”

On the digital interface in front of me, I see many options outlined in translucent blue lines. I select what I need and think of entering Keden’s atmosphere and without realizing what I’ve done; the computer initiates the required sequence.

*“Atmospheric entry ninety eight percent success”*

“What the hell...? It talks. Dane, you didn’t say this thing talked...”

“I forgot about that...”

*Ninety-eight percent, that’s good enough for me.*

Picking up speed, we accelerate, pushing past five times the speed of sound and because we are all synced the rest of the team moves with me as I drop toward Keden. In a few minutes I approach the hazy aura of the planet and for the last time, look back at the muted battle raging above and behind us. The Raiku have clashed with the blockade and while the first wave is halfway through, more of the Dynasty forces are still arriving.

*This is a full-scaled invasion. In all my time, I’ve never seen anything like it.*

*“Atmospheric entry in five, four...”*

I focus on what’s beneath us as the computerized voice continues

*“...three, two...”*

Everything shakes

*“...one”*

The DAWG’s auto piloting system keeps me from tumbling uncontrollably and shuts the engine down. Keden is now a blur of light brown and red haze and we rocket downward at over ten times the speed of sound.

\*\*\*\*\*

“Alpha...” It’s Bull on the open channel. Even in atmosphere there is no static interference “...We’re on the outer edges of the Dune Desert. From what I’m picking up, there’s nothing at the base.”

“Copy that Bull...I’m still gonna check it out.”

“Gotcher back boss...”

His words carve furrows into my stomach. The thought of finding her dead is beyond me. I switch to manual command, then open up the menu on my HUD and select Air Operations. The machine responds and the sensation of freefalling takes over. I am no longer a passenger in a cockpit; I am now a man

flying in a suit and without much thought, push my head over, ask my engines for power and enter a burning dive.

The rest of the team follows. The Neural Link tells me we are all spread, five miles apart and my Dees indicate the ground at fifty thousand feet and closing.

Forty thousand feet

Thirty thousand

Twenty thousand

Ten thousand

I pull my head up and push my hands back to force the DAWG out of the fall. The engines scream and the heady rush flows through me like an overdose. The Mecha responds more like body armor and less like a Machine, Maria was right, it does whatever I do. We pass over the Dunescape by only a thousand feet and while the sandy hills zip past us, I see the base in the distance...what's left of it.

"Coming up on the Base, everyone, give me a full sweep."

I'm calm on the open channel. I've made up my mind to accept whatever there is to meet and in spite of the hollow feeling in my gut, there is still a flicker of hope.

"Roger that Alpha..."

"Damn, it's all gone...Huski are you seeing what's under all that rubble?" It's Akita in my ear now.

"Yeah..."

I ignore the lump in my throat. I've seen death before but this is ridiculous. Through the eyes of the onboard computer, the forms of dead bodies buried under tons of fallen steel and Evercrete is life changing. I will the DAWG to slow down and it does. The fallen Starship, and what is left of its passengers, appears in layers of lines connected to streaming data.

*This is tragic.*

"Those weren't Earthfront ships Alpha..."

"I know Akita...Something big is happening and we're flying blind in it."

"Yeah..." Bull joins us "...flying blind in a shit storm."

Between the Cyclones bearing Earthfront logos and an invasion of Raiku ships on Keden, it seems that Earthfront and the Dynasty have bigger plans for the Galaxy.

"So what's the plan?"

I take a second to reply to Akita "We go with the flow."

"Aye Cap"

Descending brings an unfamiliar sensation. If it weren't for the knowledge and memory of me climbing into this thing, I would believe entirely that it was my body, naked and flying around with guns and missiles somehow strapped to it.

"What happened here? What did this?"

Pitbull answers Hound before I can say anything "Cyclones..."

I look on as the last of us touch down on one of the dusty landing pads, my mind grasping for answers before asking my question. "How do you know?"

Pitbull's voice is steady and even. He is angry but in control, I know him enough by now to judge correctly.

"I'm picking up a Cyclone a few miles out. We can get to it if we try."

"Anyone got any live readings here? Because I'm getting nothing..." I take note of the time on my HUD. It's now oh-nine-hundred hours, Dunan time.

Maria, who has been silent for most of the trip, joins in "Negative Alpha..."

In fact, I haven't heard her speak since we escaped the ship in vacuum.

"Dane...?"

"Huski...?"

"...you alright...?"

"I'm okay Alpha, just pacing myself..."

"Okay lets go get that Cyclone and see what this sonofabitch is all about."

I open my vents for maximum push and as they burn hot, I jump into the sky and watch the ground fall away in the blink of an eye.

If this Cyclone is nearby, then where are the others? That Deepcore pilot had said that there were seven more. Either way, the dead of SysDef on Keden will be avenged today.

We are now edging past the speed of sound and as the sand and dunes of the desert flash by, I try to ignore the worry that's beginning to seep in.

Maria comes over the com "Alpha, I got a tally on the Cyclone..."

"Copy tally..." I see my target "...I got him too. Looks like we're crashing the party...weapons hot..."

I'm two miles out and slowing down quickly. The edge of the Dunescape is in view and what looks like a Kedenian MAV is battling an Earthfront Cyclone.

*That Ked pilot is good.*

The onboard computer alerts me of six life forms. I push the thought to a place somewhere in the back of my mind, keeping my focus on what is going on ahead. In a split second, the information races through me and my heart stops for a moment. I pick up the Kedenian pilot who's MAV is now slamming into to the ground but somehow, he has survived the crash. The enemy in the Cyclone is there also, along with the two crazies in the Booster Tank headed to their deaths. I turn my attention to the other two on foot...

"Alpha, are you getting this?"

"I see them Akita...going ballistic!"

I am seeing Mirana and a girl in my head as the super computer streams the battlefield information through me like a wildfire.

*How did she get out here?*

However, there is no time to waste. Switching to ground controls as I drop out of the sky, my tracking reticule locks on to the tin-man boasting the

Earthfront insignia. I think of my missiles, select ten Brimstones and without thinking twice, release them.

*I'm making sure this bastard doesn't come back.*

As my legs slam into the ground, the heat seekers trace an arc above the space between us and with a series of hollow booms and a vicious flash, the cyclone becomes nothing but a balloon of tumbling fire and bits and pieces of flying metal.

"Bull...weather...?"

"Clear and Sunny Alpha..."

"Let's get to them and when we do..." I'm already moving "...give me a defensive perimeter, and kill anything that shouldn't be there!"

"Copy that Cap..."

I find the communications linkup and activate the frequency find "Kedar Booster Tank, this is Iron Five Captain, Richard Gant and we are non-hostile...repeat, non-hostile. Request pilot ident and escort to Dunan do you copy?"

I wait a few seconds before he comes back "*Captain Asan Aseid copies Iron Five request and will be ready for escort when you are.*"

"Copy that. You guys go get your pilot from that wreckage and we'll keep eyes out for any more hostiles."

*"Will do Captain..."*

I approach Mirana and the girl. They are scared but the Base Commander stands defiantly still. I physically crouch and the DAWG does the same. In my head, I split the cockpit open and hear it depressurizing. The Brace lowers me to the dirt and the bright world outside my machine comes into literal view. With my feet on the desert floor, I remove my helmet and walk-run toward her. She is a mess. Her tight bun of hair is now loose and scattered across her shoulders. There is enough dirt on her skin to be noticeable even from this distance and her clothes are torn and ragged but I don't care; she is alive.

"Huski...?"

I like the look in her eyes but she is as shocked as she is, worn.

"Commander..." I salute and then nod to the young girl behind her.

"What are you doing here...?"

"I'll explain later..." *What in the Galaxy justifies me being here?* "...right now, we need to get you to safety. We're going to Dunan and when we get there, I'll let you know what's going on."

I turn my thoughts inward and find the Booster Tank then speak away from Mirana.

"Asan...?"

"Yes?"

"You got room in there for two more?"

*"We've got room in here for four more."*

"Good, come get these two ladies when you're done and then we'll be heading out..."

"...On our way."

The Booster Tank whines as it turns, a quarter mile away and begins coming to us.

"Captain, what are those, and where are your MAV's?"

"Those are Dynamic Automated War Gear..."

"Dogs...?" She utters with a smile.

"Yeah, Dogs, but there's no time for an explanation now. You two get in the Booster and we'll take it from there."

I keep an eye on her as she hustles away and thank God, she's alive. I want to tell her what I am feeling but I can't. It just doesn't fit and I know somehow that it is better this way.

## FACT

Bullets and missiles used in vacuum, all guided by Magnatech, explode and disintegrate on contact, or once they have achieved their maximum flight time. Laser cannons on the other hand are relics of the past that very few ships still carry. Since the dawn of particle absorption and laser redirection technology, the laser cannons of yester-year have all been scrapped and or confined to laboratories and mining equipment.

## A few months earlier

### MIND GAMES

Year: 878 TE

System: Sol

Planet: Neptune

Location: Kona base - Proteus

"Welcome Captain Andrews..."

"Hello Amanda."

A streamlined woman in a grey flight suit casually approached Terrier. They had met six months before, when he was first contacted by Earthfront command regarding their suspicions of Iron Five. She was the representative assigned to him when docked here, but that was bullshit...she was more his handler than a rep and even though he knew it, the circumstantial intimacy between them made it easier to live with.

She kissed him when she was sure that none of the few guards stationed throughout the facility were near, and led the way to a briefing room two levels below the moon's surface.

"Welcome Mr. Andrews...sit..." A heavysset man in a black flight suit gestured him to a seat on the opposite end of a large triangular table.

As Terrier sat, the man continued. "Let me get straight to the point. Iron Five has become a hindrance to our operation and must be discredited and destroyed..."

Terri took a moment to comprehend what the man was saying and when it registered, he jumped from his seat but was shoved firmly back into place as the pain of a thick, white hot syringe burrowed stomach cramping fingers into his neck and shoulders, between which the needle had been inserted.

"...this must be done quietly however, and to keep it below radar, we will need your team to start the ball rolling. We will break Iron Five apart from the inside..."

Terrier coughed as the massive soldier holding him down, released his grip "Why are you doing this?"

His head swam and he knew without a doubt that he would be dead, or worse, unconscious in a few seconds.

The man continued as though nothing had happened "Our cause is paramount and you, my friend, will be the man to lead our charge..."

"I will die before I betray my brothers..."

Terri's voice did not sound as his own. He slurred the words and felt his tongue roll around in his mouth.

"Don't you worry, my friend, everything will come in its own time. I will see to it that you are handled with care. You will be wiped and reprogrammed to carry out the necessary orders and when you have run your course, you will be *rewarded* accordingly. In the meantime, Gemini, see to it that his processing goes as planned."

Terri lolled his head toward his recent lover and felt the chill of horror flood through his bones. Even now, in the haze of her betrayal she had the gall to smile at him.

"By your orders sir."

And then the world around him faded away.

## CHAPTER 13 - CROSSROADS

Planet: Keden

Location: Dunan City

Time: 1030 Hours Dunan Local

We leave the large, blue and grey metallic landing pad where our DAWGs sit idle and walk across an open-to-the-sky bridge. On my right, A few MAV's in a small hangar are preparing for action and to the left is nothing. We are high above Dunan's metropolitan core and from here, the tops of every other Eversteel and glass building near and far are visible, which, now that I am this close, are actually all a part of one very large complex.

Connected at varying levels by way of enclosed passageways, they stand weather-beaten but proud. In every direction below, the buildings of steel, mostly stripped of their paint and painted symbols, reveal glints of their natural grey, giving the city an aged yet modern and otherworldly look.

The wind is gusty where I walk but not a problem. I hope Mirana is already on the inside. After we had left the battle site, our Booster Tank allies contacted their superiors and relayed my request to meet with their leaders. Our message was met with surprising willingness to co-operate, and the Booster Tank had parted ways after flying into Dunan about ten minutes ago.

Past the outer edges of the hazy city and appearing as a blur on the horizon, is the edge of the Dune Desert. It is funny...as much as I hated it here, SysDef's Base of Operations on Keden had unwittingly become my home and now, a sense of emptiness resides within, as though I have lost something dear to me.

Our armed escorts, five heavy Kedar Soldiers and a few light guards, lead us through an opening made up of three sliding doors. Two of these doors slip off to either side of the opening while the third disappears into the metal wall above. Our boots echo on the reflective floor and goose bumps ripple along my arms and neck as my combat suit filters the hot Kedenian air and cools my skin.

We enter the building. The outer world vanishes and we are now in a large room with a very high, richly decorated ceiling. I remove my helmet now that we are away from the harsh, dusty air outside and hear the clicking of the rest of the team doing the same. It's chilly and I take a deep breath of it...smells like winter air...tastes like it too...reminds me of my cabin back home on a crispy winter's night.

We follow our escorts through another set of sliding doors where the ceiling is lower, and then into a wide, blue carpeted hallway. Along its white walls broken up by brown doors, paintings of Kedenian landscapes, dawns, daylights, sunsets and nights, hang.

*The artist must be phenomenal, because these images look more like still-shots.*

As we walk, it occurs to me that they have put much thought into the decorations here. The paintings, hanging near plants in large brown pots by every door give the long passageway a welcoming and homey feel.

Ten doors later, at the end of the corridor, through the only set of double doors I have seen thus far, we enter a large semicircular room. The circular wall is made entirely of Everglass while the straight edge, behind us now, is all reflective metal. This gives the illusion of a larger space. The guards, along with our escorts remain outside and the doors close.

This room is perfect and reeks of high society and wealth, unlike the rest of what I generally know when it comes to Kedenian Interior Design. Thick, deep-red carpeting is wall to wall. Large and heavy drapes made of Kedenian Brocade hangs, pulled aside, at each end of the monstrous windows. Magnatech lamps hover several feet above the floor here-and-there and the massive, semi-circular Earth Oak table sitting in the midst of all this, along with its million-Credit-a-piece, Oak chairs completes the portrait. I take another drag of the purified air. It's a lot like the air in my suit.

"Gentlemen...Lady..."

I turn toward the rough but soft voice. A sleek, expensive looking woman in a black, full body pantsuit and grey, high cut military boots is walking toward us. Armed with guns in holsters on curvy hips, her long legs move in unison. Her upper body bulges in the right places while her long, black-jeweled neck leads to a slender and hard face...*Definitely not my type...*with her short, cropped, dark-green hair that stays rigidly in place. We make eye contact, and like the hair, green, they stare into mine. There is great intelligence there, the gift of discernment. In them, I see authority and the confidence of a good speaker.

"Lady..."

She acknowledges my response with a slight bow. It is a sign of great respect to refer to a woman here as "Lady" much like Ma'am back on Earth.

"Please have your seats. We will be with you shortly."

*Who is, we?*

I remain silent and simply acknowledge her words with a curt "Thank you."

We all take our seats as she leaves the room and Akita breaks the silence.

"Well Alpha, what do you think?"

"She's not my type..."

He smiles "You know what I mean..."

"I don't know. We're gonna have to play this by ear and see what happens."

The doors open and we all turn in that direction. Mirana O'Canon enters the room. Her tangle of red hair is now a ponytail and she has changed into a fresh combat suit.

She eyes us all and just before sitting..."Iron Five..."



She finds Maria; I see the question forming in her eyes and remember Terrier. I have been ignoring them but the mixed emotions are now back.

“Commander...”

She looks to me and I answer the unasked question.

“Terrier is dead.”

My own words sting and my stomach turns to knots but I keep it together as the expression on her face goes from questioning to understanding, to sorrow.

“I’m sorry...”

There is nothing more to say, not now at least. I’ll explain it to her when the time is right.

“Gentlemen...Ladies...”

The streamlined woman is back and this time, there are two men with her. One of these men, a giant with a strong, chiseled face stands on her right. He is a fierce looking man with fierce looking eyes and bulging arms that might crush an Aircar. The other man, on her left, is more sophisticated and elegant. His eyes, even with his tranquil exterior, are deceptive. There’s an animalistic cunning in them. He is a calculator, no doubt the brain of the outfit. I take in the ensemble; the Muscle, the Ambassador and the Brain; this should be interesting.

“Please...”

The woman motions for us to sit again and as we do, the three strangers take their seats. The table is semi-circular, like the room. We sit along the straight edge of it while our hosts sit near the middle of the curve opposite us; the Brain, in the middle, is on the largest chair. These must be Keden’s royalty. It feels strange to be here with them but then again, under the current circumstances...

The man in the middle speaks “SysDef Commander, Mirana O’Canon. Iron Five. Captain Richard Gant, Huski. Neil Valeno, the Akita. James McKee, Pitbull. Michael Reihgt, Dachshund. Miss Anna Maria Santina, what is *your* call-sign?”

It is impolite to speak to a Kedenian official if they have not directly interacted with or asked a question of you; one of the many iffy little rules and regulations that give me the unwavering resolve never to live here.

The man in the middle, with a flawless, full head of white hair hanging down his back, curves his thin lips into a smile and then Maria answers.

“Dane...Great Dane...”

He looks to me again “A shame what happened to Terrier?”

“He’s dead, there’s nothing more to say about it. May I ask with whom do we speak?”

They are visibly taken aback, but not for long, and the man in the middle speaks again.

"I am King, Al-Raadein Asaud Kedeni and this is my sister, Princess, Al-Shari and my brother...he puts a hand on the broad shoulder next to him...General Al-Jair..."

"We are the Tri-rulers of Keden, direct descendants of Amir and Sharai Kedeni. Forgive us if we bypass the usual etiquette and get directly to business. As you know, at this moment, Raiku forces are at war with our defenses on the outer perimeter of our planet's vacuum so time is of the essence..."

He just launches into it. I like that...straight to the point

"...Reinforcements are on their way but until then, we must hold off the invaders and prevent them from touching down planet side. After the events on Solace Five, you have proven yourselves friendly and willing to stand with us against our enemies. Along with recent intelligence reports we are now convinced that you are in no way allied with the Raiku, so I offer you a choice..."

"Wait a minute..." I cut him off "How do you know about Solace Five?"

"Mr. Gant, regardless of what you think you know...Sol is not the only system with a Galactic Spy Network. We know many things. Like the fact that Earth, just as Keden, is in danger of a hostile takeover. As a matter of fact, as we speak, Earth is now in full lock down and your esteemed brother-in-arms is at the helm of this treachery..."

"Brother...but how? Terri's dead."

"On the contrary Captain Gant, Terrier is alive..." He stops me from interrupting again with a raised palm and continues. "Hear us. Listen. You might learn something."

My instincts tell me that I need to shut up, so with a slight bow, I remain silent.

"...Huski, you are here to rescue your people, and we are here to save ours..." The sleek woman cuts in "Normally, we would not have graced you with our presence; however, given the current state of affairs, there is little room for protocol..."

*Appalling...* It's the only word I can think of. As if, we needed, or wanted to be "graced" by their presence, but she continues without falter.

"...We need your help..."

I think carefully before answering because this situation is as real as it gets.

"Explain..."

"It is as I said. We need you to help us in this fight..."

"And how would the five of us make much of a difference?"

Their leader joins in again "You have had firsthand experience with the Cyclones and you are very familiar with Earthfront technology and how it works."

What he is saying makes sense but it makes no difference either way. Iron Five has never set foot in a Cyclone and without Keden's assistance, we might as well just kiss Earth goodbye.

"We no longer have ties to Earthfront, which means that free access to their system no longer exists..." I shift my focus to the woman of the three "...If we are to remain here, to help Kedenian forces, we will most certainly need to be paid."

"Credits...Mr. Gant?" The Largest of them opens his mouth for the first time "...Surely you'll need more than Credits to save your home world?"

His words are a punch to the gut but I hold my ground.

"We'll cross that bridge when we get to it, but for now, it's either we get paid or you fight your war on your own..."

"And how, Captain Gant, are you going to leave without a ship?"

I give the muscle the best defiant look I can muster. It is obvious that he doesn't think much of me but this is fine, because the feeling is mutual.

"Five Earthfront soldiers and a Galactic Nine pilot...acquiring a ship will be the least of our challenges."

"We have strayed...gentlemen ..."

The Brain breaks the tension and activates a Hologscreen in the middle of the desk. General Hawk's mean face appears.

"Welcome, General Madison..."

"Greetings, King Al-Raadein...Princess Al-Shari...General Al-Jair. Commander O'Canon, it's good to see you alive and well. Iron Five..."

"General Hawk?"

"Huski, you and your team have caused me much trouble. Your flight from Rouna has made it very difficult for me to prove your innocence in all of this."

"Our innocence...?"

*What the hell is he talking about...?*

"You and your team have been under surveillance for some time now. Terrier's involvement with the Raiku made you all suspect. Were it not for our history Huski, I would not have given you the benefit of the doubt."

"What are you talking about? Neither of us knew about Terri's betrayal. All we know was that we got set up and an Earthfront Cyclone tried to kill us, then your assassins attacked us on Callican..."

"The assassins you speak of are not our own. Earthfront is as much a victim of the Raiku's actions as you are. Some time ago, Kedenian spies discovered a plot, conceived by General Hj'igori of the Raiku Dynasty, and implemented by Terrier..."

A knife carves its way through me as the truth rears its ugly head.

"...A plot in which he would help the Raiku to overthrow Keden and take control of K-One's resources, but in order to do this, they needed Earthfront out of the way..."

"The attack on us and the SysDef base of operations here..."

"No Captain Gant..." Al-Raadein rejoins us "...not an attack. The Raiku destroyed an Earthfront base on Venus and stole the Cyclone prototypes to make it appear as though we were responsible, breaching the Intersystem Peace

Accord and Deepcore, under the guise of pirates paid to move gold off world to Solace Five, were our way of determining the truth...but there's more...Toros..."

"Toros...?" It no longer surprises me how vast Kedenian Intelligence is. That was what they had paid him for...*fifty million Kays for services rendered*...Hard gold. His words echo through me "*Do me a favor my friend and leave this one alone*..." He was warning me.

"Yes, Toros...your contact did in fact arrange the delivery of the gold to Deepcore pirates. The same Pirates you were to track and kill. At the time, your commander thought them to be responsible for the Venus incident. However, the gold operation was just a front. It would help to facilitate the lie, making Deepcore appear to be terrorists working with our enemies...Earthfront, we thought also at the time. After confirming that the people who had employed them were in fact an elite group of Raiku operatives, Deepcore contacted us and along with Earth's Intelligence Network, we were able to put the puzzle together."

"So you're saying..." I cut in again "...that after Deepcore, a known pirate organization, realized they were helping the Raiku to overthrow Keden's leadership, they gave you a heads up? They were willing to smuggle your gold but not willing to help overthrow you?"

"No, they, with our authorization, carried out the smuggling runs in order to maintain their guise. You see, we needed more Intel..."

"So you let them do as planned, knowing fully well that we were being set up for an ambush?"

"You were enemies of the state. You had come to Keden to carry out illegal activities under Earthfront command and your association with Terrier placed you on our watch list..."

I understand what he is saying but I still don't like it.

"All I knew was that we were ordered to intercept and terminate a Deepcore fleet that had attacked an Earthfront base. Those were my orders and nothing more."

General Hawk cuts in "At the time we sent you on your mission, we had believed Keden to be responsible for the Venus assault. However, new Intel revealed that it was your very own who had led that attack."

"Hold on a minute..." I retaliate. "Terri might have been involved in all this but he was nowhere near the attack on Venus. How could he lead it? He was always..."

My words fail me. Embarrassment, betrayal, anger, sorrow...all play vicious games in my mind.

Hawk continues, "Terrier was on leave to see his mother, was he not? At least that is why he was on leave. Our investigations proved that he never set foot near her. Instead, Terrier led the assault, stole the Cyclones and made it appear to be the work of Deepcore. Even now, you fight to come to grips with

his betrayal, but facts are facts. The Pirates you were tracking were under orders to kill you when you found them, orders given by him. According to the plan, Deepcore was to take the gold to Solace Five and that would have been the end of their mission, but Terrier knew you well. He made sure that when you got there, assuming that you would have survived here, you'd meet the Cyclone and die by it."

"Well we're alive and kicking...there's hope."

"Captain Gant..." General Madison shifts his weight "...the leaders of every alliance on Earth are dead. Their assassinations were carried out simultaneously..." His look pierces me "...by Raiku assassins, defects from Earth who sell information to our enemies and that, my friend, is why there is a Raiku Battalion knocking at Keden's doors and an all-out siege happening right here on your home world."

"This is why we need your help..." Al-Raadein speaks now, turning his attention to Mirana "...That Cyclone tracked you in the desert. You bore witness to what they did on your base. You were the only witness left who could have exposed the Raiku before their intended assault."

"Excuse me...?" All eyes turn to Mirana "There were two of us..."

"No Commander, you were the only witness. The woman you were with was a Dynasty spy. Didn't it strike you as odd, that the Auto-cannons around your base did not engage the hostiles?"

I feel her distress. The look on Mirana's face is easily readable.

"Sari...? Then why didn't she kill me? She had more than enough opportunities to d..."

"Sari is not an assassin but was planted to relay sensitive information, shut down your defenses when the time came, and await further orders. Hers was with no doubt, to be the same fate as your base."

"Where is she?"

"She is in a holding cell and will be contained there until this is all over and she can be tried before a court of law."

I cut in. Sari's fate is of no concern to me.

"If we help you, we'll need our records cleared..." I make it obvious to Hawk that I'm addressing him also.

"Soldier..." He responds angrily "...you are still under Earthfront command and I urge you to remember that. Iron Five's new orders are to provide the requested support to Keden's forces and after Earthfront reinforcements arrive, get your asses to Earth ASAP. Do I make myself clear?"

"Yes Sir..."

Somehow, the highs and lows of this hand that I've been dealt aren't working out, no matter how I play them.

Keden's Leader stares into me and in his face; I see my father's glare. He would have looked at me when I was a child, the same way. A time so long ago

that it sometimes is no more than a blur. Times when I thought, I knew what was right but he knew better.

“Captain Gant, your service to Keden will guarantee a new leaf in our relationship. We will wipe your records clean and you will be honorary citizens of our world. I cannot however, speak for your superiors on Earth. Your fate with them is beyond our control.”

I gather my thoughts and pull myself together. This is bigger than any of us had imagined. Terrier has betrayed us, and the Raiku are about to usher in the apocalypse.

“Al-Raadein...Iron five is at your command.”

The tension in the room lifts. It's almost tangible. Beyond the Everglass wall behind Keden's royalty, the sun hangs halfway through its afternoon curve. The sky is clear and thoughts of what's happening beyond the haze out in vacuum fill my head with images of battleships and cruisers, some burning, others maneuvering and missiles tracking targets. We all know that the battle will eventually reach us here. We also know that the chances of victory against Dynasty forces are minimal but then again...

“Wait...” Everyone looks to me now “General. You said that reinforcements were on the way. How soon will they arrive?”

“Four Earthfront armadas are jumping to K1 and will be in your space in a little over sixteen hours.”

A loud crack, as though the heavens have literally split in two, rocks the room and shakes it with a quake that moves us from our seats. Guards rush through the doors and begin shuffling their leaders to safety. Long lines snap and crackle diagonally across the large window-wall, cutting it into gnarled sections, and then the City's air defenses come alive. Hundreds of fiery streaks trace lighted arcs across the desert and missiles leave vapor trails in their wakes.

Out and above the landscape beyond, a menacing Raiku Dreadnought peels away from the sky and descends to the dusty planet surface. Even from this distance, the red and black Logo on its hull boldly stands out.

“They won't bomb Dunan...too much to lose...they'll need the place intact. The rest of the fleet won't descend anywhere near the city's air defense limits. That Dreadnaught is just testing your limitations. So prepare your troops Al-Raadein, this battle is going to be up close and personal.”

The King looks back to me as guards hustle the three leaders to the exit.

“Get to your armor and await orders...”

These are his last words before vanishing through the door. The Hologram image of Hawk flickers and sputters, drawing my attention. “Good luck Iron Five.” Then it is gone.

“Iron five...” I find Mirana “...Get to the gear and wait for me...”

“Aye Cap...”

Pitbull acknowledges the command and leads the rest of the team out of the conference room and into the hallway. Akita gives me a questioning look but keeps moving, and now I think carefully before I speak.

"Commander..." I walk toward her and there is a slight shift in her stance "...you need to get to safety..." I am close enough to smell the metallic odor of her flight suit.

"...let's face it, we are about to go to war. We might not come back..."

"I won't run and hide Huski. They killed everyone one on my base..."

"Commander..." The stubborn look on her face makes me refrain from continuing. I have no choice but to accept her decision "...How do you intend to fight?"

"I'm a qualified pilot with over ten thousand hours logged. I know my way around a MAV well enough."

"Okay Commander, let's go..."

"Huski, call me Mirana..."

There is a spark between us but it does not last long enough for me to do what my mind tells me to do, so I nod and turn away.

"And Alpha..." I turn to her again, "...you have to come back..."

I wish this moment existed in another time, even if it was the same place. I want to kiss her but instead, I nod with a smile, it is the best that I can do with what little time we have left.

## CHAPTER 14 - DAWGS

1358 hours Dunan time

We run through the outer doorway and onto the open bridge that will take me to my DAWG and Mirana, to her MAV. The guard assigned to us leads her to the hangar across another bridge-way and I watch until she disappears indoors.

The air is stifling...too much dust. *How do Keds live in this?*

I shove my helmet on, suck in a deep breath of the pure air and move toward my waiting machine.

"Alpha..."

"Hound..?"

But his words are cut short as a peeling clap of thunder shakes the platform under my feet making me stumble. Regaining my footing, I look out across the desert. The Dreadnaught, minutes from touching down, explodes and begins to disintegrate as hundreds of long-range heavy missiles continually tear into it. The sound of the titanic battleship breaking up, is like mountain sized boulders being split apart and grinding against each other.

“Alpha I’m beginning to think we should not be on this ledge...”

Akita is right, so I run to the opening cockpit and while I slide into the brace, the onboard computer tells me that Mirana’s MAV is now walking out of her hangar. The world around me goes black for a moment as I am sucked into the DAWG and synced up. In that split second of suffocation and nothingness, I feel the Neural Link joining me to the rest of my team. Everything is at my mind’s disposal now. I open my eyes from my new height and instantly, before the thought barely registers, I connect with the Commander.

“Mirana...you with us..?”

Two seconds pass and “Yeah I’m with you...”

Her voice is a bit muted. The Kedenian mechanics that interacts with our Galactic Nine Technology creates a slight rift in our connection. She sounds a bit nervous. I want to ask if she’s sure about going through with this, but I don’t. Yet I can’t help but worry. I have never thought of her as a MAV pilot but then again, no one gets to be Commander of any Earthfront base unless fully trained in combat and combat operations.

I think it and my DAWG links up with her. In a few seconds, her Neural is connected to ours and now I feel her, somewhere in my gut; at least it seems that way.

“Okay guys, look alive...”

I open the digital menu and select ground and air combat

“...Let’s get low for a while, five hundred on deck...on me.”

In my head, my engines burn for liftoff and in reality, so does the DAWG. I jump and it does the same. The vertigo brings a natural high while the city of Dunan dangles below, but I break free of Keden’s gravity, push into the air, over the edge of the landing pad, and down to five hundred feet above immediate ground level.

“Dunan Control, Captain Richard Gant requesting linkup and relay to General, Al-Jair.”

A rusty male voice comes back after a second or two.

“Iron-Five, you have linkup and are to report to General Al-Jair at the Forward Command Center on Nalas. Squawk code is, nine-nine-four-two-five-zero.”

“Copy, report to Nalas with squawk nine-nine-four-two-five-zero. We’re on our way.”

The com goes quiet and instantly an image of Dunan’s landscape flashes through my head as the computer sends the information in a millisecond.

“Okay team...tight formation. Let’s stay five on deck and bullet to location on link. Speed sync-up in five, four...”

And as we synchronize our thrusters for formation flying, I feel the other Mecha in my group increase in power and with relief, Mirana is right on the ball with us.



“...three...” I lean forward and the team follows “...two...” I am aware of my heart hitting my chest, one thump after the next, with the whine of my engines about to blast off “...one!”

My DAWG jumps into flight and I’m pushed forward weirdly as the cushy interior holds my body firmly in place.

We rocket toward Nalas; an Island base, twenty miles from the shoreline of the Minera, Keden’s ocean-lake and the only body of water on the entire planet.

“Huski...” Pitbull is on the com “...I’m picking up a dozen battle cruisers entering atmosphere. Their projected drop-zone is forty clicks south east of us.”

“They’ll most likely set up shop there. The sooner we get to Nalas, the better.” I reply.

An indicator in the lower right of my sights tells me that we are on course at two hundred miles per hour.

*How did General Al-Jair get out there so fast?*

The onboard computer projects our time of arrival somewhere in the back of my skull and based on the way the information feels, we will be there in ten minutes.

“Mirana...”

“Huski...”

“How’re you doing?”

“I’m keeping pace if that’s what you mean...”

“Yeah that’s what I mean. Do you have a call sign?”

“Yeah, they used to call me Gunner back in flight school...”

“Gunner..?”

“...to do with my last name”

“Iron Five...we’ve got a Tag-along...Call sign, Gunner... Owwooooo...!”

“Hilarious...” There is laughter in Mirana’s voice.

“Okay Gunner, stick close to us and be ready for anything.”

“Roger that Alpha...”

She is not an official part of Iron Five but I like the thought of her being with us. At least this way I can keep an eye on her. We blast past the shoreline and are now over the open lake. I look down at the crystal clear water. Keden’s ocean lake is entirely made up of mineral water. It is the only body of water on the planet and all of Keden’s water supply comes from here, be it by direct pumping or deep wells along the coast.

“Boss...” Its hound and he’s on a secure channel. He has said very little thus far so I’m a bit anxious to hear what’s on his mind.

“Hound..?”

“Let’s do this for Terrier...”

“Terrier betrayed us...”

Hound comes back as though he’d been rehearsing it all day “They must have brain wiped and re-informed his mind. Think about it Alpha...we’ve all known him long enough and you, better than any of us.”

"I don't know Hound. I don't know what to think anymore."

"All I know is that I feel it in my gut, and I always trust my gut."

I have mixed feelings about this, and the funny thing is that I can't put a finger on any of them. It is like a jumbled mass of unrecognized emotions flooding me.

"We'll see how it goes Hound..."

The communication ends and the rest of my thoughts go with it as I see the island. It is actually one very huge, flat, grey rock formation with a few patches of shrubbery here and there. The base is in sight too. Blending into the surroundings, it is an interconnected rectangular Evercrete complex with runways and landing pads everywhere.

"Nalas Command...Iron Five on approach, request guidance on link. Approach code, nine-nine-four-two-five-zero"

*"Iron-Five, you are cleared for approach. You have guidance. Follow digital to Landing Zone four and contact on touchdown."*

Other than Keden's royalty, this is the first clean Kedenian voice I've heard in a while. He is either always indoors or always wearing face-gear.

"Roger that Base..."

I open up every speed-brake on the machine and let the Magnatech do the rest. The sensation dazes me slightly but is nothing to worry about. The team does the same and I stay on course along the computer generated lines that will lead us to Landing Zone four.

We pass over an Evercrete runway and drop to twenty feet above it. Approaching the designated landing-pad, I notice many Hover Tanks and a weapons carrier parked nearby. Almost every landing zone and runway has MAV's and Sky Fighters in motion, at the ready and on standby, but I soon forget what I see outside and concentrate on landing this thing. With a slight thud, Iron Five touches down and I let the cockpit lower and spit me out. There is no time to waste.

Walking briskly toward our escort, I am aware of the rest of my team behind and on either side of me. I return the salute of a young, wild eyed lieutenant and follow him into the center of the hangar where twenty or more Holograms illuminate the space. General Al-Jair is standing on a raised platform in the midst of the Holograms, and lined up in groups below and around him is a few hundred of Keden's Elite.

"Welcome Iron Five...fall in. The situation is, as you see here, Jackal one, Jackal two and here, Jackal three..." He manipulates the screens so they show us what he wants us to see "Three Raiku battalions have entered Kedenian airspace and set up bases on three fronts outside of Dunan..."

The Holograms show us enlarged satellite images of the enemy ships and their positions along with live streaming visuals from drone flybys.

"...They will hold their locations until all of their battle groups have landed, by which time, Dunan would have been boxed in on all fronts. Our

objectives therefore, are to stop this from happening. We have a defensive line with a thousand forward command posts on the borderlands outside the city. It is our first line of defense so we cannot let them overrun the lines and converge on Dunan.

Objective one: I will lead Raider One in a concentrated attack on Jackal three. It is the best strategically placed outpost of the Dynasty's forces thus far. Raider two..."

I find the unit he's referring to, about a hundred men and women on my right

"...You will proceed to outpost Two Six and clear the air around Jackal Two. Dunan has been evacuated and so have the surrounding towns and villages. Our heavy missiles and Hunters are doing damage but not enough. Iron Five..."

I acknowledge him and await our fate.

"...While we push their deployed forces back, you are to advance and take out their Command Platform. Each battalion has one of these and if we can destroy the platforms, we will scatter their units. You are to also keep a lookout for any Cyclone activity. Go after them once you make contact. The Cyclones are your primary responsibility. You may request assistance when engaging them but they are your sole purpose outside of the platforms."

I remember fighting one Cyclone and not being able to even dent it, but that was before, and that was with a light MAV. This time however, I'll be more than ready.

The General is still speaking "...Re-loading will be done via Hawk, in flight. Co-ordinates will be given as you go..."

The Hawk he is speaking of is a High Altitude Weapons Carrier; HAWC.

"...And when we have destroyed these three command posts, you will receive further orders...Men..." The General's voice is louder now "...through vicious trickery, these Raiku Dogs have come to take our resources. But by our triggers, let us give them hell!"

The army around us erupts in cheers and shouts and Al-Jair goes on. "...Fly brave!"

The men and women in flight-suits everywhere shout in return. "Fly strong!"

The General can barely be heard now as he issues his final words.

"Gear up and await launch!"

There is nothing to do but go back to our machines and prepare. As I exit the hangar and my Dee's adjust to suit the extra-bright sunlight out in the middle of nowhere, a heavy hand palms my shoulder and I spin around to see the General standing close.

"Fly brave, my brother..."

With all hostilities aside, I smile in return. This is their custom. A blessing before the battle and so I place my hand on his shoulder all the same "Fly strong General..."

And with a nod he releases me and walks off to his Mecha.

\*\*\*\*\*

1443 hours Dunan Time

We are in the air and moving south-west across the Minera at the speed of sound, twenty one thousand feet above the sparkling water. We will be approaching Jackal Three, high and from the west. They would have already picked us up even with our Lizard Skin Tech but this is not a problem. This battle is inevitable and stealth is of no use.

Anxiety mixed in with the calm before the storm, doesn't hit true this time as it often does; at least for me that is. It's strange, the way I'm focused on what is to be done while thoughts of Mirana and her Kedenian MAV linger in my head. I hope to God that she can keep up in that thing. I listen to the chatter over the coms and smile as Hound retaliates and fires a nice response to Akita's taunting. It's good to hear the team in good spirits again.

I check my weapons. Three hundred Cats; short for Catalysts, these missiles bring the heat; enough heat to incinerate a Heavy Mecha in a second. I have also got four hundred thousand rounds of tracers, fifty pops of Chaff and Magnetic Decoys, and two Supernova Heavy missiles. The Supernovas are there to add the finishing touch to our primary target; the Raiku Weapons Platform.

"Okay guys...Coast line in twenty seconds. Kill the chatter. We're now weapons hot and five minutes from the fireworks, ready up..."

Akita now "Aye-aye Cap..."

I continue "Remember...anyone pick up any Cyclone activity, do not engage alone..."

Pitbull joins in "Copy that Alpha..."

"We'll take it down to angels fourteen and do a three-way split. Help the General clear the air and then meet up at our point of entry..."

"What about me?" Mirana now.

"Three-way split means three teams of two. You're with me."

"Copy that Alpha"

"...Now we came as Iron Five, so we're leaving as Iron Five. I don't want any heroics. We stick together and bring the rain on these Cyclone bastards...are we clear?"

"Clear as air boss..." Akita once more.

We rip past the shoreline of the lake and the dusty expanse of the Jeraka, Keden's Mineral Desert, slips by far below.

"Gunner?" I connect with Mirana's MAV on a secure link.

"Huski..."

"You ready for this?"

"As ready as I'll ever be."

I like her voice. The idea of her life being in my hands is a bit unnerving and I wish that she was piloting a DAWG instead of a Ked Mecha. At least she has a few Catalysts on board. I still see Terrier's machine in pieces on the ice. I can't help the flashbacks.

*I'll be damned if I let that become her fate...or anyone else's*

"Keep your eyes open and stick with me..."

"Alpha...I'll be okay."

Pitbull cuts in on our open channel "Alpha, we've got hostiles five miles out and closing at angel's fifteen..."

"I've got tally..." Dane confirms it "...Flight of eight coming in hot..."

The computer shows me the eight MAV's, Light-Class, heading our way at fifteen thousand feet.

"Well, let's introduce ourselves...weapons free, light em' up!"

"Cat one..." Maria alerts us of her missile launch "Cat two...Cat three..."

*Damn she's out for blood.*

I lock-on to two Raiku MAV's headed my way. Warnings of missile launches flash in my head but my tracers cut them down in no time. In the background of everything going on, I hear my Vulcans roaring. The barrels, at one hundred rotations per second, sends streaks of superheated, armor piercing rounds toward my enemies and shreds the first machine into a million particles of twisted, jagged metal shards.

Flying by what is left of the wreckage at over six hundred miles per hour, it disappears off to my side and I rotate my torso and enter backward flight...

*Feels like ice skating*

...as I lean to the left and force the machine into a hard high-gravity turn. The sensations of flying like this takes my breath away and I make every effort to remain focused as the engines scream to give me the power I desire.

I raise my hands while tracking my prey, still flying backward, and the robotic arms on my DAWG move with me. The second MAV is in my sights, I squeeze the trigger and the evasive Mecha takes a few hits before exploding into a cloud of flying parts and burning dust.

"Gunner has tally on objective...ten miles. Alpha, call it"

Mirana is suddenly on coms. She's excited.

I run a mental scan and in a millisecond, the onboard AI tells me that there are no more hostiles in our space.

"Wedge formation, sync up..."

The Command Platform is now in sight. I lean forward and enter a steep dive. The ground dangles eighteen thousand feet below, one eye filling, brown, barren platter of sand and dust.

I tear out of the dive at fourteen thousand feet and hear-feel the enemy tracking and targeting systems reaching out to me. At this altitude I see, digitally enhanced, as far as the other battalion, code named Jackal two, a hundred miles away, but warnings of incoming Sky-fighters draw my eyes to what's happening below. The Weapons Complex here, Jackal Three, is nothing more than a grey, mile wide, disk shaped saucer with the red and black, Raiku emblem on its upper surface. It is like a hive surrounded by angry bees and some of those bees are headed our way. The airwaves light up with mad chatter and in the distance, General Al-Jair and his forces have engaged the hostiles and the war has now begun.

"Okay guys, angels fourteen and three-way split. Rendezvous at point of entry..."

I drop off to the left and feel Mirana move with me. The rest of the team splits away and my AI alerts me of a group of Sky-fighters inbound at two thousand feet and rising. They are coming in at the speed of sound, loaded with hammerheads and armour piercing rounds.

"Gunner...it's gonna be a close quarters..."

"Not a problem. I love a good gunfight..."

"Target Sync and let's go suicidal."

"Syncing..."

I cut the communication as my targeting module automatically selects three of the five incoming hostiles. Mirana's MAV would have already locked on to the other two by now, so I roll over and enter an insane plunge at over a thousand miles per hour.

Mirana's voice comes over the com "...Cat one!"

"Gunner what are you doing..?"

"One of my targets has me locked...I'm not gonna give him a chance to fire!"

"...just watch the missiles up here. We're close quarters..."

"Copy that..."

The dive is incredible. All of my muscles and tendons, everything, right down to my bones, have come together to form a runaway freight train in my chest and throat. My head drifts in the moment as the Minera Desert rushes up to meet me.

Ten thousand feet

Nine thousand feet

Eight thousand feet

I squeeze off the first round and my tracking computer steers the flow of red hot streaks away from me and into the first of the three Sky-fighters, devastating it in an instant.

*Speed brakes...*

The thought brings the desired reaction and I spin with the passing fighter, guns rattling and ripping him to shreds. The third target turns hard to get a bearing on me.

"Cat one!"

I unleash the missile and watch it track and kill my opponent. Instantly I turn my attention to Mirana but the mental flash that comes shows her a mile away and returning without any hostiles. I must say...she's impressive.

*What the hell?*

Every warning light comes alive in my cockpit and the AI burns the image of a Cyclone to my eyes, imprinting it in my head. He is ten miles away but moving fast and if I head south-east, we will intersect in forty seconds.

"Iron Five..." I open our secure com "...Alpha team has Cyclone visual...engaging...need lookout for others..."

Akita and Dane comes back "Copy that Alpha..."

Then Pitbull and Hound "Gotcha Boss..."

"Gunner..."

"I'm on you at a hundred oh'..."

Mirana is thousand feet above and behind me so I have room to play. My systems indicate the Cyclone locking me up with its missiles but I push toward it.

"Gunner..?"

"Alpha..?"

"Keep your distance, and eyes open..."

"Copy..."

Our rate of closure is too fast so our missile battle is now a gun fight. The Cyclone slices by me at seven hundred miles per hour, guns blazing. We both turn at odd angles, trying to get a bead. Scratch that...our battle is now a knife fight. The engines on his machine light up. He knows that I have the kill shot, so while I take aim, he skyrockets and I follow a split second later.

He has gained some distance and altitude but I still have him in my sights. My altimeter runs through the numbers. The Cyclone rolls over at twenty five thousand feet and launches under me, trying to get behind, but I am not the helpless MAV pilot back on Solace anymore. I turn with his maneuver and open fire. Arcs of red hot metal, trace a path in the sky between us but he is running so I take off after him and we break the sound barrier, twice.

"Alpha I'm having trouble following you and now I'm dancing with a Sky-fighter and a MAV..." Mirana is worried but focused.

"Can you handle them?"

"I'll be with you in a sec..."

I like her attitude "Then do what you must. I've got this. Meet up with the rest of the team when you're done and clear the air..."

"Copy..."

She didn't question me or hesitate; impressive again.

"Akita..?"

"Alpha..?"

"Get up here!"

"On my way..."

This Raiku pilot is good...and fast...but my mind is quicker. I see what he's about to do and in this instant, as his air brakes begin to deploy, the onboard AI reads my mind and my DAWG's Magnatech kicks in, slowing me down to a crawl in a matter of seconds. My insides become like liquid and then compresses but I stifle the urge to vomit. The Cyclone, slowing rapidly, no more than fifty feet away is like a blur to me. The effects of this flight is demanding as I stop, move to the right, arms up, guns online, he's turning, I squeeze both triggers...

*RHEEEEEEEEEEEEE!*

My Vulcans revolve and the Cyclone takes the hits until there's nothing left for its pilot to do. He ejects, twenty five thousand feet above Keden, but the DAWG's auto tracking system sees him as hostile and turns the helpless Earther into spray and vapor.

*"Target critical...proximity warning...target critical in four...three..."*

My DAWG's computerized voice echoes in my ear. I let go of the Magnatech holding me in place and cringe as my stomach reaches through my throat and I drop out of the sky, roll over onto my back and push for maximum thrust. It is the quickest way I know to escape the blast. The falling Cyclone above breaks apart and mentally, I shut of the Vulcans still tearing into it. The shockwaves from the explosion shake me but I am clear, and the once sleek machine becomes a brilliant ball of fire and burning, spinning parts.

"Alpha!"

"Akita?"

"I'm in trouble. Cyclone on my six, I can't shake him, help me!"

"Hang on buddy!"

Desperation is in my voice and Terrier's MAV in pieces on the ice, is in my eye.

"Iron Five...Get that bastard off Akita!"

"It's a full court press boss. We've got incoming Cyclones too!" Bull comes through first.

"Mirana..."

"Huski..."

"How are you on ammo?"

"Low but I'm coming to you..."

"No...get to the Weapons Carrier and wait for us!"

She pauses, only for a split second and then "Don't keep me waiting..."

"I'll be there, go!"



This is not good. There are six of those bastards and six of us, one of which is no match in this fight. We've destroyed three so far and added to the six that are here right now, that leaves one unaccounted for.

*Terri, where are you, you bastard?*

I think of Akita and the tracking system finds him thirty miles away at three thousand feet above ground. I fall from the sky head first and ask the AI for more power; and my DAWG responds.

*Mach one...I push for more...Mach two...Faster...Mach three...I'm sixty seconds away, ten thousand feet and leveled out.*

*"Alpha..." It's Pitbull "...got a breakaway, I think he's tracking you..."*

I maintain my mad dash toward Akita and scan the skies for the incoming Cyclone. The Computer shows me what I am looking for like the blink of an eye and its speed, altitude, angle of approach and arsenal, embeds into my brain like a leech.

*"Bull, can you get it?"*

*"Would love to Cap, but we're two on two right now..."*

*"Dane?"*

*"Estoy tratando pero estoy demasiado lejos!"*

*"Keep coming to us..."*

By the looks of it, I have a minute-and-some to kill Akita's pursuer if I want to be ready for the demon behind me.

*"Akita, I'm on my way, hang on..."*

*"I'm hanging!"*

His guns are blazing in the background. He is backwards flying. I slow to suit the rate of approach as the distance between us closes in seconds. I boost my Magnatech to full power and resist the vomit once again; I doubt that I can fight it a third time. The Cyclone is on Akita like lightning, jinking and turning with him like it was nothing, but I am here, four hundred feet behind, six hundred above and closing still. Images of my battle on Solace Five flicker in and out of sight but I push them away. My weapons system locks on to him but the enemy drops to the desert floor and makes his final line-up on Akita. If I don't do something soon, Akita will be battling, God-knows-how-many missiles.

The enemy is seconds away from launching while the brown dusty ground rushes up to meet me. I hit the dirt running, plant one foot forward and the other behind, I have got to be steady, raise both arms, focus, and open fire.

The hyper-rattle of both Vulcans erupting fill the air as I release a barrage of twenty Catalysts that streak away and toward the Earthfront Mecha five hundred feet out. I may have overdone it with this attack. My enemy rotates in my direction and my Dees immediately adapt to the wicked glare that expands and blossoms into a mushroom of superheated death and again, my warning systems come alive.

I turn in time to see another Cyclone on the ground a hundred feet away, Auto-cannon spitting at me. My armor takes the hits but I am going to have to do something about it soon or he will tear into me.

*"...missile lock...missile launch imminent..."* The computerized voice assails me with the warning, but...One...two...three...four...five...six...seven...and still more Catalysts rain down on him as bullets slice through his armor, reducing the advanced technology to bent, twisted, burning and torn apart scrap metal. The Mecha bursts open in a hail of fire and debris.

"Whoooooow!" Mirana flies by and leaves a row of rising dust in her wake.

"Nice save Gunner..."

"Anytime Alpha..."

"I thought I was supposed to meet you on the Hawk?"

My DAWG lifts me into the air and I join her as she comes around for another low level fly-by.

"I owed you one..."

"Iron Five..."

Akita is first in my ear "Alpha..."

Pitbull now "On our way boss..."

"Estoy Aqui..."

"Get down here..." I switch to Mirana "Gunner..?"

"Alpha..?"

"Get to the Hawk, re-load and wait for us there..."

"Copy that..."

I watch her peel away from our holding pattern, gain altitude and shrink to a dot in the brown sky. Through the Neural, I get a flash of my team approaching and after we are all in sync, I take us to a thousand feet at the speed of sound. With the majority of the Cyclones out of the way, we might actually have a fighting chance.

"Okay guys, there's no room for error here. I'm on point, Pitbull and Akita, you're the second wave. Hound, Dane, you guys finish what we're about to start."

"Boss...I have visual on Jackal Three..."

"I see it Bull, follow me in and let's do it clean the first time..."

I accelerate and lead the team to three hundred feet above Immediate Ground Level. The desert floor whipping by, looks like a never ending smudge as we close in on our target.

"Raider One..."

The onboard computer projects Al-Jair's call-sign and his voice hits me like a slap in the ear. He is in combat. I can tell by the wildness in his words and the chatter-chatter of gunfire behind them.

*"Alpha I have you on scan, bring the fire!"*

"Clear out..."

*"Copy, clear-out..."*

We rush toward the monster saucer with sixty seconds to impact and at the speed of thought, I select my Supernova's, launch them both, and climb into the heavens like a rocket.

Keden's dirt floor shrinks within seconds and the indicator passes two thousand miles per hour as the first heavy missile detonates, and one by one the rest of my team deliver their blows.

At fifteen thousand feet, I roll over as the rapidly rising and churning cloud of fire and smoke erupts. The Raiku Command Platform breaks apart and crumbles to the desert floor, all of their aircraft and ground troops either surrendering, being blown up or high-tailing it to the next platform a hundred miles away.

I go to open-communications now *"Iron Five. Angels twenty, form up on me..."*

*"Aye Captain..."*

I rise to twenty thousand feet and we head off toward the Minera. Then, stepping up to twenty five thousand feet, I connect to our Forward Command Center.

*"Nalas Command..."*

*"Captain Gant, Nalas Command has you on link, what's your status?"*

*"Low on firepower and need re-load..."*

*"Track Hawk at angels forty, locale is being uploaded to you...now."*

*"Copy, Hawk is Angels forty and location is received...Iron Five on our way."*

We take our flight to forty thousand feet and the expanse of Keden, like a light-brown desert map, spreads out beneath us. The HAWC is two hundred miles away and we will be there in five minutes.

*"Iron Five, Hawk has you on approach vector, you have guidance on link. Go auto and reduce speed to three hundred and twenty, over..."*

The voice is female and sounds like her throat is made of sand paper.

*"Iron Five copies guidance..."*

I slow to three hundred and twenty miles per hour and give control to the autopilot.

*"...Hawk, you have control."*

*"Roger that Iron Five. Re-load is twenty seconds after dock-up. Remain inside your machines. Await clearance and coordinates before undock."*

*"Will do..."*

The com flickers off and the hazy outline of the High Altitude Weapons Carrier appears ahead. Fighter groups of MAV's serve as escorts to the heavily fortified and armed Carrier and can be seen flying with it and in patterns at varying altitudes. A few Mecha and Sky Fighters are on deck, some just arriving, some being loaded while others head off to other battle sites. My

altimeter reads forty thousand feet and the switch from manual to auto flight is flawless. I connect to Mirana's MAV on a secure link.

"Gunner?"

"Alpha?"

"When this is over, let me buy you a coffee..."

My heart beats as though in combat while she takes her time with the answer. Three seconds, but it seems like an hour. The Weapons Carrier is clearer now.

"I know a joint in Marasa..."

I have no idea what Marasa is and no doubt, she realizes this.

"It's a little town on the Minera. There's a coffee shop on the waterfront called King's brew."

"Sounds like a plan."

Our conversation lasts a good five minutes and as I ask about her tastes, the HAWC Flight Director comes through again.

*"Iron Five...Speed sync in twenty seconds..."*

I acknowledge him as the Carrier gets closer until we pass over its flat surface of lights and landing docks. Three heavily armed Mecha unlatch from an area off to my right and as they lift into the wicked air currents, one by one, the Ked pilots slide away from us and drop off into nothingness.

The sensations of the Autopilot as it shifts and corrects my trajectory are strange. Slowly, it takes me over the designated space for my DAWG, and the computer shows my deceleration while my team and I slow to three hundred miles an hour; matching the flight of the Weapons Carrier.

The auto-guidance brings me down until the thump of my machine colliding with the Eversteel surface indicates a solid connection. The docking clamps snap my legs in place and my Mecha is now held stable as robotic arms and loaders connect to me. A digital menu appears and I select my choice of weaponry.

Armor piercing, explosive rounds - Full re-load

Catalysts - Full re-load

Supernovas - Two

The slight shudders that rock me are effects of the ammunition being fitted outside. The computer tells me that I'm good to go and the Flight Director makes contact.

*"Iron Five, you have release in thirty..."*

"Iron Five reads thirty seconds to release. We're good to go." Switching to my team "Iron Five, follow to angels fifteen and bullet to Jackal two..."

Pitbull comes back "On you, Boss..."

The flight director is in our ears again *"Iron Five, you're good for flight. Undocking now...good luck..."*

The Latches unclip and I feel the change in motion as they do. I go from securely standing on deck to swaying in the wind, so it's back to manual

control for me. Asking my DAWG for power, I lift into the heavy air-currents and accelerate over and away from the HAWC.

## CHAPTER 15 - JERICHO

Sunlight cracks the dusty horizon with its silvery glare. It has been a wild night. The dark, early morning skies had been all lights and action unlike anything I have ever seen in my career. Guns blazing, missiles tracking, bombs targeting, explosions erupting, ground shaking, sky shattering...we did, however, manage to destroy Jackal Two and One but the celebration was short lived. Not long after our efforts to hold our enemies at bay seemed successful, we found ourselves badly outnumbered as swarms of Dynasty fighter squadrons and Battle groups, broke atmosphere, overran the forward command posts and devastated Keden's frontlines. We and Al-Jair were forced to regroup and await further instructions and now, the Raiku are mere moments away from taking Dunan and its outlying territories.

*"Iron Five..."*

Al-Jair comes over our coms

*"...we're making a run on Jackal Seven in twenty minutes. Keep us clear of hostile aircraft and artillery until we're through..."*

*"Iron Five copies, we'll be there in twenty..."*

An avalanche of noise splits the heavens. At thirty thousand feet, we bear witness to a crippled Raiku Battle Cruiser as it falls helplessly to the desert floor below. No doubt killed in orbit, it is a spectacle to behold. About a mile long and half mile wide, the warship comes apart in balls of flaming pieces, each chunk monstrous while the bulk of it travels, according to my scans, at over a thousand miles per hour. But as it falls, it slows. Even in the face of annihilation the Magnatech fail-safes on board would slow it down, reducing a potential planetary catastrophe to nothing more than localized damage.

*"That's gonna make a dent..."*

I respond to Mirana on the open com "Whatever hit it must be a powerhouse..."

As if on cue, hundreds of Starships pierce the sky, their blue and white hulls dazzling in the morning sunlight and their Earthfront logos visible even without magnification.

*"Earthfront..."* Hound breaks the silence.

We look on as our home ships descend and flood the battlefield within minutes.

*"Alpha...!"*

I accept Al-Jair's incoming transmission *"Victory here is ours. Your new objectives are to report to Nalas and board the Starship Cala, then rendezvous with Al-Raadein on Aaram."*

*"Alpha copies objective Nalas, and Mission Rendezvous with Al-Raadein. It was a pleasure fighting alongside you General."*

*"The pleasure was also mine Earther...Fly brave..."*

*"Fly strong..."* I give my blessing and switch to Iron Five's secure com *"Iron Five, Bullet to Nalas. Form up and speed sync in ten."*

The thrill of battle is still in me but I am, at the same time, glad to be away from this war and finally one step closer to my ultimate objective. I don't care how long it takes, or what I have to do to get it done, but Terri will answer to me for what he did, even if it is by my trigger.

Leaning sideways, my DAWG drops from the sky and thirty thousand feet becomes twenty thousand in seconds. The fight on Keden might be over, but the war has only just begun. Getting a battle-group to an already invaded Earth is not going to be a walk in the park.

*"Iron Five, Nalas Command has you on approach, follow digital to LZ one five, contact on touchdown."*

*"Roger that Nalas Command, we have digital."*

Nalas Base is a hazy outline ahead of us. I descend over the Minera, deploy my airbrakes and the distance closes within the minute.

*"Nalas Command...Iron five is on deck and waiting."*

*"Iron Five... power down and proceed to Hanger seventeen. Condor awaits you for bullet to Aaram. Welcome back."*

*"Copy that..."*

After shutting down the DAWGs and leaving our cockpits for the first time in almost twenty four hours, we get to our new ship. It has been a rough ride the past few hours, and we each take turns in the bathrooms onboard Condor. The spaces are not as roomy as the Mirage but will still do nicely. While each of our flight suits are run through a cyclic cleaner, sterilizing and eliminating all traces of piss and shit, the team and I relax in clothes given by Al-Jair's staff. It's unpleasant business, but a part of the whole nonetheless.

\*\*\*\*\*

Now harnessed and sitting in the cockpit of this triangular ship in fresh flight suits, we ready the systems for lift off and are awaiting permission to launch. It has been a gruelling battle and we are all feeling the effects of sleep deprivation, but Aaram is five hundred light years from K1 so we will have a good six hour nap after we enter hyperspace.

*"Condor, Nalas Control has you ready for launch. Taxi to runway five and hold, over?"*

*"Condor copies Taxi to runway five and hold."*

I take a good look at the people around me. It was not so long ago that Terrier was with us, behind the controls, right where Dane is sitting. Things have changed but we are still Iron Five. I steal a glimpse at Mirana and she looks my way. I smile before going back to what we were doing; there will be time to talk later.

With a slight push into my seat, Maria rolls us out of the hangar and into the blazing sunlight, across the tarmac and then with a one hundred and eighty degree turn, lines up with the runway. It has been a long time since I have experienced a rolling takeoff and within the minute, our coms come alive.

*"Condor, your launch is a go. Take it to angels seventy and await co-ordinates."*

*"Condor copies angels seventy and wait for co-ords."*

The brakes are released and the cockpit shudders under the immense power of the Sol Combustion. Dane accelerates the ship and we speed down the runway. Outside my window, Nalas and her island blurs past and then drops and angles away from us. The familiar sensation of my stomach being pushed into my gut lingers on the edges of my thoughts but in two minutes, the sky grows darker and Keden becomes an image of grooves and lines far below.

At seventy thousand feet, we are on the edge of the planet's atmosphere. The Condor's artificial gravity kicks in, and after a crackle on the com, the rusty female voice from Nalas comes through again.

*"Co-ordinates to System Gate Jericho have been uploaded. Good luck Condor."*

I acknowledge the Flight Director "Condor has co-ords and our flight is a go."

Keden's two Starports are nowhere in sight. Based on the Holo in front of me, they are on the other side of the world and according to the info I unintentionally ask for, neither of them would ever be in this location. Dane draws me from my thoughts as she speeds us up. Everything outside my window shifts now that she has engaged our Eon Drive, and we jump into the blackness of space.

Keden would be nothing but a micro-speck in the portrait of space now, with all of its fighting no longer our concern. After twenty minutes, we come out of warp and a large, cube shaped Gate known as Jericho speeds toward us. Interacting with the System-Gate's AI is not at all difficult. The Condor's Artificial intelligence gives the exact calculations to the isolated station and Maria guides us via the Gate's Digital Magnetics. We slowly, *one thousand miles an hour*, move along the Eversteel rail that extends outward from the control center and within the minute, the jolt from a split second of electrocution shocks us all as we are launched into hyperspace.

## CHAPTER 16 - IRON FIVE

We come out of our jump and the most visible thing in sight, is a planet that is, according to my screen, fifty thousand kilometers away. It is nothing but a monstrous ball of white and green, hanging in the middle of nowhere and based on the information being fed to us, this is Aaram.

We are in the Armenese System and from memory it is a very remote one. Ten thousand light years from Sol, its location in the Galaxy allows for obscurity, because the only access to it is by System Gate or Xaris, the Capital System of the Galactic Nine.

We approach the planet on its day side at twenty thousand miles per hour and after an hour and a half, and fighting the waves of nausea from our magnetic deceleration, we enter atmosphere and follow the co-ordinates given to us from Nalas.

*"Condor..."* The com comes alive *"...Nest has you on approach, take it to angels twenty two and auto-dock on pad eight, nine."*

*"Condor copies twenty two thousand feet and dock to eight, nine..."*

Aaram's mountain ranges become clearer, spreading off in every direction and as we get closer, grooves and crevices and cliffs suddenly become menacing. Like jagged arms outstretched and begging us to come near, the granite edges shimmer in the sunlight, casting long shadows down their barren sides. Beneath Aaram's pale green and white sky, the planet maintains a surreal appearance, like soft colors in hazy memories of childhood days back on Earth.

*"Condor...Slow to two hundred and go auto."*

*"Copy...Condor is on approach, slowing to two hundred, we are now on auto..."*

*"Nest has you Condor. You have guidance on link. Welcome to Aaram."*

At twenty two thousand feet, our flight path takes us between many peaks and rock faces that stand like heads on the shoulders of titans. As the scenery drifts by, I imagine what it might be like to live here. The air is a hundred percent breathable, making Aaram the only planet in this system like it. However, there are no cities on this rock, but settlements can be found at the bases of many of these mountains where the rivers run clean and clear and disappear below surface.

In times long gone, Geologists had paved the ways to large lakes in caves, deep underground, but few make the journeys now. Flash Flooding has forever been a danger on Aaram.

The ship veers to the left and we round another precipice. This reveals a large complex built into a massive mountain near its peak dead ahead. Eversteel buildings, runways and landing pads at many different levels which have been embedded into the surrounding nature, make up the strange sight; latched into the rocky incline like a parasite.



Within ten minutes we are docked at a landing pad on one of the upper levels. Our escorts lead us through a series of tunnels by way of Airvan and after an hour, my team and I are now standing in an expensive office, in the presence of Keden's leader, Al-Raadein.

"Sit, Gentlemen...Ladies..." We take our seats quietly and he continues "...Our efforts have been successful, thanks to your selfless service to Keden..."

*Selfless service? His definition of selflessness and mine are entirely different*

"...However, our spies have relayed new information. A Cyclone unit has recently been stationed at a Raiku base on Jakta."

"Jakta? That's four hundred Lights from Sol." I add.

"Intelligence has confirmed that it has gone to rendezvous with an army of Dragons, the Dynasty's equivalent to the Cyclone project. With Raiku battleships awaiting our invasion, it is safe to believe that Terrier will be leading the Dragons to intercept us in Earth's atmosphere."

"Then we'll be ready for them."

"That you will captain. The Galactic Nine has sent more Dogs to our aide and Earth's older Cyclone regiments are already engaged in combat as we speak."

This is a relief. During my military training, we learned of the high tech battle gear of the Raiku, but little information about the Empire's top secret program had given way to more speculation than fact.

"When this is over, we will strike the Raiku menace at their heart, and you will be among those of us leading the way."

I was wondering when we would get around to this. If the Dynasty fell, the first galactic power to lay claim to its wealth would have a permanent foothold among the stars. I'm beginning to have second thoughts about helping these people. What is there to stop them from going to war with Earth if they took control of the Raiku worlds?

\*\*\*\*\*

The meeting lasted for an hour before we were dismissed. It will take Keden's combined forces with Earthfront and the Galactic Nine, eighteen hours to arrive in Sol. If their calculations are correct, we should exit hyperspace around five hundred thousand kilometers from Earth; close enough for a successful assault and atmospheric entry.

According to Al-Raadein, the armadas on Aaram will not be ready for launch until midday tomorrow. That is twenty hours from now, so in the midst of all this mess, there will actually be some downtime and without wasting any of it, Akita is off and on the prowl. Hound and Maria were last seen deep in

conversation around a stripped down engine in the hangar and Pitbull was left chatting up a busty brunette in the cafeteria.

...As for me and Mirana...

"It's not King's Brew, but this is nice."

I smile at the way she says it with a sigh; a steaming mug of coffee in her hand. We are on an open, stone patio, part of a riverside restaurant in a village at the foot of one of the mountains a few miles from Base. It's beautiful here, even without plant life. The clear water coming around a bend not far away, flows past us and disappears about a quarter of a mile downstream. The constant gurgle of it, relaxing, and everywhere no matter where you go on this planet, smells like freshly cut stone.

I follow the scars on her face. Some might say they make her unattractive, but she is beautiful to me. Her red hair is let down and I like that. I don't think I have ever seen her wear it this way on purpose and as our conversation lasts well into the evening, her eyes shimmer in the dimming light.

A green and white glow has now spread across the canyon. On the opposite riverbank, the smooth rock face that lines the shore reflects the sunlight and glistens like one very large precious stone.

"How does all this affect you?"

I look at her without any idea of how to answer and she continues

"I mean Iron Five and your life as a soldier?"

"I don't know. If Earth is not the way I want it to be after all this, then it's hard to say. I don't want to work for the Keds, and Galactic Nine is nothing but a spy network...not my thing really..."

"I know...Black Ops is your, *thing*..."

"Is that what you really think? Is that why you hated me?"

"I didn't hate you...I found you to be arrogant and disrespectful. It's normally that way when a woman is in any position above a man." She pauses "I'm not saying that it's that way with you now, but I've seen my fair share of pig heads so forgive me if I once placed you in the same category."

"None is taken, and it was never about your position as a woman. I just hated Keden and I let my emotions get the better of me."

"Well your hatred for the place got me to not like you."

"And now?"

She goes quiet. Our eyes arrest each other again

"I like you a little bit."

We both laugh.

The afternoon turns to night. Stars light the clear sky and one of the planet's three moons illuminate the valley, causing rocks here-and-there to cast glints of reds, greens, blues and purples. I stand and walk to the stone balustrade at the edge of the terrace and Mirana joins me in gazing out at the colored rocks all around.

"When this is over, where are you going to go?"

It is a question that I had been meaning to ask her for some time now. She leans on my arm and rests the side of her head on my shoulder. It is an unexpected move, but I keep my cool and put my arm around her.

"I'm not sure. I doubt that I'll fit in on Earth, it's been too long..." She sounds tired "...to be honest, I've grown quite attached to Keden..."

"Keden?" I didn't see that coming.

"Yes Keden. It's not as bad as you think."

"So you'd live where...in Dunan?"

"No, I'm not a city girl. I *can* though, see myself settling down in Marasa..."

"The town on the Minera?"

"Yeah..."

"What would you do there?"

"Tourism...yes..." She continues before I can say anything "There's a market for it there. I've envisioned it for some time now. There are so many islands on the lake and everyone sees them by air. I'd like to provide some good old boat tours."

"Sounds like fun, and it makes sense now that I think of it. It's just that I pegged you for a lifetime in the military."

"Don't get me wrong Huski, I love my job, but there comes a time, especially after surviving two invasions, when one has to re-evaluate life and where to go in it. What about you, where would you go?"

I want to tell her, wherever she goes, but I know I am not going to ever settle on Keden and besides, I doubt that I would ever be able to leave the team.

"*Maybe* I'd like it on Keden..."

"You, on Keden?" She laughs "I know better than anyone else how much you hate it."

"I could love what's on it..."

The moment of silence is awkward but I ignore it.

"And what will you do there?"

"That's the tough part. I don't know anything outside of my life as a soldier. It's all I've ever known and dreamt of."

"Then live your dream..."

There is another moment between us. I wish that we were headed down the same path but it is obvious we are not. What will I do without the team? Iron Five is everything I know. Could I actually let it all go and settle down...*on Keden?*

"Live my dream?"

"Yes...you only have one life...*Alpha*..."

I fall head first into her eyes. Her waist is heaven as I slide an arm around it.

"Alpha..."

Her body, warm and perfect against mine, enchants me

“...what are you doing?”

Her voice is soft, I drift in it.

“Living my dream...”

And with her hands slowly finding their place around my neck, the soft heat of her lips connects with mine. I am complete.

And the night wears on. After a walk through the lively village filled with bonfires, food, drinking, music, happy voices and another out-of-this-world kiss we get to the port and board a shuttle that will take us back to base.

The chemistry is definitely here, but the uncertainty of our immediate future hangs like a rift between us and takes root where intimacy should be. I want more of her and she feels the same, I can tell by the way she held my hand and returned my gaze but now, back on base and alone in my room; I am not sure where we go from here. I close my eyes and after God-knows-how-long, drift off to sleep.

\*\*\*\*\*

Aaraman Desert

1330 Hours Aaram Time

According to my computer, the time is thirteen thirty hours and we are in the Condor awaiting launch. From our position we have a good enough view of the Aaraman Desert as it is called by the locals, fifty thousand miles from the nest. Akita's voice is the one most heard in the cockpit as he drones on about his latest love; the sexy mechanic who had connected our ship to the base's maintenance equipment when we arrived here; he never ceases to amaze me.

In a half of an hour's time, midday on this twenty eight hour world, eighty thousand ships; Battle cruisers, Dreadnaughts, Carriers, HAWC's, Command Centers, Invaders and more, will launch from every military installation on the planet. The fleet would be rendezvousing with a System Gate known as Chronos One; the only Gate in the vicinity with the power to jump such a large force.

Mirana is strapped in not too far from me, but a conversation here is a conversation with everyone so I remain silent. We had a great evening yesterday and although our paths seem to go separate ways, I know that if we are alive after this whole ordeal, then the gap which keeps us apart might somehow be bridged.

The coms crackle to life and Akita closes his mouth

*"God-fist..." It's the name of our fleet "...Nest has you ready for launch in ten minutes...go auto and sync up..."*

The moment has arrived. We are engines rumbling and hearts pounding as the armada, as far as the eye can see, quakes the dry plains and fills the air with dust, revealing flat rocky surfaces beneath the dirt. Our Magnatech takes over, lifting us slowly...twenty feet, forty feet, sixty...a hundred. Every ship, in every direction floats above ground at a hundred feet right now. The cockpit vibrates with the force of thousands of engines that pound the planet surface. Wild winds whip up and spin into dust tornadoes and the world beneath us cracks and splinters as the count down from ten seconds reaches zero and God-fist begins to accelerate.

With tremendous force and incredible noise, our ships defy Aaram's gravity and climb to ten thousand feet and still rising. The rumbling grows deeper and the skies darken. *Twenty five thousand feet.* I've never seen anything like this; thousands of ships of all sizes and classes ascending at the same time.

The coms flash on again.

*"God-fist...you are a go for vacuum. Bullet to Chronos in fifteen, prep for highlight."*

Our angle of ascent has changed from horizontal liftoff to a vertical climb. The planet and its deserts along with all of its mountain ranges now lay behind us and the black of space becomes more and more visible with each passing minute. *Fifty thousand feet.* The fleet is now moving at six times the speed of sound and as the computer signals the fifteen minute mark, the scene outside our windscreen warps and stretches as we jump through the solar system.

As though time flew by in a millisecond, we come out of Hyper Light and instead of blurred lights, the eighty thousand ships that are now headed to Earth, fill our view. Chronos, one of the few manned System Gates in existence, is a half circular, gunmetal-grey station with a rail so large, it reads at ten miles wide and fifty long. The power this thing generates must be astronomical in order to throw eighty thousand battle ships into hyperspace at once; Sol Technology at its peak if you ask me.

*"God-fist...Chronos has you on link. You are cleared for hyper to Sol. Maintain sync and flight pattern, jump is a go in forty, thirty nine, thirty eight, thirty seven..."*

The time has finally come. There is no turning back. The massive rail is a dazzling sight as arcs of pure white electricity ripple along its length. I prepare my mind for the split second shock to come but the anticipation of it still gets my heart pumping. Yet I have questions I cannot shake.

Our enemies know we are coming. How big is the battle group awaiting us on the other side of this jump? Are we going to survive this? After all is said and done, who among us will still be alive? What happens to Mirana and me afterwards? Is there an "afterwards"?

*"...five, four, three..."*

I feel the tug on my senses as I am squashed into my seat.

*"...two, one...jump initiated...fly Brave."*

We lurch forward, the arcs of electrical currents split apart, reaching out to every ship in the fleet and with a wicked shock to my system, we enter the slipstream at eighty three point three-three-three light years per hour, and everything goes black.

## FACT

Mercury is one of our solar system's harshest mining planets. Yet even as technology struggles to make its soaring temperatures and equally destructive frigid nights bearable, over a thousand ships visit each week. By way of Magnatech and Sol Combustion, powerful corporations and government contractors extract iron ore and precious metals from mining facilities built deep underground. With no atmosphere, Inter-System Barges and Deep Space Haulers touch down on Eversteel landing pads daily, as Mercury is one of the few solid bodies in Sol whose space station is surface-side.

Workers on mercury often run on twelve hour shifts and are housed in subsurface facilities beneath both poles, the only places on the planet that have frozen water.

## SCARECROW

**System: Sol**

**Planet: Earth**

**Location: Sahara Desert**

**Time: 0730 Hours - Local**

A hover truck entered an Earthfront military base built into a sand dune that looked more like a small mountain. Descending rapidly and whipping up clouds of sand and dust, it leaned hard and fell into place over an Eversteel landing pad. Captain Akata Kumasi and three teams of five coalition pilots jumped from the back of the rugged vehicle and made their way across the tarmac. Raiku ships had broken atmosphere and by the look of it, he would in no doubt be up to his eyeballs in combat within the hour.

"Get to your gear gentlemen, briefings will be on the go!" The resident Flight Director shouted when they dismounted their vehicles.

Akata ran to his Mecha and the cockpit opened while the machine lowered itself with his approach. He climbed into the seat of his Scarecrow, effortlessly

maneuvering over and around its instruments and instinctively tightened his stomach as it lifted him thirty feet to standing position.

*"Scarecrow flight..."* The Director's voice filled his ear *"Pyramid has you ready for launch...Systems...check. Weapon's...check. Countermeasures...check. Right arm...left arm...check. Sync up...you have green light...happy hunting, boys."*

The gunmetal-grey monster, armed with two Yoruba auto-cannons and four Hades class rocket launchers came to life and immediately jumped into the evening sky.

*"Pyramid to Scarecrow...enemy flight of eighteen, in-bound...five hundred miles northwest at angels twenty...co-ords uploaded...you have full clearance."*

At the speed of thought, Akata scanned the skies and his computer flash-printed the approaching enemy Mecha, four hundred and ninety five miles away into his mind. Tiny pinpricks, like hundreds of microscopic needles walking across his brain, stabbed him bearably as his briefing and target information passed flawlessly between machine and man.

*"Scarecrow flight...bullet to angels twenty five...let's welcome our guests."* He spoke to his team over their secure channel.

A collective agreement of aye-eyes, yes-sirs and copy-that's in three different languages flooded the airwaves for a moment and then all was silent as they ascended to twenty five thousand feet. Among the group of walking/flying battle tanks, seven were from the recently united (given the circumstances) Middle Eastern Coalition, six were from the Russian Air Force and the remaining two, Akata included, were what was left in this sector of the U.K.A. or Yuka as it was known, the United Kingdoms of Afrika.

Four days had passed since Scarecrow's base of operations exploded into oblivion, and the memory of this bold-faced act remained freshly embedded in his mind. In the middle of the night, without warning, Raiku Stealth and Hunter Mech had struck them. After three weeks of working together, a brother-hood of sorts had been born, and though they were not friends of old, this cause united them.

Now he was out for blood.

*"Scarecrow Flight...Engage on sight!"*

Akata acknowledged the Director's command just as his secure com lit up.

*"Scarecrow lead...I have contact."* Erol, the only other survivor from his previous team, spoke into his ear with controlled excitement.

*"Contact confirmed. Here we go, keep it loose!"*

Akata dropped from twenty five thousand feet toward his prey while the Raiku bandits stayed their course to intercept, and gunfire lit up the sky. Bullets pinged off the cockpit glass and explosive tracer rounds left balls of smoke and fire where none had hit their marks.

Akata fell toward the danger, slid off his enemy's line and spun with the momentum of the maneuver. Careful to keep the target in sight, he squeezed the trigger and the cockpit shuddered as four missiles left his launchers.

Accelerating in order to stay within range of the evasive Mech, the Scarecrow followed through with a stream of cannon fire that tore into the shoulder plating behind the Raiku machine and a ball of expanding fire erupted as Akata flew past the burning patch of sky at almost a thousand miles per hour.

The onboard A.I. imprinted images of three incoming missiles into his skull and he rolled over, demanded full power from the machine and deployed a flash of MD's.

The magnetic decoys did their jobs, attracting the incoming artillery guided by Magnatech and detonating them safely away as he fought against forces that pulled at his consciousness.

Akata tore out of the high G turn, rotated to face another incoming target, brought his arms to bear and opened fire. Four more missiles left him and his auto-cannons came alive, carving a swath of death and destruction across the sky where it ended in a blossoming cloud of flames and debris.

More bullets assailed him but the Scarecrow had speed and agility to make up for its lack in heavy hitting firepower, and in a world where a split second meant the difference between life and death, Akata used it to his advantage. He wove an intricate trail around his enemies, dodging and rolling until he descended upon another helpless foe, baring his teeth in a mad assault of guns and glory.

**Location: Hall of the Royal Assembly - Ethiopia**

**Time: 0930 Hours - Local**

The assembly hall was bustling with men and women keeping track of the events going on in atmosphere and over Afrika. Digital images in the middle of the massive, triangular room provided a three dimensional view of the battle above Earth while live-footage of other happenings were being streamed via all Digital Eyes.

High above the crowd, a group of armed men dressed in heavy armor escorted a woman along an open mezzanine. Her blood-red cloak fluttered in her wake and long strides from leather-covered legs took her quickly across the floor. She hated these pants but given the circumstances, ignoring the discomfort of the bodysuit was doable along with the hope that this meeting would be fruitful. She stopped beside an elevator, entered it and then descended for what felt like too long, to a reinforced bunker deep within the very foundations of the building.

This meeting was unnecessary, she thought. There was nothing to be said here that couldn't be discussed digitally, yet the Kings had demanded it and she alone could do little to sway them. Gathering in the same location was



risky. She remembered her late husband's words...*Never place all your valuables in one pocket*...words derived from an old saying he often quoted, but he was gone now and she continued in his footsteps.

Her demeanor was flawless and even in the midst of a global invasion; her composure was not a show. She had seen her fair share of war and catastrophe, and had stood on the frontlines of many rebellions and uprisings. To her, death was simply a means to a glorious end, and whenever they were destined to meet, she would not go with it easily.

The elevator doors opened and gave way to a corridor that surrounded a triangular room. Beyond its Everglass walls, a table of the same shape stood at the center with richly decorated, cushioned seats, two along each edge.

"Your Highness..."

The commander of those standing guard at the door addressed her with a crisp salute and his men followed like clockwork. She waited for the doors to slide aside and then stepped into the chill of the inner chamber.

"Queen, Ashanti! Akwaaba. Wo ho te sen?"

The King of East Afrika stood and bowed his head and with the shuffling of oaken chairs on carpet, each of the five Kings of Afrika took their turn in greeting.

"Me ho ye, meda ase. Wo no ho te sen?" She responded, bowing all the same.

"Me ho ye pa..." He flashed a broad smile.

After the *welcomes, how-are-you's, I'm fine's* and such, the six rulers of Afrika took their seats and a digital image of what was going on over the country appeared as a three dimensional bubble between them.

"Let us, for wisdom sake, put aside the usual formalities and get straight to business..." Ori, the King of East Afrika began "...Queen Ashanti?"

Ashanti streamed the relative data to each of their Digital Eyes and began her report. "Our most recent intel reveals a Raiku Battalion in hyperspace as we speak. Our contact on Gena relayed this information only a few hours ago before going dark..."

"Going dark? Where is the rest of it? Has your contact been captured?" King Makaba, the ruler of South Afrika, asked.

"We do not know..." The queen responded

"So our enemies will be here in twenty days?"

"No..." She countered "...they will arrive at an unknown location, in an unknown star system in twenty days..."

Ori joined in "According to the information here, they will need a system close enough to Sol. A twenty four hour jump from us..."

"Yes..." Ashanti continued, "To exit hyperspace within Sol would leave them vulnerable to a counterattack upon arrival. Our network is currently identifying all viable star systems within range and Earthfront will spearhead the investigations as we isolate them."

"That means that there is a Raiku System Gate there already..." Makaba stated.

"And it will be Earthfront's responsibility to locate and destroy it before the fleet arrives." She answered.

"Then we have no choice but to cross that bridge when we meet it. To other matters of more immediate concern..." Ori continued "Project Vyra...what's the status?"

"Our agents are in place and awaiting the catalyst." Ashanti replied, "The order is ready to be given."

"Then now is the time. Are we in agreement?" Ori looked to all around him as they replied with five upturned thumbs "Queen Ashanti...on your command." She nodded in acknowledgement and he continued "King Ahmad, we have sent reinforcements to Algeria and Libya and more should be arriving from our brother as we speak."

Yusuf, the Saharan King nodded in agreement.

"So far, the Raiku have not been able to breach our air defenses except here..." Ori said, pointing to a location on the constantly moving image. "The Central Northern Array has been overrun but we have news of a small team that has been tasked with aiding coalition forces to retake it."

Queen Ashanti took over from here "Our regiment at Ain Salah was attacked and most of them are no longer with us. However, those remaining have been given new orders and are rendezvousing with coalition fighters to move on the Array."

"Has there been word about the Earthfront, Galactic Nine and Kedeni armada en route to Sol?" King Makaba asked.

"As far as we know, they are in hyperspace and should be arriving in five days." Ashanti repeated to him what her defense secretary had said to her less than an hour ago.

"Good..." Ori took the reins once more "Now to some more pressing business. King Lukeni, give us the latest report from your reconnaissance unit in vacuum..."

The meeting went on. An hour and a half of agreements and plans-of-actions that directly addressed the war fought in and out of atmosphere had been somewhat a success and was now in the hands of their Generals.

Fifty floors above ground, overlooking acre upon acre of lush gardens and trees, Ashanti exited the eight hundred foot Everglass pyramid that was the Hall of the Royal Assembly and braced against the cool gusts that rushed past her. The Eversteel deck was abuzz with dignitaries and aides moving to and fro and as she approached her parked vehicle, a young woman in body armor with dual pistols strapped to her upper thighs met the queen half way.

"Your Highness..." Ashanti's personal aide welcomed and ushered her into the Aircar "I have news..." The doors of the sleek vehicle closed with a short

hiss and, surrounded by a dozen security escorts, they lifted into the morning sky.

The girl continued, "Our forces have taken the Northern array."

"Good. Has there been any word from my son?"

"Yes, he is inbound as we speak."

With a sigh of relief, Ashanti let the memory-cell seat absorb all of her bodyweight and smiled.

\*\*\*\*\*

**Location: North of El Guerrara, Algeria**

**Time: 0900 Hours - Local**

Akata's auto-cannons roared, spitting violent streaks toward his final target five miles away. The sky was alive with smoke and falling parts and as he plummeted headlong into the fray, he easily dispatched his enemy. The Central Northern Array was now theirs.

"Scarecrow Flight, regroup at angel's twenty and hold..."

He asked his Machine for power and climbed to twenty thousand feet, and his team followed the order as they synced their flight with his.

"Biskra Command...Central Northern Array is yours...Scarecrow is detach-and-en route to Ghana Com-Cen."

"...Copy detachment. Hand-off to Ghana Command Center at forty thou..." The Flight Director responded.

Akata switched to his squad "Scarecrow Flight...I'm detach-for-home. Go with God."

"And may he be with you until we meet again, my brother."

Erol's voice came back with the warm blessing and he could not help but wonder if he ever would see him again.

With the goodbyes and farewells of his team behind him, he took his sixty-ton Scarecrow to forty thousand feet, burning at over a thousand miles per hour. The monster Mecha rose above the clouds, covering the distance with ease and as the world passed by in a blur, the computer torched an image into his mind that wedged an anchor deep into his gut.

In the blink of an eye, Akata reacted as a Raiku Ghost materialized three miles away and shortened the distance between them in less than two seconds. Ripping past at twice the speed of sound, the two missiles it had released before vanishing again missed Akata by a few feet and fought to reacquire their target in a mad turn and burn.

The Scarecrow's auto-defense system released a cloud of Magnetic Decoys while Akata rolled onto his stomach and shot skyward. The MD's got rid of the

initial problem and he levelled off at sixty thousand feet; scanning the skies until he found his prey.

Still in stealth mode, the lone enemy rocketed toward him from directly below, but the Scarecrow could see past its cloaking. That imprint in Akata's mind was not just a message from machine to man, it also acted as a tag that now linked both Mechs digitally.

M-Track, it was called, was a top-secret program designed by Yuka's defense department to stay abreast with Earthfront's Cyclone program, and while the Scarecrow project lacked the battle dynamics displayed by the next generation of Mecha, they still dominated the world of stealth and stealth detection.

Akata, flying backwards, gained even more height, then he initiated the machine's speed brakes and weightlessness took him. Man and machine hung temporarily suspended, he brought his auto-cannons to bear and squeezed the triggers at his fingertips and all hell broke loose.

The superheated bullets leaving his guns at over five thousand feet per second followed his target as the Raiku pilot rolled over and zigzagged his way out of danger.

The Scarecrow answered its master's command and both engines roared. Akata dropped face first from above and gunfire lit up the air between them. Bullets twanged off his armor but he still pressed the attack. The hyper-chatter of his cannons filled his ears and at ten thousand feet, the Ghost left the insane plunge and levelled out at nine hundred, still flying backwards, still guns-blazing and then dropped into a narrow canyon.

*This pilot is a lunatic!*

Akata thought as he followed without hesitation, limiting his assault to short bursts when his foe entered his reticle.

Around a deep bend, over a drop-off and down into a wider section of the gorge, the Raiku machine skimmed the river there, released two missiles without locking onto his target and rocketed skyward.

Akata ignored the gushing spray of water that hit his windscreen as the enemy Mecha left the watercourse. Thoughtlessly, he plunged the Scarecrow into the river, impacting the moving surface with a splash that displaced the running water and exposed the riverbed. Both missiles had missed, but he knew that they were only there to throw him off the scent.

Angry now, the Afrikan came to a stop as the waters closed in around him, planted both feet on the sinking silt and then took off out of the valley. Instantly, he found what he was looking for and let loose a single rocket, then dropped low and engaged his own camouflage.

The Ghost pilot easily shot down the incoming missile and hovered at two thousand feet. With all his scanners searching for his opponent, he was sure to find his foe.

*Who was this Earther pilot?*

The Raiku soldier wondered. His initial assault should have taken him out and yet, here he was, battling what should have been a dead man, but the skies were clear and he had strayed too far and too long from his squadron. The Ghost rotated, increased power and one, two, three and more missiles tore into it with precision, guided by Akata's mental connection to his target.

When the guns on the Scarecrow's outstretched arms stopped spinning, all that was left of the Raiku machine was a twisted husk of metal that ballooned into a brilliant flash of light as it exploded into fire and flying parts.

Akata breathed easy after searching the sky for any threat that might have remained hidden, but there was none.

*"Scarecrow..."* A female voice filled his consciousness *"...Ghana Com-Cen has you on scan...link and rep live over..."*

*"Ghana Com-Cen...Skies are clear and E.T.A to Palace H-Q is five minutes..."*

*"Scarecrow...you have clearance...hand-off to Kotoka is go...welcome home."*

Off to his right, the towering buildings of Accra, with trees planted on high terraces and hovering transport terminals that channeled traffic at different heights, stood as a testament to the Kingdom's wealth.

Akata flew past the bustling city and as the Kotoka Spaceport chatter flooded the airwaves, he left it in his wake and flew in over the Palace grounds, ten miles from the metropolis.

Handing the controls over to the Scarecrow's autopilot, he touched down with a slight jolt. It felt good to be back. After three months on the warpath, seeing his childhood home was refreshing.

The Mecha lowered its cockpit to the Eversteel floor and opened.

*"Prince Akata..."*

A deep voice hit him like a blunt object just as his boots touched the ground, and he flinched at the sound of it. *What was it now? Was there no rest for the weary?* He thought.

*"Captain Uche..."* He replied.

The slender, but giant man stood in digital form ahead of him and saluted. Even in the dimness of the quickly dissolving evening sunlight, his Dees rendered the image with enough clarity to rival reality.

*"Congratulations on your most recent victory...your briefing will be at oh hundred hours. Her Highness requests that you come fully prepared for redeployment, so ready up and make haste...Welcome home."*

The man saluted again and his image vanished.

Akata crossed the open courtyard where rows of low hedges lined narrow paths between well-kept flowerbeds. At the center of the garden, a large, red oak stood proudly with thick branches that held some of his best childhood memories. Those days were long gone now, days of worrying his parents as he,

along with his brothers and sisters, frolicked among the leaves high above the ground. Maybe these times weren't any different, he thought. With every mission flown, his mother still worried and with each victory came relief, though she did a good job of masking it.

He wondered about his new objective, according to Uche, and by the sound of it, his time home was going to be a short one.

*So be it*

Ever since the confirmation of a Raiku invasion, this had become his life, day in, day out. He wondered where this new development was going to take him. Would it be across Afrika...Europe...the World?

The walkway brought him to a wide staircase that led to the main entrance of the complex and twenty minutes later, Akata stood in his dressing room staring into a mirror.

The emblems on both shoulders that represented the Royal House and all it stood for gleamed in the light above. Another glint drew his gaze. An out-of-place razor had caught his eye and though he tried to ignore the distraction, as though with a mind of its own, his hand pushed the wayward thing into alignment with the others around it.

The past few months had aged him, it seemed; hardened him visibly. A photo wedged between the reflective glass and its frame conjured needles within his stomach. On it, his father's stern face stared back, spurring him into action.

"Your death will be avenged..." He spoke softly "...I will personally see to it..."

*Do not throw your life away over foolishness!*

The eyes in the picture scolded him with silent words but Akata would ignore them yet again. In the end, his father was gone and those responsible for it would suffer. He picked up a tiny bundle of string from the dresser that remained deliberately tangled in complex knots. The uneven ball of ties was a puzzle handed down by his great grandfather that, over time, had found its way to him; one string, knotted in order to create the challenge of untangling it without cutting or breaking the strand.

He grabbed a small book that was beside it and tucked it away within the folds of one of his jacket pockets. In it, a collection of sayings and principles written hundreds of years before his time by an unknown author, and like the ball of string; it too came from father to son for over six generations.

It was now his, a treasure; *the guide by which we live and breathe*, according to his father.

### **A walk in triumph**

The rough, leather-bound book with its name engraved in gold, and the initials S.S. carved beneath it, had a noticeable weight for its compact size. It had seen him through good and bad times and now it would comfort him once again.

Akata left the room in haste, pushing the turmoil of emotions back into the abyss from which they originated and as he hurried down one corridor after another, he thought of his mother. She must have been feeling just as much, if not more, pain as he felt and yet there she was, standing at the helm of West Afrika's war machine with the strength and determination of a hundred men. His father's voice echoed again.

*Will you throw yourself carelessly into battle for a dead man...a man who has already lived a full life? Will you leave your mother? Must she lose one more of her own? You say you do this for me, but it is for your own self...*

Akata shut the voice out. The chaos he had unleashed on his enemies went beyond the death of the king. The picture was bigger than this. His mother would not suffer the same fate and his people needed protection. The world and life as he knew it was on the line, and though he knew deep inside that it was anger that drove him, he didn't mind. In the skies or on the battlefield, anger gave way to rage, and through rage, victory had been his reward.

He was now in the Operations wing of the palace, and when he approached the Queen's War Room, all of the soldiers standing guard snapped to attention with crisp salutes. He entered the enclosed space and found himself alone. With a thought, his Digital Eyes relayed the time - 1159 Hours Local - Then the doors opened.

Akata bowed slightly as his mother entered, followed by her aide and a tall man wearing the insignia of Admiral across his shoulders.

"My son..." She hugged him "...sit..." and everyone did "...Admiral?"

The man conjured an image only be seen through their Dees. On it, a system located twenty thousand light years away moved slowly. Then the man spoke.

"Fifteen years ago, we planted one of our own into the Raiku Empire. Code-named Jha, her reports are responsible for the exposure of this invasion in good time, giving Earthfront and its allies the chance to respond accordingly. However, a few days ago, we received another message. In it, we learned of a much larger Raiku force headed to a solar system within a few hours range from Sol, but the transmission ended before any further details came through. If this information is correct, and we believe it to be, we must act accordingly. With the bulk of their army hidden so close, the Raiku can strike Sol in her weakened state and be victorious in their venture. As we speak, Earthfront is working on finding the Raiku's intended jump point in an attempt to destroy the System Gate there. This is where you come in..."

The man pointed to the digital image between them.

"...This is Ekai, a mining system made up of twenty five ice-worlds and dominated by a frozen sun. Be aware, it is one of the most dangerous places in the galaxy. There are no Starports, so you will be making your way there via System Gate. Once you have arrived, jump to Neeva..."

The image between them flashed across space and came to rest above a blue and silvery planet covered here-and-there with a thick, slowly moving mist.

"...Night-Train-Eight...a hauler, contracted to move between the Raiku systems, will be waiting there. A man who goes only by the name, Roban, captains it. He will be expecting you..."

"What if they are not there?" Akata cut in.

"Co-ordinates to our system gate in Ekai and further commands are already embedded in your Neural Link and will become accessible only under those circumstances. From Ekai, the miners will get you to Ora, the Raiku core system, but not to their central world. This task will be entirely up to you. You must find your way to I'Jin, their capital city on Gena. Info regarding our spy will also be available through the Neural at this point."

The image vanished.

Akata interrupted the Admiral again "A jump to the Raiku core would take about twenty days..."

"We know, but the information our spy possesses is priceless."

"I thought this information had already been received?"

"No..." His mother cut in "The message was cut short, but by the reports of other field assets, we have reason to believe there is more at stake than we first realized..."

Akata thought carefully for the moment and by the look in her eyes, decided to stay within his boundaries.

"And how do we know that she hasn't been captured, or worse?" he continued.

The Admiral spoke once more. "We don't, but she has not eluded Raiku authorities this long because she's inexperienced. We are very confident that she is still alive, though in hiding..."

"What about our...assets? Can't they verify her status?"

"All communications have been severed. We can no longer risk exposure of our operation. That's why you are to find and extract Jha. Night-Train-Eight will await you at a given location and you will return to Earth."

"Sounds simple..."

"Know this. Gena is monitored by Eos, a digital blanketing system, and though our contacts have assured us that they have found a way around this obstacle, you must be mindful of its existence at all times."

Akata nodded in agreement. Digital Blankets were standard security tech of many major cities but according to intelligence reports over the years, none rivalled that of the Raiku. With their city constantly mapped by live, computer generated imagery, every movement and action is live-monitored by the AI, and in some unverified cases, even predicted.

"When do I leave?"

"Now...There is no time to spare." Queen Ashanti answered.



**Time: 0100 Hours - Local**

Akata strapped himself into the cockpit of the Imala, a Starship given to him a year ago by his father. Equipped with Yoruba cannons and missiles designed for vacuum warfare, the ship could hold its own in almost any combat environment. As he readied the system for launch, he caught sight of his mother standing on a balcony across the bay. They were off the west-wing of the palace, where combat drones, manned fighters and MAV's stood ready to defend their kingdom if need be. Her cloak fluttered in the morning air and even at this distance he could see worry etched across her face.

"I'll be fine, Mamma..." He said it with a smile.

Her voice came back *"I know. But it is my job to worry about you..."*

As the third son of the Royal Court, he never cared for the throne. His passions, ever since he was a boy, had been born from time spent in the cockpits of Mecha and light aircraft piloted by his grandfather, the King at that time.

The flight director broke his reverie.

*"Imala...Palace Command has you on guidance. You are a go for flight. Bullet to System Gate on link..."*

*"Palace Command...Imala copies go for flight and Gate co-ords received."*

By his mental command, the ship vanished and maintained its camouflage as it lifted into the dark morning sky. Sensors indicated Raiku forces to the north and south but all was clear here and as the city of Accra fell away behind him, Akata accelerated and shot out of Earth's atmosphere.

"Captain..." The smooth voice of the ship's AI filled his ear.

"Mala..." He responded

*"Co-ords to Xed uploaded...Hyper-light on standby..."*

Akata engaged the ship's Eon Drive and jumped through space at eighty three point three-three-three times, times the speed of light.

\*\*\*\*\*

Forty-five minutes later, the prince exited hyper-light and the magnetics from a small System Gate slowed the ship to a crawl. This gate called Xed was nothing more than a thousand foot high, rotating cylinder with a mile-long rail beside it. Along this rail, thousands of lights blinked, running its length every five seconds.

Akata remembered his first hyperspace jump. He was twelve and his Father had taken them to Jnderra, a system fifteen light years from Sol. Since then, he had experienced the launch into hyperspace too many times to count. Yet, here he was...heart pounding against his chest and making a concerted effort to control his breathing. He would never get used to it.

Mala interacted with the unmanned space station and after a few minutes, Akata braced for the shock as bolts of electricity rippled along the rail, extended beyond it and embraced his ship, then launched the Imala into the slipstream of hyperspace.

## FACT

Three hundred years after The Exodus, after humanity first left for the stars, Venus was the second successfully mined planet in our solar system. Ever since, it has been a hub for Interstellar Haulers of all classes that dock at one of three space stations orbiting the planet.

Surface-side, beneath the ever-dark sky, mining facilities built from dense Eversteel, extract whatever the planet has to offer and Magnatech barges can often be seen ferrying ore and other materials from surface to vacuum.

Ishtar Terra, a plateau near the North Pole, is home to one of Earthfront's most top-secret military outposts. With surface temperatures near seven hundred degrees Fahrenheit, and where a perpetual cloud cover of sulfuric acid blots out the sun, the planet offers the perfect environment for government projects to go unnoticed and undetected.

**System: Ekai - 2000 Light Years from Sol**

**Planet: Lok**

The Imala exited hyperspace and the first noticeable thing as the induction system brought Akata back to consciousness, was the temperature reading. According to the information being streamed through his mind, this system was so cold, that matter here moved slower than anywhere else in the Milky Way and ahead of him, a galactic wonder hung in the deadness of space; a slowly undulating specter of gas and ice.

In its almost blinding glare, the only frozen sun known to man stood like an ancient guardian.

Nearby...fifty thousand kilometers away...the planet Lok floated eerily in the blackness. Its white surface, frozen solid by its parent star, shimmered like glass in sunlight as trillions of tons of dense gas remained almost in stasis, forming an eerie bridge between the two giants twenty three million kilometers apart.

*"Warning...gravitational vortex...structural destabilization imminent..."*

The ship alerted Akata of their impending doom and after entering the coordinates to their destination, Mala initiated her Eon Drive and they jumped through space.

An hour later, with the sensation of his mind arriving a few seconds before his body, Akata left hyper-light and was greeted by the monstrous world that was Neeva. Over fifty moons and a belt of frozen rocks the size of mountains, moved so slowly that it took ten earth years to complete their rotation around the planet. Here, interstellar ships extracted Nyxium; the core material used in the manufacturing of Eversteel.

It didn't take long to find Night-Train-Eight. The computer flooded Akata with information regarding the Hauler and he set a course toward it.

"Night-Train-Eight...Starship Imala requests guidance on link..."

*"Captain Akata...we have you on scan...go auto..."*

The cockpit vibrated ever so slightly as he switched from manual command to auto and the mining vessel's magnetic guidance drew him in, past monumental asteroids and rocks. Ahead, the hulking grey hull of Night-Train-Eight appeared a mere speck when compared to the monolith from which it was drilling. Its name, painted in yellow, followed by the Roman numerals for eight, ran from top to bottom. Beyond the freighter, the silvery blue, dayside surface of Neeva created a breathtaking backdrop. Roughly ten times the size of Earth it was a hostile, extreme world with slowly moving storms, and temperatures that would freeze nitrogen.

No mining facilities or space stations existed here, only ships captained by those willing to risk the trip.

The Imala slid into a narrow docking bay along the side of the Hauler. Guided by Digital Magnetics, the ride remained flawless all the way to touch down. Then powerful clamps locked it in place.

From the cockpit, Akata noticed a slim girl with thick, electric blue hair that stood up and out as though struck by lightning.

"You look too rugged to be a prince..." She shouted as he climbed down the access ladder from his spacecraft.

His feet hit the floor evenly "You look too young to be a Miner..."

The girl, no more than twenty, laughed, "Welcome to the Night-Train...right this way..." She gestured for him to follow.

Across the small, lonely hanger, they entered a lift that took them to another level high above the landing pad. When it came to a stop, he followed his escort into a corridor that was lined entirely on one side with floor to ceiling, triple-paneled Everglass windows. Beyond these, chunks of ice the size of hills and mountains stood almost perfectly still, thousands of kilometers apart but still tightly packed by astronomical standards.

"You ever been on a freighter before?"

Akata gazed for a moment at her slender figure covered almost entirely by her flight suit. The only skin visible was from her neck up, and around the slender neck, colorful tattoos formed intricate patterns.

"No, this is my first time."

"Ever been to the Raiku systems?"

"No, but I've seen much of them in digital walkthroughs..."

"Ha! Then you haven't seen anything yet..."

They stepped through a door that had opened with a hiss and entered the Command-Bridge.

"Prince Akata Kumasi..."

"Captain Roban..." Akata replied.

The older man nodded with respect and Akata did the same.

"My crew..." He moved his hand in an arc between the other people in the room "My Chief mate, Jesna..."

A well-put-together woman, about Akata's age, smiled and the way she did it made him think that her station was more than just a formal one.

"Second officer Franc..."

"With a Cee..." A rusty looking young man with an incredibly chiseled jaw line pointed a finger in the air as he chimed in.

"Third officer Willis..."

An older, more rounded and bald headed version of Franc smiled through missing teeth.

"Navigations specialist, Millennia..."

For a moment, Akata stood spellbound. The woman waving at him was as breathtaking as the view one would find after ascending the summit of a mountain in paradise, he thought. Moreover, by her purple skin, he recognized Millennia to be of Rokan Descent. Forty something light years from Sol and the only two habitable worlds in their system, the twin planets Roka and Rokus, gave all who dwelled beneath their dying suns, purple hues.

"...and you've met Tik-tik...our Deck cadet..."

Akata peeled his attention from the Rokan and turned to face the wild-eyed girl who had met him when he had first arrived. "Tik-tik..."

"They say I'm like a bomb..." she replied before anyone else could "...but they're wrong. I have full control of myself. Bombs don't."

Akata wasn't sure if he should smile or not. This crew, left up to his judgement, looked questionable however if his mother believed in them, then so did he.

"It is a pleasure to meet you all and I thank you for your accommodations. Captain, when do we leave this system?" He moved toward and stood beside Roban, gazing out at the huge rocks that made up the outer ring of Neeva's mining belt.

"We'll be ready for departure in thirty minutes and E.T.A to our System Gate would be three hours. From there, it should take about an hour more to prep for inter-system jump, so four and some hours overall. Strap in."

The bridge came alive as everyone took their places and moved with efficiency that looked more military than industrial. Akata took the seat

assigned to him and slipped the X shaped harness in place, careful not to look toward the beautiful woman nearby.

"What do I call you...?"

Akata looked at Tik-tik as she continued

"...As a prince, is referring to you by your first name proper?"

He thought carefully before giving a reply and even though he was locked eye-to-eye with the young girl, he could sense the others waiting for his answer.

"Akata will do just fine."

"Oh...a down-to-surface prince...Cap'n, can we keep him?"

"Leave our guest alone, Tik."

Akata ignored the captain's response "Tik-tik, what's your real name?"

"Hannah..."

"And where are you from, Hannah?"

"Gorse Nine..." She crossed her two index fingers to form an X and lifted a thumb beside it.

"That's in Ara'ad, in the outer spiral..."

"Yeah, and it's gorgeous...You ever been there?"

Ara'ad was a system located in the outer spiral of the Milky Way closest to Sol. Around its parent star, nineteen gas giants hosted countless moons, most on which mankind had made their homes.

"No, I have never had a reason to see it."

"You should. Me, and Millennia met Cap'n Roban while he was on a mining run there a few years back..."

Akata used the opportunity to catch a glimpse of the attractive woman.

"My parents left Rokus when I was seventeen and moved us to Ara'ad."

She answered his unspoken question without looking away from her screen.

"Okay, kill the chit-chat. We're ready for high-light..."

Roban interrupted, and everyone braced for the initial lurch. The Captain engaged the behemoth's Eon Drive and after a few anxious seconds, all sound vanished as they shot into space.

\*\*\*\*\*

Three hours later, the Hauler came out of hyper-light and decelerated with an unnatural force that made Akata close his eyes to control the twisting feeling throughout his gut. After years in the confinement of small, pressurized cockpits, he wasn't used to the experience of an open Bridge, even though it offered similar protection.

"We've got an hour before jump. Tik, see Akata to his quarters..." He eyed the prince sternly "Get refreshed and changed if necessary and for God's sake, don't eat anything until we're in Ora."

"Will do Captain..."

Tik-tik led Akata to a cabin one level below the Bridge. His 'quarters' was nothing more than a cubbyhole with a cot and a blast-shower that stung his skin as he stood beneath it, yet somehow, it was a surprisingly comfortable space. After a few minutes, he emerged into the corridor in a fresh suit of clothes that matched the black and yellow uniforms of Night-Train-Eight.

"Ya see?" His young guide sang, as she looked him up and down "You fit right in. You'll pass for one of us any day and no Raiku would ever know otherwise."

"For all our sakes, I hope so." Akata replied.

"Are you always this serious?"

He considered her words for a moment "Only when all of our lives are on the line."

"Hmm..." She spun playfully and walked away "...you might be surprised to find that having a little fun could save lives just as well."

"You sound as though you know this from experience."

"Oh I do. On my home world, if you can make Marlo the local arms dealer laugh, he won't kill you. Even if you were caught trespassing on his property."

Once again, they entered the ship's Command-Bridge and took their seats.

"Why were you on his property?"

"Not this again..." Franc, the Second officer cut in.

"What? It's a good story..." Tik-tik reacted with a whine.

He turned to Akata "I swear, every time we hear her tell it to some new and poor soul, it sounds a bit more exciting than the last. What once was a five minute tale has now become a short story...I swear..."

"Ignore him...he's just jealous he's got nothing interesting to talk about..." Tik shot Franc a dirty glance.

Franc chuckled and without interruption, the energetic blue-haired girl told of the search for a dog that led to her capture ten miles from home, and two days of tortured imprisonment that ended the moment she made the Kingpin known as Marlo, laugh.

What Akata noticed however, was though everyone seemed to share the Second officer's opinion, the looks of anger at what Marlo had done to her was clearly evident, especially on the face of Franc. According to her, Millennia had been the only reason she wasn't roaming Gorse Nine an empty shell without a purpose, and by the Rokan's body language throughout certain parts of the account, there was definitely more to this tale.

By the time Tik finished, they were ready for launch and Akata felt scarred. He ached for the girl as though she were his own sister. If what she said was true, then this man, Marlo, should answer for his crimes, but the questions would have to wait. Twenty days in gravimetric stasis awaited him and the next time he opened his eyes, he would be in Raiku space.

Roban broke the silence and gestured for Akata's attention "It's time to jump. When we get to our destination, Raiku authorities will board and scan us

at their blockade. At that time, you will be a tech-boy assisting one of our Deck Engineers in one of the engine rooms.”

“What about my ship?”

“Your ship has been dismantled and placed within a storage area...salvaged parts for sale, as usual...” He stopped Akata with a raised palm “All is well, we’ll put her back together again by the time you return, and in good order. We have some of the best ship builders and mechanics from our system, onboard.”

“Okay, I have no choice. So be it.” Akata responded, still troubled by the thoughts of his precious Imala in pieces.

Without another word, Roban interacted with the System Gate’s AI and after a few seconds of mind-bending forces and a jolt of electrical current, it threw them into hyperspace.

## FACT

Almost a thousand years ago, our ancestors faced the challenge of capturing and disposing massive amounts of spent rocket parts, debris from surface-to-vacuum missions, and dead satellites that had cluttered Earth’s high and low-orbital zones; all efforts had proven futile. However, during the year of 2035AD, when a scientist working on creating a miniature replica of our sun had succeeded in keeping it stable, Sol Technology was born and Magnetic Technology (Magnatech) was its unexpected twin.

With the newfound ability to sustain magnetic forces powerful enough to corral Earth’s space-junk, we solved the problem. Within a few years, though we did not get rid of our trillion dollar garbage problem, the cluster was reshaped into a relatively flat disc, throwing them into geo-synchronized orbit and giving our home what is officially known as, The Iron Band, more commonly referred to as Earth’s, Junk Rings.

## IRON FIVE, DAWGS OF WAR

### **System: Sol God-fist Armada Iron-Five**

The Condor's induction system wakes us from our hyperspace slumber and alerts from enemy ships locking onto our position flood the cockpit.

*"God-Fist...Russian Space Command has you on scan...anchor at co-ords zero, zero, five, echo. Get synced and engage enemy at will."*

The message comes over all comms across our fleet's network, and around Earth, it is a sight to behold. Raiku Dreadnaughts and Battle cruisers, along with Command Centers and Carriers, hang suspended above my home world as our forces engage them in battle.

*"God-Fist command..."* I connect to our lead ship "Captain Richard Gant of Condor flight requests detach and Iron Five mission-go..."

*"Iron Five...clearance approved...you are good for detach...good luck out there..."*

We are four hundred thousand kilometers from my home and ten minutes later, our Magnatech slows us as we approach Earth's Junk rings. Above us, billions of pieces of dead satellites and other debris revolve around our planet and stand as a reminder of our old ways.

A calm but commanding voice comes to my ear *"Condor...Switchblade Flight is with you. We're your escort for today, welcome to Earth..."*

*"Switchblade...Condor copies escort...we're with you all the way in...how's the weather?"*

*"It's a shit storm...gonna have to cut a path through it..."*

*"Copy that..."* I break the connection with the captain of twenty fighters as they prepare to accompany us through atmosphere, then my team and I release our harnesses.

As they all leave the cockpit, Mirana takes control of the ship and I linger for a moment.

*"You ready for this?"*

She's not looking my way, with fingers tapping out codes and such on invisible keys while I wait for her response.

*"As ready as I'll ever be..."*

She turns to me, her real eyes hidden in the dimness beneath the shimmer of her Digital ones. *"Don't keep me waiting soldier..."*

*"Aye aye..."* I give a casual salute but can't help the worry.

*"Go Husky! I've got this..."*

*"Never doubted you for a second..."* I nod and walk away.

\*\*\*\*\*



My DAWG is open and waiting and after it seals me into the cushy interior, pinpricks along the inside of my scalp signal the digital connection of machine and me. Then the Condor shakes as we begin atmospheric entry.

This trip to Earth should have been one for pleasure but here I am, worried about things over which I have no control. Betrayed by my best friend and seeking answers to unanswered questions, I am about to play dodge ball with death.

The cabin shudders under the intense exit through atmosphere.

*"Iron-Five..." Mirana is on our open comms "...release in thirty..."*

The floor beneath us splits apart and each half swings downward. On our digital displays, a projected red light flashes a few times before turning green, then the mechanisms holding us in place disengage and our Mechs drop into the skies high above the Atlantic Ocean.

As we fall, the beautiful spectacle that is Earth appears with stunning clarity and the DAWG automatically syncs my flight with the Condor. High altitude clouds far below come into view and like a swarm of angry bees, a squadron of Scavenger MAVs, the Raiku equivalent to second generation Earthfront Mecha, are on an intercept course.

*"Captain Gant..."* Our escort lead is in my ear, *"We'll keep the bulk of them off you. Maintain heading with Condor..."*

*"Copy that...Iron-Five will deal with whatever gets by you..."* Switching to my team now *"...Hound..."*

*"Alpha..."*

*"Stay with Mirana...no matter what..."*

*"Will do..."*

*"Condor...?"*

*"Alpha..."*

She's calm, I liked this about her back on Keden...I like it now too.

*"Hound is your wingman to HQ. The rest of us will keep the air clear..."*

*"Copy...hound is wingman..."* She responds.

*"Alpha..."* Akita comes to me *"...tally on hostiles...engaging...I got the two on the left."*

*"Going high..."* Pitbull alerts us as he skyrockets to intercept his targets.

*"I'm with you..."* Dane says, as she backs him up.

I turn my attention to what's left of the incoming enemy flight. The distance between us makes a missile fight too risky for either side, so high-energy bullets carve lines through the air and the Scavengers rip past me at twice the speed of sound.

I turn as easily as a hockey player does on ice and my Auto Cannons erupt, finding their mark and tearing the first enemy apart. On my right, two Raiku pilots coordinate their attack, one high, one low. Three missiles leave the one above as his partner keeps a steady stream of bullets coming my way.

With a digitally augmented mind, I make the split second decision and deploy my speed brakes. It's like hitting a wall of pressurized air, but the cushy interior of my cockpit prevents my body from succumbing to the effects of this maneuver and I drop beneath the onslaught, rotating as my Vulcans lock onto the incoming rockets and blast them into nothing.

Bullets ping off my armor; I roll under my opponents, out of their line of sight and before they could re-acquire their target, cut into the first one with a steady stream of gunfire.

The Scavenger disintegrates in a cloud of fire and flying parts. His wingman launches himself high into the sky, burning with everything he has, but he won't be escaping me that easily; the Mecha under my control lurches upwards in pursuit.

*Forty thousand*

*Forty five thousand*

*Fifty thousand*

The Raiku pilot rotates and opens fire, flying backwards as he plummets back to Earth. My computer is still giving me hundreds of choices per second, information flashes by like lightning. Out of the corner of my eye, another Scavenger swoops down, guns rattling and I select an option never seen before.

A wave of magnetic energy explodes outward from my armor, reducing the impacts just enough for me to bring my Vulcans in line, and with one mechanized arm pointing toward the first of my foes and the second at the newcomer, I squeeze both triggers.

A flash of my team in battle answers the semiconscious question in the back of my mind. Everyone is still alive and kicking, according to the Neural.

I ask for more power and the DAWG responds, closing the distance between the first of my targets. He rolls away, desperate to escape but I'm too close, the first missile hits him before he could deploy his counter-measures and in a bright flash, he's gone.

The computer carves an image of the enemy behind into my mind. Without thought, I slow to a complete stop and at twenty five thousand feet, the Scavenger rushes past. Four Brimstones leave my machine and track their victim like hungry predators. Wispy vapor trails, the tendrils of death himself, hang like spider webs in their wake, ending in a hollow boom and a ball of flaming parts.

*"Iron-Five..."*

*"Skies are clear boss..."* Pitbull's voice comes back to me.

*"Rally with Condor..."*

*"Already here..."* He reply's again

*"On you Huski..."* Akita answers

*"Almost there Alpha..."* It's Dane now

We regroup with Mirana and over the ocean, heated air-to-air battles between Earth's united forces and Raiku invaders dot the expanse but we press on.

"More Scavs inbound..."

"I see 'em..."

At three times the speed of sound, another wave of enemy fighters light up my mind as the onboard AI screams in my ear.

"Going high..." I call my target across our open channel.

"I'm on you..." Akita now

"We'll clean up the rest..." Pitbull jumps in.

I'm gunning toward my targets; four Scavengers closing the gap fast. I open fire. Bullets clip and tap against my armor and in the blink of an eye, we flash past each other. I sense Akita below and off to my right, angling with me as we enter a turn that brings me around and within sight of our foes. The four of them separate, two high and the other pair split, circling around on either side of us, The Roman Helmet. I smile at the futile manoeuver. My targeting system finds the two above.

"Cat one...Cat two...!" I shout it to my wingman and the Catalysts leave my launcher, streaking toward their targets.

"I've got the one on the right..." Akita alerts me as he pulls away, guns rattling.

My missiles won't hit their targets, but they give me enough time to engage the Raiku coming around on my left unhindered. He drops beneath me but my DAWG follows with little effort. He's trying to buy time, warding me off until his team can reenter the fight.

His effort is useless.

I demand power from my machine and zip past the plummeting Scavenger, then roll toward him, bring my guns to bear, launch two more missiles and as the Catalysts hit their mark, open fire.

Tracking alerts fill my senses. The other two Scavs are on me, accompanied by five Hell Hounds...the Raiku missile equivalent to Earthfront's Brimstones. My computer hits me with evasive manoeuvres that flow through my head like a river in a deluge. Hundreds of chaff leave smoking trails in my wake, and with immense effort, I drag myself out of a thousand mile per hour dive with only fifty feet to spare.

A groove across the surface of the ocean sprays into the air behind me and I rocket into the heavens once again.

"Coming to you Alpha...!"

"Negative, Pitbull. Stay with Condor..."

"Copy that..."

Via the Neural, I feel Pitbull's turmoil as he forces himself to obey my order and I hope to God that it was a good call.

"Akita...?"

"On him..." He comes back.

We have our enemies between us and as Akita launches his attack from below, I do the same above. Within seconds, Akita hovers beside me as what's left of our foes fall piece by piece to the ocean beneath us.

"Let's go home..."

"Copy that Alpha."

A half hour later, we enter Northern Alliance airspace and our coms come alive.

*"Welcome home Iron-Five...Wichita Control has you on approach...link and rep live, over..."*

"Wichita Command...Captain Richard Gant is lead at angel's twenty...skies are clear with tag-along...Condor is weapons free and requests green light for dock..."

*"Condor has guidance...green-light is active...maintain course to Sheppard Battle Command...Iron Five...stand by for tasking...redirect to Cyclops is in effect..."*

"Copy tasking and redirect..." I reply as the change in frequency and voice takes place in my head.

*"Iron Five, Cyclops has you on link...relay status...go ahead..."*

*"Iron five...inbound...Five DAWGs...ready for war...over..."*

*"Iron Five...turn heading on link...maintain altitude and hold..."*

*"Maintaining..."*

The underside of the Condor flashes in the corner of my eye as Mirana peels away from the formation and digital lines appear in front of me that would lead to our new assignment. Under the direction of Cyclops, our eyes in the sky forty thousand feet above us, we stay on course, six hundred miles from base and cruising at twenty thousand feet over a war torn scene of devastated cities, where endless ruins stain the sky with smoky brush strokes.

*"Iron Five...bullet to objective on link...Raiku Warlord-Class Battle Cruiser is in bubble and on current vector...intercept at angel's thirty with multiple bogeys inbound...Switchblade flight will be with you on strike...you are cleared, weapons hot...engage on sight..."*

A jolt of anxiety ripples through me, my heart rate increases and I take a deep breath of purified oxygen. We to find and destroy a battleship capable of wiping out an entire state and it's in bubble, meaning that it's passed through atmosphere and is now barreling toward us.

In the distance, a black dot appears and under enhancement, the battleship and all of her escorts come into view. Through our Neural Link, a wave of energy within the void of time and space plasters a vision of our incoming forces across my mind.

*"Iron five...Switchblade flight is twenty seconds out and engaging..."*

The Earthfront flight leader makes contact and the wild emotion in his voice in combat comes through on our open channel.

“Copy that...we’ve got eyes on the cruiser...Iron Five, execute two way split...I’m going for the bridge...” I respond, leaning forward, urging my DAWG onward; slicing through the air at twice the speed of sound. In my head, I locate my objective, maneuvering deeper into the smoke and fire filled sky as the Battleship retaliates. Bullets bounce off my armor but with the aid of the onboard AI, my DAWG is able to evade the ship’s heavy artillery. The battle Cruiser’s command bridge is now directly ahead.

“Going ballistic...Cat one, Cat two, Cat three...” I shout to the team, squeezing my triggers as the cockpit shakes under the kickback of three spent missiles and the rattle of my auto-cannons.

A line of superheated bullets bridge the gap between us as my missiles draw counter fire from the Battle Cruiser’s defense system. With my assault in full blaze, the steady barrage of gunfire connects to the Everglass around the Raiku Command Bridge and the upper deck cracks, splinters and then explodes.

“Iron Five...Command Bridge is down...clear out!”

Pitbull comes back “All hostiles have been neutralized...clearing out...”

Across the stern of the monstrous vessel, with its cannons and defense systems now dead, I fall over the edge and drop into the nothingness between it and Earth’s surface. I search for the rest of my team and find them spread out and away from the doomed ship as R34 Marks; Magnetic Air Repair and Capture Ships quickly take control of it. These mid-sized machines would slow the crippled vessel in a controlled descent, allowing a smooth air to surface transition without the risk of a catastrophic impact.

With the cheers and farewells of Switchblade long behind us, my team and I swoop into Sheppard Battle Command. In the distance and around us, fighters, MAVs and other advanced machines of war move in and out of the bustling base at different altitudes. Our approach takes us to a wing of the complex made up of many circular platforms stacked irregularly upon each other. Rows of shimmering Everglass line the almost reflective discs floor by floor and each landing zone boasts the large Earthfront E, at their center.

Beyond this spectacle, two colossal frigates rise into the air, hanging above ground like two pillars of war. Magnetic Technology keeps them in place, allowing these beasts to transition from surface to vacuum without the full burn of their monstrous engines. These deep space battleships will assist our forces beyond atmosphere and I pray they return in good health.

Touchdown is smooth and in no time, we are out of our DAWGs and a young lieutenant leads the way along a corridor. Outside the floor-to-ceiling windows that line the walkway. In the distance, a portrait of more ships and the like, shimmer and dance beneath the noon sunlight. Never in our history has there been a global invasion. Never in my life have I seen activity on this scale at any military base.

“Gentlemen...”

General Hawk greets us, drawing my attention away from what’s happening outside.

“Sir...!”

We respond with crisp salutes and enter a dimly lit briefing room.

“Welcome Commander...” He greets Mirana as she enters.

“Iron-Five, welcome home. As you have seen, this invasion has us hard-pressed and running out of time. You did well with that battleship but that’s a drop in the bucket compared to the big picture. We’re holding the Raiku at bay, yet as we speak, there are battles raging throughout Sol, though the bulk of our enemy forces are concentrated on Earth and Mars. Thanks to Kedeni and Galactic Nine reinforcements however, we have gained some ground. At this time, you will assist us here...”

He opens a digital map with the location of an intended target.

“Raiku elites have set up shop at various locations within our borders and a joint strike, code named Operation Slingshot, is in effect. Olympus Command will be monitoring the raid and you will be dropped in via high altitude insertion...”

“Boots on the ground...?” Akita cuts in.

“Right you are soldier...” The General continues, “...Fifteen teams will carry out simultaneous attacks on each location and you’ll be one of these teams. Your objectives are to take out all enemies on the compound and destroy whatever vessels they have docked there at that time. Extraction will be twenty minutes in so it’s kick-ass-haul-ass. Departure’s at oh hundred hours...any questions?”

“Why not a Mech drop?” Akita again

“...Because you won’t stand a chance. They’ve set up anti-air guns that’ll tear you to shreds before you could get anywhere near them. This mission calls for subtlety and precision.”

“Are there prisoners on site?” Hound asks

“No. All systems are unmanned and run entirely by the AI. The guards stationed there were killed in the initial assault.”

“These bastards take no prisoners...” Pitbull now

“That’s why we’re returning the favor. Huski, you’ll take point. Akita and Hound, you’re primary support, Pitbull, you’re on recon.” He turns his attention to Maria “Dane. You are not a member of our service however, Galactic Nine Legate, Chandra, has cleared you for temporary duty, you’ll serve as Pitbull’s backup. Commander O’Canon, drop and extraction will be on you. Iron Five...get some shuteye and I’ll see you in a few.”

I check the time as we grab something to eat from the mess hall. It’s ten pm and the place is just as active now as any day. Mirana throws down the last of her energy drink beside me while Akita and Hound are at it again. At the end

of the table, Pitbull and Maria are lost in a discussion about engines and jump drives and I smile. Mixed emotions plague me. The team is still here. We are still Iron Five, but one of us is missing.

*Terri...what happened to you?*

I remember him clearly. He was six and I was seven. His mother had brought him to our family barbecue and we'd been brothers ever since. We grew up together, dragged each other through flight school and had our share of adventures...then he died, but now he lives...and in the end, he turned out to be the mastermind behind what could have been Iron Five's demise.

"Hey..." Mirana jars me from my reverie.

"Hey..."

"Are you okay?"

"Yeah, I'm good...just thinking..."

"About Terrier...?"

Her eyes entrance me "You know me too well..."

"Discernment is my job, and I've dealt with Iron Five long enough to know you..."

Her words take me back to our beginnings. They were unpleasant times; long deployments to her base back on Keden where we had our fair share of clashes. The scar running from the middle of her forehead, down her left eye and to her lower jaw, draws my gaze. Earning it during the hostile takeover of her father's moon base at seventeen was impressive.

"Does this ever bother you?" She asks quietly, still staring at me.

"No...we all have our scars, and oftentimes it is the ones we can't see that hurt the most."

"Well said..."

"Believe me, if I wore the scars that haunt me day and night, I'd be hideous."

"Am I hideous?"

This is the first time she's ever mentioned her scar in this light. Back on Aaram, I had learned of its origins and of her father, but no more.

I wish we were alone in this moment "Far from it...I see a beautiful, battle-hardened woman, who makes me wish this war was over and done with..."

Her eyes probe mine, her mind dissecting and grinding my words into pieces in search of the truth behind them.

"Wrap it up guys!" Akita brings us back to our current reality.

It's time to go, so we put the questions and answers behind us for now.

## Time: 2300 Hours - Local

The hangar is ablaze with activity. Ships preparing for vacuum, men and women loading and unloading equipment, maintenance crews busy at work, all a part of a bigger whole that fills the air with rhythmic noise.

It's been a while since I've seen warfare outside of my Mecha. The combat suit sticking to me like an extra layer of skin feels weird and the carbon-fiber skeleton woven into its fabric borders on the fringes of uncomfortable. A young officer meets us with a salute and leads the way to our drop-ship. The iridescent aircraft stands like a giant metal bug, mimicking the color of the floor and walls around it. Retractable wings tucked away, reminds me of the beetles we used to catch on our farm here on Earth during my childhood.

*"Iron Five..."* General Hawk crackles across our comms *"Wheels up in ten...drop is a go at angel's sixty. Get in, get it done and get gone. Good luck and God's speed."*

"Aye General..." I respond as we climb the ramp at the back of the ship.

"Huski..." Mirana pauses before entering the cockpit. "...stay alive...that's an order."

"Will do..." I respond.

"Ready-up...!" The Jump Master, a young Marine responsible for our insertion, shouts across the wide cabin.

We all help each other, pulling on and securing Drop Packs; flat backpacks that use magnetic technology to control our descent through the air, then strap into seats opposite each other as the engines come to life. The compartment shudders. Mirana lifts off and the ramp seals shut just as we glide out of the hangar and into the night sky. Rumbling into the air, my Dees reveal our altitude, speed and location. Hawk has already uploaded the mission data and with a thought, it streams across my eyes until we level out at sixty thousand feet.

A half hour later, the lights in the cabin flash red.

"Link up...!" The Jump Master is on us again and we activate the digital magnetics that connect us to the aircraft's AI, then the ramp opens into the blackness of the night. "Check Drop Packs...!"

We do one last inspection.

"Stand by!" He shouts again.

Sounds of rushing wind and low rumbling engines assail us. The lights flash green.

"Go! Go! Go!"

One by one, we run the short length of the cabin. The edge of the ramp passes under my feet and wild winds take me as I hurl into nothingness.

"Alpha Team...Sync up!"



Akita and Hound connect digitally to my suit while Pitbull and Dane detaches from us on another flight path. At fifty two thousand feet, I push my head forward and we drop from the heavens at the speed of sound.

Clouds embrace us and in a flash, disappear into the night. The ground rushes into view and the Magnetic Technology in our packs kick in, slowing our fall until we hover just above the tree line on the outer edges of the compound.

Slowly, we descend to the Earth.

“Alpha...” Pitbull’s quiet voice is in my ear “...We’re dug in...hold position...”

On the highest rooftop, two hundred meters away, my Dees show him and Maria as they secure the platform and begin surveillance. He comes to me again.

“One ship, north-east end, unmanned. Watchtowers, north, south and west side active...Two tangos per, anti-air launchers fixed. Operations Module set up, east end...Five-man unit on guard. Digital shows group of three inside. Three-man-units on patrol...Eastern and western gates current...marking them...now.”

Imprints of the men on station appear across our Digital Eyes and I give the order “Pitbull...tower guards are yours...Akita, set all charges. Hound and I will move on the Module. Take out patrols on exit.”

Akita’s suit warps, blending into the surrounding foliage and the rest of us do the same. I wait until he’s out of sight before moving low and steady toward the main entrance.

“Tower guards acquired...awaiting order...” Pitbull again

As the patrol moves onto the next gate, Hound and I run with enhanced speed, closing the distance between us and the guards outside of the Module within seconds.

“Go...” I give Pitbull and Dane the order.

Our strike is swift. The first Raiku soldier to see us ripple into sight as our camo disengages convulses as I squeeze the trigger. Hound cuts the other three down with suppressed rounds as I kill the fifth, and with the same momentum, we breach the doors to the portable tent-like structure.

Once inside, two of the men draw weapons and we end them quickly, but the third is unarmed with hands raised and smiling.

“Boss...we gotta go.” Pitbull alerts me and by the sound of it, he’s on the move. “Alarm’s tripped...reinforcements are on their way...”

I squeeze the trigger. “Akita?”

“Huski...” He comes back breathing rapidly.

“How’s the weather?”

“Incoming storm...charges armed...patrols are on you...”

Explosions rock the compound and flashes of fire illuminate the darkness. The anti-air guns and the parked aircraft are no more but we’re not out of

trouble yet. Hound and I exchange glances and I take point as we run through the open yard and vanish into the shadows but it's too late and gunfire erupts. A bullet hits my armor, disabling the camo but deflects away safely. The impact knocks the wind out of me.

Hound opens fire, forcing our enemy to take cover.

We cringe behind two thick pylons as bullets cut into the Evercrete like high-powered chisels.

*We will not last long here.*

"Akita, where are you?"

"About to save your asses..." He comes back.

Gunfire crackles across the space as Akita cuts through our enemies from behind.

"Let's go...!"

His voice hits me with relief. Pitbull and Dane force the remaining Raiku to get to safety as their sniper rounds split the heads of those out in the open and within the minute, we are on the move.

With the anti-air gone, I open communications.

"Gunner..."

Mirana's voice comes back "On my way but you've got a Dragon inbound, get to cover..."

With a loud whine of burning engines, a Mecha suddenly appears. Descending from the night sky like a demon, it hits the ground hard, splitting the earth apart, kicking up chunks of dirt and rock and expanding dust.

The matte black machine locks on to us and turns his cannons in our direction and as they light up, bullets slam into him from above, drawing his attention.

*Mirana*

The drop ship moves around the compound, just out of the Dragon's line of fire, but it won't be for long.

"Akita...do you have any more of those charges?"

"Yeah..."

"Give them to me..."

The rest of the team fires into the walking battle tank, to no avail. Its armor is too thick.

"Go...go...go..." I shout to them as I run toward the Mecha.

The sound that comes from it hastens my steps. He's about to jump into the sky and once he does, we are all dead. The robotic skeleton in my suit drives me faster and with a lunge that takes all of my willpower, I hit the top of the machine's knee joint, clamp the charges in place and push off with all of my might.

From this height, I fall hard, hitting the ground with enough force to break bones and though the robotic frame of my suit cushions most of it, the shock to my knees stabs me with pain.

Unable to stand, someone lifts me to my feet.

"I gotcha..."

Hound is with me. I pull the trigger on the detonator just as the Raiku pilot launches into the air. The explosion is monumental. Hound shields me as the heat from the blast washes over us, and the shockwave that follows a split second later lifts us from our feet. All sound merges into one high-pitched screech that eventually fades away and it takes a moment for the dust to settle.

I am dazed but still alive. Akita and Dane frees us from the rubble and shards of debris while Mirana brings the drop ship around in one clean swoop. Pitbull stands guard, guns ready and within the minute, we are in the air and on our way home.

*"Iron Five..." Hawk's voice hits me like an unexpected slap "Mission update...Intel report's high priority target and armed escort in your sector...Raiku Spec Ops Commander Dahvad Kaga...known chemical weapons specialist and tactician. Target is surface-side...spooked and on the move. We believe he is attempting to evade air patrols and surveillance...this is a priority live capture unless fired upon, in which case you are to leave nothing behind. Mission Ident altered...operation Lone wolf is a go."*

*"Copy mission update and high priority target capture; Lone wolf is go"*

*"Rep live on mission complete"*

*"Roger that..."*

The com goes dead. The image of our new target appears across my Dees and I remain at the edge of the open bay as Mirana speeds along a lonely stretch of road, out of the wasted city and across open plains.

Sixty feet above ground, the world flashes by in a blur of color, darkened by the blackness of night and lack of streetlights, many of which lie destroyed by the invasion.

*"Target acquired...engaging..."* Mirana's words prepare us for what is to happen next as the aircraft slows rapidly, tilting in a tight arc with the sound of its guns rocking the air around us.

We jump from our positions as soon as she touches down and I flinch in pain, but the skeleton in my suit enables me to go beyond my injury as we close in on the disabled vehicle ahead of us. In a cloud of dust, we encircle our victim, guns up, pointed at the scene of mangled hover trucks and smoldering bodies that once protected the Raiku Commander.

Shots ring out. Akita and Dane both hit the front of the vehicle containing our prize, killing the driver and bodyguard, the windscreen shatters into crimson shards.

"Hands...!" I shout the command to the man in the rear seat, the only survivor of his ordeal.

Pitbull rips the door away with augmented strength and I drag the fuming man onto the Evercrete to secure him. Then we pile into our waiting Aircraft and Mirana lifts us into the night sky.

"Olympus Command...Iron Five is inbound...Lone wolf is alive and in custody."

*"Good job...Bullet to Base and prep for debrief and tasking update."*

*"Copy that."*

I turn to the rest of my team and then catch a glimpse of our captive. His eyes blaze with rage but I ignore it. Taking pleasure in his anger, I smile and turn my attention to the outside world.

### **Sheppard Battle Command**

**Time: 0245 Hours - Local**

Mirana takes us in and with a noticeable thud, we touch down and the ramp opens outward. A medic team is already here. In no time, they have Hound and I juiced, bandaged and patched to go while armed guards in heavy gear drag our prisoner from the ship and out of sight.

*"Iron Five..." Hawk comes across our comms "...Get cleaned up. Debriefing is in twenty, don't keep me waiting."*

*"Alpha..."*

Mirana falls in beside us as we hustle to our quarters.

*"I'm okay Commander...just a little shock to the knees."*

*"A little shock...? You had to be lifted onto the ship..."*

*"Well, walking is easier now thanks to the medics and whatever it is they've got in those needles. I'm fine, believe me, I've seen worse days."*

She looks at me the way my mother did when she didn't trust me as a kid.

*"I'll be keeping my eye on you soldier..." She says it sternly*

*"And I you..." I smile, but she does not return it.*

Eleven minutes later, we're all, minus Mirana, in a room deep within the heart of the base. This meeting area is a small, dimly lit, windowless room and within minutes, they have extracted all of the data recorded during our mission from our Digital Eyes.

*"Congrats on the mission success...all of our soldiers have returned in one piece and through your efforts, we were able to put an end to Raiku occupation in these locations. You have definitely earned your day of rest and recovery; however, there are new developments that demand immediate action..."*

The image of a star system materializes and hangs in the air between us.

*"Recent reports from Afrika's Intersystem Network have revealed a massive Raiku battle-fleet en route to Sol. As far as we know, they are going to leapfrog the attack and should be out of hyperspace in about ten days. This gives us time, not much, but just enough to find the system from which they will be basing their final launch. From this unknown location, our enemies can commence its follow-up attack on Sol within twenty-four hours, dealing us a fatal blow. If these reports are correct, then we can kiss our world goodbye..."*

“So this current attack...they’re softening us up...”

“On point Gant...” Hawk eyes me with an unnerving grin “We believe that the primary objectives of the current invasion are to weaken us and take out our planetary and system-based defensive arrays. Once the defense network is down, a much larger force can swoop in and finish the job. Allied reinforcements are on their way but they may not arrive in time. If that Starfleet launches, we are doomed. Iron-Five...the Condor and your *Dynamic Automated War-Gear*...Galactic Nine’s *property*, might I remind you...have already been reloaded and prepped for departure tomorrow. Your new tasking orders are as follows. Find the System in which they intend to set up shop, preferably before they get there, locate their Jump Gate and destroy it. Huski, I won’t lie to you, if the Raiku are already there when you find it, then this mission will most likely be a one way trip...”

“Aye...”

I give the only response I can and he goes on

“Bullet to System Gate Ares, co-ords will be uploaded in flight. Your destination is Ayo, in the Csyro System...” He points to the live digital image “...Our contact will meet you there and with luck, he will have the location of the Raiku Jump Gate by then. The Condor has been fitted with three Nova-class missiles. They will deliver the punch needed to destroy any System Gate large enough to jump such a force...”

“What about Mirana?” I ask as calmly as possible.

The look on his face is unreadable, but something tells me that I have just confirmed his suspicions about us.

“*Commander O’Canon*...is being debriefed and will be assigned duties here on Earth...”

“Sir...” Akita jumps in “...What’s our window after we launch?”

“Yesterday...” Hawk lets the answer hang between us for a moment “Until we know of their destination, true time and distance are anyone’s guess. Carry out your mission as quickly as possible. You are dismissed.”

\*\*\*\*\*

“Can you believe this?”

Akita steps up to our table with a large plate of grub and annoyance plastered across his face.

“What now?” Hound responds without looking up from his food.

“I simply asked her to dinner...”

Pitbull approaches us laughing, “No...you were sloppy...”

“That’s not the point...”

“From the start Akita...” I reset the conversation before he starts blabbing.

“The girl at the buffet, I asked her to dinner...didn’t see Hawk standing nearby.”

We all laugh at his distress and then Mirana captures my attention from across the hall.

"I'll catch up with you guys later."

"Go get her Alpha..." Hound says, grinning devilishly.

"Ahwoo..." Pitbull joins him now.

"Mind your business." I walk away, not giving them a chance to respond.

She is beautiful, with her red hair in its usual tight bun.

"Hey..."

"Hi..." I reply

"Let's go somewhere private..."

I nod in agreement and follow her lead.

Out of the hall, down a corridor and into an elevator, we rise to a quiet balcony garden high above the ground. By the look of the place, we are somewhere in the senior officer's wing.

"Am I even allowed to be here?"

"If I say so, then you are."

I hold her gaze for a moment "Mirana, we're leaving in the morning. Iron-Five has new orders..."

"I know..."

She takes a seat beside a flowing fountain and I plop down beside her.

"Take this..." I send her a file from my Digital Eyes to hers "...Terri's parents. If it's possible, keep an eye on them for me..."

"I will, but you can do that when you get back..."

"Let's be real, if the Raiku are already there when we arrive, then we're on a one way ticket..."

"No you're not..."

"Hey..." I touch her chin awkwardly. For the first time in a long time, I am nervous "...we have to face reality..."

"I am, and I'm telling you, that you have to come back..." Her eyes are ablaze with anxiety.

"There are two options. One that's easy and one that's damned near impossible..."

She tilts her head curiously "Go on, I'm listening."

"We find the System Gate before the Raiku gets there, that's the easy one we're all hoping for. The other option however, well that's the tricky one. If they're already there, then we'll have one opportunity to get it right."

"Yes, and no matter what this second option is, once they're ahead of you, you'll only have a few seconds before the fireworks begin."

"But what if we aren't detected? What if we can arm one of the DAWGs, engage its camouflage and deliver the payload to the gate?"

"Don't even think about it..." She's alarmed by the very thought

"Why not...? It will work..."

"You'll never escape the blast in time. It makes no sense."

"Then we'll make it a timed detonation. This way, I can get back to the ship and be in Hyperlight before they even know what hit them."

"What happens is you're spotted?"

"The same thing that happens if they get there ahead of us..."

She goes silent, knowing that there are no other options available, and after a resigned sigh, she leans against me.

"Please find the gate before they get there..."

"We'll do our best..."

"And come back alive..."

Her eyes shimmer and in them, I see fear mixed with hope, tainted with despair.

"I will..." I fight the urge to kiss her again. It'll just make this situation harder than it already is "...I will..."

"Then go kick some ass and when this is all over, I'll buy the coffee."

"Yeah...and where will you be taking me?"

"The King's brew of course..." She answers grinning

"On Keden...?"

"Yeah..."

"Keden is a long way from here..."

"...Doesn't matter...it'll be time well spent."

We lock eyes, but nothing happens. This is definitely not the place or time.

\*\*\*\*\*

*My DAWG rips past a Cyclone that turns like a ballerina in the sky. It's cannons open fire but not fast enough. My bullets rip into its armor, shredding the high tech machine until all that remains is the cockpit. The pilot ejects and I follow his falling body through the sky. As I close the distance, the computer captures his dying face and the world around me fades away.*

"Terrier..."

I wake with a start. The time on my Dees is four thirty five am. There's no way I'd be able to go back to bed after that so I slide from the mattress to go take a take a piss.

Washing my hands, a recently shaved, worn face stares back at me in the mirror. My hair is a mess and my mind is worse. Thoughts of getting to the Raiku jump gate before they arrive, switch between those including Terrier.

I hit the shower, make my bed and get dressed. It is early, but I will pass the time on one of the flight decks.

**Time: 0800 Hours - Local**

The team and I are leaving the mess hall. Akita and Pitbull are arguing about a girl they both knew back in flight school. Hound is laughing at Akita's grief and Dane is in deep conversation with Mirana. We get onto a lift that shoots upward and slows to a stop within seconds. The glass doors open and give way to a lively, cavernous hangar. Our Starship, the Condor, given to us by Keden's Royal family, sits like a bird of prey near the center of the space. Behind, with its cargo doors fully opened, our DAWGs are loading one after the other.

*"Iron-Five..."*

General Hawk's voice comes across our comms yet again.

*"General..."*

*"...We have information on Terrier. Our sources indicate that he is leading the very fleet that you are being sent to find..."*

The mention of his name drives knives through my stomach. It was not long ago that Terrier, my childhood friend...my brother...flew side by side with us.

Hawk continues, *"Your secondary objective upon completing the destruction of the jump gate is to find him and bring him in...alive."*

*"That's easier said than done sir."*

*"I know, but if anyone can do it, you can. Iron Five...it is an honor to serve with you, and rest assured your efforts, once successful, would save the lives of billions. Godspeed and the best of luck to you...and Huski, if all efforts fail...kill him. I trust you to use proper judgment this time."*

*"Yessir..."*

*"Good hunting, soldiers."*

Hawk cuts the connection, leaving me at the mercy of unbound thoughts about my friend...enemy...brother...life...death...love...Mirana...all jumbled into a mixture of madness that makes me question my very existence.

*"What was that about?"*

I turn to Mirana; the cold morning air leaving her lips as a frosty mist.

*"Terri is leading the next Raiku wave..."*

*"I thought that much. Huski listen to me. Carlos was your friend, but the man you knew is not the same one you're about to face. Remember, if you confront him, that's when your team will need you the most..."*

I want to hold her right here and now but the rules do not allow it. She takes my hand with a squeeze, obviously sharing my thoughts. Slowly, with all of my willpower, I let go and force myself to walk away but I turn to face her once again. The turmoil in my head is overwhelming. What I am about to do is going to change our lives forever.

*Alpha what are you doing?*

I ignore the frantic voice somewhere in the back of my mind.



"Mirana, I don't want coffee from the King's brew..."

She looks at me, puzzled.

"I'd rather we make it for each other...for the rest of our lives..."

My heart drives its fists into my chest as if I'm about to be shot into space via jump gate as she approaches.

"What did you say soldier?"

Her stern voice plants a foot in my gut but I return her gaze "When I return, we'll make coffee for each other for the rest of our lives. Marasa, was it, on the Minera? I can live with that."

Her eyes search mine. She's giving my words much thought before relieving me with a response.

"I'll be waiting..."

The words quench my tormenting thirst within and I press on, up the ramp and into the Condor to join the rest of the team in the cockpit, and strap myself in for what might be either our final mission or a whole new life.

**System: Csyro - 250 light years from sol**

**Time: 1348 Hours - Local**

The Condor exits hyperspace and is instantly captured by the magnetics of Ayo, the capital Starport in the Csyro system.

*"Starship Condor...Ayo Space Command has you on link...state Captain-ident and intensions..."*

*"Starport Ayo...Condor requests docking under Earthfront clearance code Ess...Arr...three...nine...three...four. Captain Richard Gant is lead."*

A few seconds pass as the flight controller verifies the information forwarded by Earthfront Command.

*"Captain Gant...Docking request acknowledged, cleared for entry at bay forty three, you have guidance on link...go auto."*

Dane hands the ship over to the Starport AI and settles in as we are ferried to our landing zone.

Ayo, one of the biggest ports I've ever seen, with a few hundred docking bays in view, is unlike any within Sol. A gigantic grey square, emblazoned with the monstrously bold orange letters "Io" across the top has twenty-one jump gates pointing in various directions, giving it the ability to launch ships to hundreds of destinations.

"What's the plan Alpha?" Akita breaks the silence.

"We get station-side and meet our contact. As far as we know, that Raiku fleet jumped thirteen days ago. According to Intel, their time in hyperspace should be twenty days. This gives us an idea of a few systems they might use however, it would be impossible to search them all. Every habitable world

within this time frame has been put on alert but there are many that remain uninhabited.”

“Twenty days...” Pitbull joins in “. So we’ve got seven days left before they arrive.”

“Exactly, and hopefully by then, our forces would have ended the initial Raiku attack or we’ll be fighting on all fronts. It’ll be a massacre.”

Dane cuts in “How is our contact here going to know where to look?”

“That I don’t know, but Hawk was confident that we would be pointed in the right direction. All we can do, is hope he’s right.”

“Enough about that...” Hound cuts in...” Alpha, we need a better plan. I refuse to accept this as a one-way mission...”

Akita speaks before I reply, “I’ve been thinking about it and I believe that I’ve found the solution to our dilemma if they’re already there when we arrive...”

He has our attention, especially mine, so I encourage him to continue.

“It’s not one-way Hound, there’s still a chance that we can find the gate before the Raiku gets there. If not, then we exit Hyperlight, blow our target to oblivion and jump again before they even know what’s happening.”

The rest of the team looks at him like he is crazy but he holds up a hand to silence them and continues.

“We won’t make it out alive if we have to locate the gate when we get there. If we can exit the slipstream directly in front of it on the other hand, then we’ll have our shot and by the time they realize what has happened, we’d already be in Hyperlight again.”

“So how do we intend to do something that’s never been done without a Starport? A jump like that would depend entirely on the co-ords given by our contact. They’re gonna have to be right on the money...” Hound voices what I’m thinking.

“There is another option...” Pitbull cuts in “If we do get there, and our target is not directly within our line of fire, then we can get out just the same.”

“That would be abandoning the mission...” Hound counters

“No...that would be living to fight another day...” Akita shoots back

“If we don’t blow this thing up on the first run, the Raiku will know that Earthfront is expecting them. They won’t wait once we’ve escaped and the only thing Iron Five would have accomplished will be the hastening of their plans.”

They all remain quiet, and so I continue

“We knew the risks when we took the mission. Akita, if the co-ords don’t put us directly within striking distances from our target then we’ll do what has to be done.”

A colossal, rectangular ship moving silently beside us captures our attention. It is a deep space barge and by its sheer size and well-aged look, I can tell that it has been around for a long time.

We sail into a large opening that leads to our docking bay and touchdown on a landing pad carved into the floor of the bustling Eversteel hangar.

With a bump, a bridge-way connects to our ship and Dane shuts down our engines. We all grab backpacks stuffed with the required necessities and exit the cockpit. The bridge is nothing but an enclosed Everglass shaft with an elevator that descends into the superstructure at gut twisting speeds. Once below deck, dim lights illuminate our space and within seconds, we slow to a stop.

The first thing that hits me as we exit the lift is the silence. Hundreds of people, voices, digital and real, come to me quietly, as though the very walls absorb the sound.

“Where do we meet our man?”

“Hold up...” I reply to Hound and access the contact’s info through my Dees. The data appears about two feet away, visible to me and no one else.

“He’s in the city...”

“So he’s coming to us?” Akita asks, annoyed.

“Not according to this...” I motion to the info streaming across my Dees “All I have is an address and the name of our escort, a Mr. Kelvan Montgomery.”

Amidst the bustle of the weirdly quiet, very-high-ceilinged terminal, we make our way to the exit and hail a passing cab.

“Atlas heights...!” I shout across the broad sidewalk split by a row of trees that line it all the way to the end of the block.

“Two hundred creds...” The beady-eyed driver with orange locks hanging down his shoulders yells in return.

We all pile into the boxy Airvan and with the sound of clipping buckles; we take to the air, blending into the crazy traffic over the manmade wonder of Atropolis, the city within the Starport.

A half hour later, we approach Atlas heights. It is an elevated, upscale neighborhood with its own private landing facility. From what my Dees tell me, anywhere beyond this is restricted airspace and I can see why.

Mansions dot the landscape and many of the System’s super-elite either live or do business here; a lot of which is often questionable, but allowed. Out here, beyond Earthfront’s direct control, this port offers services to the legitimate and shady, alike.

We land and the doors hiss open. I slide the driver a credits card loaded with three hundred.

“We tip for good landings.” I smile at his questioning face.

The driver nods respectfully and hands us a business card. The digital paper shimmers with his information and I pocket it.

Fostering useful friendships when moving through any Star System is always a good thing and credits is the fastest way to any heart. It is something I

learned a very long time ago. No matter who you are, or what you represent, the most influential people were often those with the biggest networks.

“Captain Gant...”

A slender man in a grey suit addresses me. He looks like someone’s butler.

“Kelvan Montgomery at your service...”

He motions us to a black limousine that floats in place near the sidewalk. We all get in and immediately, the Hovercar takes off, slipping along the winding roadway, through neighborhoods where very large houses sit on massive properties and expensive vehicles zip past us here and there.

After five luxurious minutes, a gate swings open, revealing an estate looking like something pulled straight from a fairytale. It takes us a full minute to cover the distance of the driveway and after we come to a halt half way around a large round a bout, Kelvan leads us up a broad, open staircase and onto a grand entryway.

Beside two monstrous oak doors, the servant picks away at a digital keypad seen only by him, and with a barely audible click, the entrance opens.

“This way...” The lanky man leads us inside.

Through a massive foyer where two broad, ornate staircases curve away from each other ascending to the upper floor, our footsteps echo strangely on the marble beneath us. A giant chandelier, dwarfing any I have ever seen before, hangs attached to nothing; held in place by powerful magnetics only the wealthy can afford.

We continue on, beneath a large arch covered with intricate carvings, and into a room fit for a king. Three lavish couches form a semicircle before a floor-to-ceiling bay window where silk cushions and pillows cover a fourth seat built into it. In their midst, a heavy, old-world table that looks as though it’s worth more than our ship, bears a tray containing three bottles of Fermentia and crackers that look too expensive to eat.

“Gentlemen...Lady...”

The deep voice comes to me as a strangely soothing sound

“Kelvan...that will be all.”

The butler bows respectfully and leaves us.

“Welcome, Iron Five.”

The unknown man smiles warmly and then signals for us to sit. He is someone of obvious influence and by his almost perfect physique, clearly visible through his tailored suit I suspect also, a military past.

“I am Councilor Roman Bastille, Third Fellow of the Assembly of the Lords of Csyro.”

With my curiosity somewhat satisfied, I am comfortable now that I know whom we are dealing with. The assembly of which he speaks is a union of twenty Lords that govern this Star system. Their influence and power are on par with the Galactic Nine and though allied with Earthfront, Csyro remains governed by its own rules and regulations.

"Welcome to my home away from home..."

Slowly, deliberately, he opens the Fermentia nearest him and immediately, its fragrance whisks my senses away.

"Csy'ah seven, thirty-five; utterly amazing..."

He pours the silvery red liquid into crystal glasses and a minute later, I take the first sip of the hundred and forty-three-year-old wine.

"It is a pleasure to meet the heroes of Keden in the flesh..."

*Is this what they are calling us, or is it just him?*

"...I am fascinated by what I have heard thus far. When this is over, you must return to my world. Your recollection of the events on Keden would be most...fascinating."

I wonder if this man knows anything regarding the mission we are about to embark upon. If so, then certainly he does not expect us to come back from it.

"If we can, we will..." It is the best answer I can give knowing I have no intension of doing so.

"Splendid..." his face lights up and he moves on as though we have just signed an agreement "...Now to more pressing matters. You are here because General Hawk needs you to destroy the unknown Raiku System Gate awaiting their second wave. I am here because our spies believe they have discovered the star system in which our common enemy will be gathering. This is what we learned just over an hour ago. Here..." He projects a three dimensional image across our Dees "...this is Adra..."

A star system dominated by a red giant comes into view.

"...a hub for pirates and the like, and is just a five day jump from Csyro. However, once you arrive there, the odds of encountering those who will strip your ship and leave you floating in vacuum without second thought, are very high."

"Leave that to us. We can handle a few pirates."

I am not sure if the look on his face is further admiration, or the loss of it but he carries on without missing a beat.

"There will be no need for violence Mr. Gant. We have..." He pauses for a moment "...acquaintances there, business associates who will be more than willing to provide you with lodging and protection under their banner."

He pours himself another glass of the precious smelling liquid, swirls it around elegantly and with eyes closed, draws it slowly between his almost closed lips.

"Is it possible to discover the precise location of the Raiku's System Gate?"

He eyes me curiously, the gears of his mind processing my words.

"That is a task even our greatest minds have yet to figure out, Mr. Gant. We will however be able to find the region, at best a list of probable locations in said region."

The realization of what I am suggesting makes his eyes light up, but only for an instant, and then it is gone.

“What you ask for will depend on the folks I am sending you to meet. With their network, they will be able to pinpoint a general location...finding specific co-ords for something so small, on such an astronomical level though, well that’s damned near impossible.”

“Not impossible...” Akita corrects him “...it just hasn’t been done yet.”

A smile plays across his face and he turns to me again “Were you to achieve the impossible, you would be become something of legend. Oh I hope you return from this Mr. Gant, there is so much I want to know.”

“Then do the improbable. Get me the gate’s exact co-ords and I’ll tell you anything that doesn’t land me in jail for treason.”

He leans into his seat eying me curiously, “I’ll see what I can do. As for now, I must be off. I will have the information relative to your destination and hosts therein, uploaded to your ship’s AI. You have an eleven o’clock jump scheduled tomorrow morning. I must mention that you should already be boarded and awaiting launch at least five hours before then. This is the best time I could buy, as you know, Csyro is a busy system and regardless of status, my influence only goes as far as certain...profits, would allow.”

Here I am, worried about giving this man a bad impression of myself while all the fool cares about is money. If the Raiku are successful, they will strip him of all wealth and power, and execute him and his house without trial.

“Gentlemen...” He stands with an almost loud voice “...Lady...” He nods toward Maria “I must be on my way. This wing of the house is open to you. Feel free to peruse it as you wish. Kelvan will show you to your quarters for the night. Dinner will be at seven and you shall return to your ship at dawn, happy hunting, Iron Five.”

He gives a short bow and without further delay, leaves the room.

“Right this way...”

Kelvan seems to have just appeared out of thin air. I wonder if he was listening to the conversation all along.

This time, we follow him into the main hall and up the curved staircase beneath the suspended chandelier. Down a corridor wide enough to fit an Aircar, we pass dozens of rooms. This house is more like a hotel than a home.

“Here you are.”

We come to a halt in a sitting area surrounded by doors.

“These are the West-wing guest’s quarters. Select any room you like and freshen up. Dinner is in four hours.”

As the butler walks away, Akita throws his backpack into a room without entering it.

“If you’ll excuse me, I have some business to attend to.”

He gives us one of his usual crooked smiles and heads off in the direction from which we came.

“What’s that about?”

I ask everyone, and Pitbull replies

"I think it's one of the ladies in the kitchen..."

"But how...? We've seen no one else but Roman and Kelvan since we got here."

"Not sure, but he mumbled something about a woman he'd seen while we waited outside at the entrance."

"Akita's on the prowl and I'm tired; gonna get some shuteye Alpha. I think I'm getting to old for this." Hound laughs at his own words, then disappears into his room and closes the door.

"Well..." Pitbull looks at me "...I'm gonna get, *freshened up*, according to Mr. Straitjacket, then head into the city, grab dinner there while I'm at it. Based on what I see here..." He points at something only he can see on his Dees, "...there's a parts dealership not too far from us that might have some components I need."

"I'm coming with you." Dane jumps in.

"What about you Alpha?"

"Nah, you two go ahead without me. I'm gonna relax here for a bit."

"Say hi for me."

Maria says it just before she vanishes down the corridor and I cannot help but smile.

\*\*\*\*\*

**Time: 2025 hours - Local**

The Spaceport's artificial lights that mimic the System's sun on their core planet have already thrown the surroundings into darkness. Illuminated by a few ambient garden glowbulbs, the well-kept grounds, filled with flowers and plants that assail me with wondrous scents is relaxing.

"Hey..."

I speak to a real-time image of Mirana through my Digital Eyes that flickers every now and again.

"Hello Captain..."

Her response is two seconds behind. Not bad for a pair of Dees that are not Earthfront issued.

"Maria says hi..."

She laughs with me and gives the response that I will have to take back to Dane.

"I needed to see you..."

"Why, did something go wrong? Is there new Intel?" She asks, worried.

"No, but once we leave this port, there's no turning back..."

"Huski, be careful. You have a delicate task ahead. You must remain focused."

"I am...very focused..."

"Then why can't this wait until the mission is over?"

"Because by then, it could be too late..."

"Captain Gant..." She sounds like the version of herself that I used to hate  
"...thoughts like this are a sign that you are unfocused on your task. I cannot contribute to the endangering of you or your crew."

"Believe me, I know what I have to do and my job is no different now, than any other time over the past few years. What I have to say to you...well that's what matters."

It is difficult to read her expression. I am not sure if she is intrigued or just wary.

"Mirana, for once I've found something that means as much, maybe even more to me than..."

*What am I thinking? My God, what is happening to me?*

"...than Iron Five..."

I flinch at my own words. The emotions gripping me are unlike any I have ever felt before. The battle for balance within is happening on a scale too great for my over-thinking mind to process. We are a brotherhood, forged in battle. Nothing comes before them; nothing; no one.

"Huski, get your head in the game. Tell me when you get back, when death isn't staring you in the face."

"No..." I counter "...I need to say it now..."

"We are soldiers..." She comes back "...We know the risks, what they entail, and we know the truths that govern us as such..."

"Mirana listen to me..."

She cuts me off "How can you justify placing me above your unit?"

"Because you're a part of it..."

My words silence her, but only for a moment before she responds

"Iron, Five Huski...Iron, Five..."

"...is just a name..." I shoot back "...even the greatest performers in the galaxy need backers, directors, people behind the scenes, or even in the stands..."

She is fighting her own feelings. I can see it beyond her Dees.

"Look, Mirana, I and my team are one, but when I'm with you, I am infinite. You make all the uneven parts fit. Traits in my life I thought to be weaknesses, with you, I understand their purpose..."

"When do you make the jump?"

My heart falls into my stomach. It is as though she did not hear a word I said and for a moment, I wonder if the transmission is faulty.

"Twelve hours." I reply, fighting to control the war raging within.

"I'll be waiting for you."

Her eyes flash with intensity that contradicts her stern face. The response has caught me off guard. I wish to say more but I do not.



"Yes ma'am..."

"Fly brave, soldier." She ends our conversation with the traditional Kedenian blessing.

"I love you."

The three syllables spill from my lips before my tired mind can stop them. She seems frozen in stasis as my words connect us through space and time in a way no technology could.

Her gaze is steady; back is straight; face unreadable.

"When we meet again, I'll tell you what I think of that."

"Copy that, Commander." I reply

We stare at each other for a moment and then I cut the feed.

It is silent here on the elevated garden-terrace, a five-minute walk from the main house. The view is strange. From the imported dirt and plants, to the houses and properties around and below us, to the sprawling city in the distance, it would be easy to think that I am planet-side, but the ceiling of the Starport, three miles above is a constant reminder of reality.

My eyelids are heavy but my mind is wide-awake. How does this new development between us affect my future with Iron Five? How does it affect her life in Earthfront Command? Does it really affect us though? I know so many married soldiers throughout the galaxy who have made, and still make it work, yet I wonder. Iron Five is not just any ordinary group. Our job takes us to places far, and wide, over extended periods. Are we really willing to face this kind of challenge? Are we even capable of such?

"I thought I'd find you out here."

Hound's voice startles me

"What are you doing up?" I slide across the small bench to give him room.

"Couldn't sleep..."

"What made you think I'd be here?"

"It reminded me of the place you and Terrier once used for escaping Hawk and his cronies. You remember...back in training...when you guys wanted to spend some quality time with the ladies on base?"

"I had forgotten about that." I laugh

"Good times..."

"Hound..." I give what I am about to say some thought before opening my mouth "...I told her that I loved her..."

"Who...?"

The look on his face tells me that he thinks I am still talking about our days in training.

"Not back then...now...here...a few minutes ago..."

"O'Canon?"

"Yeah..."

"Richard I don't..." He fumbles for the words "...Damn man...are you sure?"

It has been a long time since I have heard him use my real name.

"Yeah, I'm sure."

"And what did she say?"

"She said she's waiting for me."

He lets loose a whistle meant to be a sigh "Then go for it." He leans back against the bench and it bulges beneath his large frame "How far though? What's the extent of this new relationship?"

"It doesn't affect Iron Five."

"Of course it doesn't. What I meant was...will this new relationship eventually lead us to the place where I am required to wear a suit?"

I look at my old friend; my old rival; my brother. His acceptance puts me at ease, but my mind is a storm of unanswered questions. What scares me the most is that feel like a broken boat on a restless ocean, helplessly along for the ride.

"Who knows, Hound...who knows?"

"Well if it does, I call dibs on godfather when the time comes."

I join him in laughter.

\*\*\*\*\*

**Time: 0430 hours - Local**

"Rise and shine ladies!"

Pitbull's voice comes through my bedroom door as he gives it a few raps with his fist before moving onto the next one but I am already up and moving, dressed and geared for departure. In the sitting area, everyone is present except one.

"Where's Akita?" I ask no one in particular.

"I'm here Alpha..." He responds, dragging himself through his door as though he had not slept a wink.

"How was your night with...what's her name?" Hound asks

"Helena? Nothing happened. We just talked..." Akita dismisses him.

"I guess this means that you have officially forgotten about Riara?"

"C'mon Huski...I'm trying here..." He ignores the looks on everyone's faces "What? Come on guys...I am...seriously..."

"Back in K-one, you made her give up what she had, believing you'd come back to her, so you better be more than trying..." Hound scolds him.

Dane walks away laughing and we all follow.

"Trust me, I haven't forgotten her. To be honest, I thought I did, but now I know for sure that I haven't."

"Alright..." I break up the back and forth before it gets out of hand, "We'll take your word for it, for now. In the meantime, let us get our heads in the game. We've got bigger fish to fry."

Kelvan is at the main entry when we arrive at the bottom of the stairs.  
"Good morning gentlemen...lady. I hope your time with us has been fruitful?" He eyes Akita  
"It was good enough." I answer  
"Wonderful..." The butler replies "Feel free to visit again. Mr. Bastille looks forward to it."

Out on the driveway, we get into the limo and are off through the rich neighborhood once more where mansions and trees in well-kept gardens give way to expensive guesthouses and then open parks with trees and ponds. Beyond this, the city looms and amidst a great volume of traffic, I marvel at the view outside. As we transition seamlessly into the bustle high above the metropolis, some buildings rise even higher above us; towering goliaths that fill the complex hanging in vacuum, in a solar system light-years away from Earth.

### **Time: 1048 hours - Local**

We are in vacuum, and in queue for launch. Above us, the colossal structure that is the Ayo Starport, hangs like a well-lit, manmade cloud. In the distance on either side of the cockpit, the glows of ships moving along their own paths catch my eye. Before us, one of Ayo's monster jump gates awaits, pointing down and away from our trajectory. The monumental cannon ripple with energy, sizzling silently with trillions of electrical volts coursing along its outer shell, then spits its passengers into the depths of space.

*"Condor...Ayo Command has you ready for final taxi...ten minutes to jump...destination Adra...maintain auto and prep for Hyper..."*

A smooth, and strangely calming, female voice crackles across our comms.

"Ayo Command...Condor copies full auto and prep for Hyper to Adra in ten." I give the reply.

The ship trembles as the station's magnetic guidance suddenly moves us forward. The Condor's nose tilts downward and we glide toward the opening bay doors of the gate. These doors are at least two hundred times the size of our ship, large enough to accommodate and launch any deep space barge.

We slide into place, surrounded by the cold steel of this incredible construction and the doors retract without a sound until we sit in utter darkness; the cockpit illuminated only through our Digital Eyes. My heart kicks and screams against my chest. I prepare myself mentally for the split second electrocution to come, I think of her.

*"Condor..."* The soothing voice fills my ear *"...Jump to Adra initiated...launch in twenty."*

As the traffic director gives the final transmission, I try to control my breathing and my skin tingles, as every nerve within seems to bubble with anxiety. Somewhere between the three and two second marks in my head, the

unseen forces of the gate's magnetics press me into the memory cells of my seat and a single spark of energy lights up the giant barrel ahead, gripping my stomach with electrical fingers, seizing my very soul, and then everything goes black.

## FACT

In the year 2026 AD, the first attempt to colonize another world became a partial success. Since its discovery, the planet Mars had been a dream destination for man, but limited technologies led to lengthy trips through space, and faulty condensers left those stranded there with rapidly depleting water supplies. According to history, it was the executive decision of one man that had kept the dream alive. Against all odds, and in the face of persecution by his superiors for disobeying orders, the lone doctor among them had taken control. Under his guidance, the settlers made their way north and after much injury and losses of a few lives, they arrived near the frozen pole.

Once there, they had extracted liquid water, enabling them to survive until resupplies arrived from Earth. Sadly, it would be another twenty-four years before Sol Technology was born and until then, the original inhabitants knew no life beyond the daily struggle of survival and thus, would not live to see the fruits of their labors.

Today, eight seventy eight TE; nine hundred and two years later, Mars, or Red Earth as it is sometimes called, is the only planet in Sol to rival Earth. Through Sol and Magnetic Technology, it boasts oceans, life and a breathable atmosphere, a testament to the power of terraforming, and the undeniable brilliance of humankind.

## ADRA

**System: Adra**

**Location: Toru-En**

**Time: 1100 hours - System time**

### **2 Days to Raiku arrival**

We enter the solar system of Adra and everything slows to a brutal stop. The Condor's magnetics holds it in place as the auto-induction device wakes us from our five day slumber. Above, an asteroid looms like a misplaced mountain. Beyond it, making me suddenly feel like we are upside down, the orange curve of a gas giant disappears beyond the cockpit glass.

According to the information in front of me, the planet is Toru and the asteroid is Toru-En, one of seventeen that orbit their parent world.

*"Starship Condor... VCC has you on scan, link and rep live..."*

I respond "Viking Cove Command...Condor copies link reply live...we are a go for docking and request clearance..."

*"Condor...you are cleared for docking on platform seventeen...go full auto."*

We slide closer to the drifting mountain and enormous fissures, valleys and ridges become visible. The barren, grey rock offers no atmosphere, and surface structures are few, and far between. Guided by the cove's digital magnetics, our ship tilts and turns until Toru hangs beneath us, and as we enter a docking bay built into the asteroid, it seals shut in our wake, enveloping the cockpit in total darkness.

"When this is over, we really need to take a break..." Akita says, as we all remove our helmets.

"Agreed..." Pitbull answers "...this won't be a walk in the park. Even a fleet as large as the Raiku's will be a challenge to find in deep space. Without proper co-operation from the people here, it'll be like searching for a needle on the beach."

"They'll help..." I jump in "...and we'll have our leave when the job is done. I promise that much."

We come to rest on a circular platform high above a cavernous hangar. Around us, at different heights, many more decks like the one beneath us remain suspended on single columns that connect them to an unseen surface below. Upon leaving the ship, I take a deep breath of the purified air within the complex; smells like powdered stone. At the center of the landing pad, between our ship and an empty parking space, a lone figure stands unmoving. I can tell by the curves of the black and green body suit that it is a woman, but a mask, dominated by a tusk-shaped breathing apparatus, covers her face.

*"Iron Five..."*

Whatever tech she is wearing, distorts and synthesizes her voice.

*"Welcome to Viking Cove...I am Edria...follow me."*

Without another word between us, we enter an Everglass lift, the only standing feature built into the deck. The doors slide shut and Edria, the closest of us to a glowing, transparent, single buttoned keypad, makes eye contact.

*"Brace yourselves..."*

Before anyone has the chance to think about it, she hits the key and we drop without warning. My stomach and all its neighboring organs feel like they are somewhere in my throat. I fight the temptation to close my eyes and pass out and somewhere in the back of my mind, I hear someone grunting and another, breathing hard, then, when it seems like all hope is lost, the elevator slows rapidly, releasing us from the madness.

Like children after a dizzying ride, we steady ourselves and collect our wandering minds. We are deep within the asteroid, standing amidst a forest of

elevator shafts that rise above us. Between them and all around, many wooden huts and lively fire pits dot the rocky landscape along with transplanted trees and bushes genetically engineered to survive without direct sunlight.

Scents of well-seasoned foods assail me. Music fills the air and men and women, all wearing the same uniform as our host, stare curiously as we follow her to what appears to be a tavern, nearby.

Amidst torch-lit walkways, we approach the brown, oak building. With a sign that reads 'Oxpar Inn' it looks old yet very well kept. Up wooden stairs with dull thuds from our footsteps, Edria takes us through a pair of swinging doors. Here, where patrons enjoy their meals and drink, the origin of the wondrously smelling cooking reveals itself.

Behind a bar running almost the entire length of the space, past a low partition, a busy kitchen lightly obscured by a mist of steam and smoke is alive with activity. Adding to the already wonderful atmosphere, beyond the eating area of circular tables and chairs, three men on a stage strum and slap merrily on instruments I do not recognize. To my dismay, Edria leads us past the bar, the kitchen, the music, and into a dimly lit backroom. My stomach protests but I ignore it; there will be time for eating after.

"Iron Five...welcome..."

A strapping man, old enough to be my father, greets us with a voice as deep as the far reaches of space. From a large chair at the head of an Everglass table, he gestures to the seats around it and we all move toward them. Thick green carpeting gives way beneath my feet and a strong smell of incense forms an unholy union with that of the food outside.

"Edria...thank you..."

Our escort leaves the room and the door locks behind her.

"I am Captain Obek, also known throughout the system as Kroka; he who has a thousand daggers."

He flashes a wide grin revealing two rows, top and bottom, of razor sharp, Eversteel teeth.

"Councilor Bastille says that I can trust you, and that you seek the aid of Adra's Vikings. By his word, I will do this however let me be very clear, if you betray us to our enemies, steal from us or bring trouble to our system, I will have you all publicly flogged until death tires of your torment and embraces you."

I wonder if he truly believes this intimidation to be effective. Maybe he is accustomed to outsiders trembling in his presence, or his followers to be fearful in his midst. From first glance, I saw his augmentations through my Dees; arms spliced with biomechanical bones and plating; armored chest plates weaved into his ribcage, protecting vital organs from a direct assault and enhanced eyes implanted to replace the originals, obviously connected to Adra's Vikings Neural Network. The man was a walking beast but he was nothing new to me. I have faced and killed far worse in times long gone.

"Earthfront Intelligence has led us to Adra..." I reply as though his words mean nothing "...and as you are very well aware, the Raiku Dynasty has launched a full scaled invasion of Sol and K-1. With these systems under their control they can easily spread across the galaxy, unhindered and unchecked. Adra's Vikings would not begin to stand a chance against them. Unfortunately, for you, Adra is the System in which they intend to make camp. From here, their final jump to Sol will solidify the invasion, rendering all our efforts null and void..." I make sure he hears the finality in my next statement "...And you can be absolutely certain Captain Obek, with regards to Adra, they will leave no one alive in their wake."

He leans heavily into his seat, drumming fingers tipped with spliced claws instead of natural nails.

"You say they will destroy us, why didn't Bastille say this? We are not at war with them..."

"The information given to you is need-to-know, as it goes..."

"Need-to-know, who is he to keep me on a leash? I am not his dog. I do not work for him..."

"With all due respect Captain, if he is the one financing your, expeditions, then yes, you do work for him."

"I do not appreciate this. What do you people take me for...? If you or Bastille wants my help, I must be..."

I interrupt his sudden outburst "Captain Obek! If this is too much for you to handle, then I suggest we take our leave now. Time is of the essence and the longer we deliberate your position on the food chain, the more our window of opportunity closes. We are here to destroy a common enemy. Councilor Bastille said you would help. I don't give a shit about your operations and whatever it is that you do..."

I calm myself.

"...but mark my words, if the Raiku are able to make that jump, you won't have to worry about them purging this system, because I promise you, on your own life, I will come for you and when I do, you will find yourself face to face with a legion of Earthfront destroyers."

He is not afraid and I respect that, but he is stubborn.

Still visibly angry, Kroka taps the table harder than before. His eyes are ablaze as he looks at us, from one to the other until he stops at me.

"What do you need?" He manages to control his fury.

"The Raiku has somehow installed a System Gate here, we need to find and destroy it before they make the final jump."

"Yes I was told, and if we find it after they've arrived, you want exact coordinates. This is no easy task. I will need time..." He is much calmer, though obviously fighting a raging battle within "Adra is vast. I will need to contact the other clans. If the Raiku has a System Gate here, we will find it. What is our window?"

"Yesterday..." I parrot General Hawk's response back on Earth.

"Okay, but when this is over do not linger here. Viking Cove's protection will not hold the other clans at bay forever."

"Believe me, the *protection* your banner offers, is for your benefit. Let's get that clear before we go any further."

If looks could kill, I would be dead and though Obek hides his emotions well, I can see the barely visible flinch at my words.

"Give me a few hours and be ready to move quickly."

He stands and holds the position without another word; a sign that the meeting is over and we comply. One by one, my team filters out into the lively tavern and I close the door behind me.

"Well...what do you think?" Akita appears beside me.

"He'll get the job done. I think all that pomp was nothing more than a measuring of dicks. He's got much to lose if he refuses aid to the Councilor and he knows it..."

"Gentlemen...Lady..." Edria appears by my side "I'll show you to your quarters."

We cross the open floor in her wake and climb a flight of rickety steps. Along a balcony overlooking the commingling below, we walk with dull thuds on timber joists supporting it.

"Here we are..." Edria points us to five doors along the walkway "After you've settled in, feel free to sample all that Viking's Cove has to offer. I hope you enjoy your stay, be it for a short time."

Her smile is questionable but warm enough to keep any anxieties at bay.

"Do these offers include buying a thank-you drink for a beautiful woman, and maybe getting to know her a bit better afterwards?" Akita locks eyes with his new interest.

"Well that depends..." She answers just as slick.

"On what...?"

"Three things..."

He smiles, satisfied with where this is going "Yeah?"

She answers "One, who the beautiful woman is. Two, is she is willing to accept your offer and three, can you meet her requirements..."

"Well first, do you accept it?" He leans against the old rail near us.

"Again, that depends. Will you be able to entertain two of us instead of one?"

Akita reddens with perverted anticipation "That shouldn't be a problem."

"Good..." Her soft words pass slyly between them "...but the decision has to be mutually accepted between the three of us and in our culture, you must be the one to make the proposal."

"Not a problem, if that is your desire then who am I to refuse?"



Edria's eyes flash wickedly "Wonderful, then let us find my husband, you can ask him personally."

I try my best to stifle the hysterics threatening to shatter me into a thousand pieces. Hound and Pitbull, with their weights against the timber wall behind us are in the same boat as me and yet it is Dane, who makes me lose control. Staggering to her room, she bellows with poorly restrained laughter, triggering the rest of us as Edria spins on her heel, fully satisfied with hitting Akita below the belt, and disappears downstairs.

"Whatever guys..." Akita reddens with embarrassment.

"That's what you get for not trying hard enough. I told you, I knew this thing with Riara was a waste of the girl's time." Hound waves dismissively and enters his room.

"Oh come on!" Akita pleads, "It was just a little fun..."

"You need to figure this out, my brother..." I look at him seriously now "...the time for fun and games are over. Personally, I don't care what you want to do with your personal time and energy, but to make a woman give up what she has and wait for your return...I'm sorry Neil...I won't encourage it. Make a decision and stick to it."

"I know, and thanks for being a club to my head Huski..." He says it sorrowfully "I'll get it right, I swear."

"Good, now for the last time. Get your head in the game. We need you focused for this mission. Forget about chasing women here and now or I will leave your ass behind. Is that clear soldier?"

"Aye Cap'n..."

I slap him lightly across the back of his neck "Let's get something to eat."

**System: Adra**

**Location: Udo**

**1450 hours - System time**

**1 day to Raiku arrival**

Udo, a small ice-world on the outer edges of Adra, rushes toward us as we burn through its atmosphere. Pinned to my seat by wicked forces that threaten to tear us apart, the Condor shudders violently when we enter the frigid skies above the white planet, making my teeth collide painfully.

"Byra Command, Captain Gant of Starship Condor requests guidance on link."

Through wind-swept snow, the sprawling city of Byra comes into view on the horizon just as a calm voice responds, "*Captain Gant, you have guidance on link, go auto.*"

We all remain silent. The flat, frozen plains beneath us pass by in a blur and within minutes, the snow-covered city welcomes us as the digital magnetics from the spaceport brings us smoothly into a hangar.

*"Condor..."* The comms come alive again *"Welcome to Byra."*

After touchdown, we exit the ship and descend five hundred floors to the Burrows; an underground network of tunnels that connect the city beneath the ice covered streets above. With a temperature of minus one hundred and seventy degrees, these heated passageways make living on this world possible.

We are here to meet with a man who goes by the name of Xai. He is an associate of Captain Obek and by reputation, a very ruthless and well-connected one. Unlike the few ruffians we have met thus far, this one, according to Kroka, is royalty.

*"Alpha, we're tagged..."*

Pitbull alerts me of the person following us and we continue as normal, drawing our pursuer into our web. Gradually, Akita and Hound move away, blending into the bustling crowd. After a few more seconds, I slow to a halt beside a closed restaurant and turn to lock eyes with our pursuer. Akita and Hound has him within range at gunpoint, and Pitbull and Dane are just out of reach beside him.

*"Who are you?"*

He takes a moment to answer my question *"Just a dispatch, sent to make sure you found your way."*

*"Dispatched by whom?"*

He stares at me questioningly *"Word of your arrival has preceded you, and of you, Kroka has spoken well. However, my boss would not take kindly to the hostility you have demonstrated against his own."*

*"Surely you understand that we must be careful?"* I ask

*"Agreed..."* He nods

We all relax. With guns holstered and the journey resumed, it takes another three minutes before we arrive at a well-guarded building that looks more like a military outpost and upon entry, a strapping, fully augmented soldier meets us.

*"Iron Five, right this way."*

The gears in his joints whir with his movements and we follow our guide to a large tent nearby. Here, digital images of planets, moons and various locations float in the air. At a table in the center of the space, a man, similar in size to captain Obek turns toward us.

*"Iron Five...right on time...welcome..."* He flashes the same smile as Kroka.

*"Captain Xai, I presume?"*

*"Commander, Xai..."* He corrects me, still smiling *"Kroka has asked for my co-operation in this search, so here is what we have thus far. Our sensors have indicated an approaching energy source that should be in our space within the*

next two hours. It could be no more than a mining ship, but given the current state of affairs, we might be looking at a Raiku installation or lead ship."

An image of an asteroid belt appears in front of us.

"Here, a two hour jump away, is where we discovered the anomaly. Due to the threat of a Raiku military insertion, we have not sent any of our own to investigate. This task lies with you."

I receive the co-ordinates and nod in satisfaction "Thank you Commander."

He nods in return "Thank *you*, but tell me, Captain Gant. Why come all this way for information that could have easily been transmitted to you in Vacuum?"

"We needed to resupply and personally, I believe in the power of networking."

He grins crookedly "An Earthfront operative, networking with Pirate scum..." He laughs loudly "I love this galaxy. Who knows, Captain Gant? We might very well be onto something worthwhile. I'll see you again, if ever."

With a slight bow, the grinning Commander walks away and our escort returns to lead us back to our ship.

\*\*\*\*\*

### **1700 hours - System time**

Around us, mountainous asteroids rotate slowly as the Condor's Magnatech holds us in place. So far, we have not found a gate but our sensors indicate something large headed our way.

"I've got a ping..."

Bull relays the info across my Dees and Dane turns the ship slowly toward the location, maintaining our invisibility. One hundred kilometers away, right where our sensors indicate the disruption, space warps and ripples and a medium sized, deep space hauler emerges from the slipstream of Hyperspace, then crawls to a stop beside an asteroid rich in iron ore.

Within minutes, with powerful blasts of electrical strikes, it breaks apart the rocks nearby and pulls them to its hold by magnetically charged beams.

"A dead end..." Akita sighs heavily.

He is right. Ever since our arrival, we have been on the prowl. Twenty-four hours, six worlds, four asteroid belts and not one system gate found.

"We need to get back to Viking Cove." I say it to Dane, and without hesitation, she aligns the ship and makes the jump.

**System: Adra**  
**Location: Equia-Ar**  
**0500 hours - System time**

### **0 days to Raiku arrival**

Seven hundred thousand kilometers from the gas giant known as Equia, one of three beautiful moons orbiting it was fast approaching daylight. This moon, Equia-Ar was one of few in Adra that had an oxygen rich atmosphere and as the sun spilled light across its horizon, Captain Hewel Jaksen basked in its glow.

The pirate stood proudly at the helm of the E.R Scuttler, a Prowler that was once a Frigate, stolen and refitted to suit his needs. He was silently enjoying the view from the three hundred and sixty degree Everglass cockpit. On his left, Equia radiated with rich blue hues while below, his moon lay vast and wide, spread out and away from him like a map. Dead ahead, his destination awaited where he would intercept a lone ship jumping through their space. According to the pings from sensors placed strategically throughout his territory, alerts of ships in hyperspace were often received long before his victims arrived, and he had grown considerable wealthy this way.

With one last deep breath, the short, heavily built man sat, secured his harness and mentally readied himself for what was to come.

“Quartermaster...initiate...” He spoke clearly.

“Aye Captain...”

However, even as the young man replied, Jaksen did not hear him. His mind was on the prize three billion miles away. If the sensors were correct, then one ship, a monstrous one, was almost there. *Most likely, a barge*, he thought, as the Scuttler lurched forward, forcing him from his daydream, twisting space and time as they jumped into Hyperlight.

**System: Adra**  
**Location: Colloid Belt**

The monstrous foreshadow of The Scuttler preceded the ship’s arrival by a split second. The heavily armed vessel exited Hyperlight and floated to a halt.

“Full scan...” Captain Jakson asked without taking his eyes from his point of interest.

“Nothing yet sir...” An older woman with hair like a porcupine’s spikes answered almost immediately.

The excitement of taking another prize by force filled him wondrously. The anticipation of making his victims suffer thrilled him even more. There was nothing in the galaxy that got his heart racing like the screams of dying men beneath his gaze, not even the women of leisure on his home world.

Just then, a thousand kilometers away, space shifted and bulged and a titan, unlike anything he had ever seen before, arrived from Hyperspace.

Looming above him, even at this distance, the thing was beyond comprehension. Like an ominous giant wheel rotating through space, it was clearly a ship, but of what class he did not know.

"Captain..." His navigations officer said nervously "...we shouldn't be here..."

It was too late. Within seconds, thousands of battle cruisers and warships filled the void, the smallest of them over ten times the size of his prized Scuttler and to his shock and horror, plastered across the hull of the nearest, was the red and black symbol of the Raiku Dynasty.

"Quartermaster, go to highlight...now!"

"I can't, they've got us magnet-blocked..."

"How is this possible? We should be able to break free..."

"I don't know, maybe it's because there are so many..."

With frantic fingers on an interface only seen through his Digital eyes, Hewel Jaksen activated their distress beacon and opened communications on all channels.

"Unknown Starfleet Command...this is Captain Jaksen of the ER Scuttler...we are non-hostile...I repeat, non-hostile..."

There was no reply.

"Unknown Starfleet Command...this is Captain Jaksen, of the mining ship E.R Scuttler...requesting release from Magnetic lock...we are non-hostile..."

There was still no reply.

Consumed in what appeared to be an ocean of monsters, he urged the pilot to try for Hyperlight once more but the effort was futile. Suddenly, alerts and warnings lit up the room, splintering his mind between fear and the almost unbearable sound of every alarm triggered simultaneously.

"Evac...evac...get to the pods...now!"

Belts unclipping filled the air as the message went out throughout the ship. Everywhere, on every deck, men and women strapped themselves into single pods designed for deep-space survival and the evacuation had begun.

Captain Jakson ran to his escape pod. Every great captain was always last to abandon ship. *Good thing he was not a great captain*, he thought. The information streaming across his Dees told him that roughly half of his crew had already jettisoned. This mattered little to him. He jumped into the car-sized capsule, let the automated system strap him in and initiate, then braced for the thunderous jolt as powerful hydraulics snapped from the ship and spat him into vacuum.

200km

300km, 1000km

2000km

The digital interface showed him how far he had flown from the doomed Scuttler, and as the impact of unseen missiles split his beloved ship into billions of pieces, Hewel gasped.

"Oh God..."

His last words left him breathless. Beyond his viewscreen, Hunter-class missiles painted portraits of death and destruction and flashes of exploding escape pods filled his vision. In an instant, he was no more.

\*\*\*\*\*

**System: Adra**

**Location: Toru-En**

**0637 hours - System time**

**0 days to Raiku arrival**

We are all sitting at the bar in the Oxpar Inn and coughing on what the locals call, Thruster juice. A local favorite when it comes to morning pick-me-ups, the drink, served steaming hot consists of one cup Furic coffee, quarter cup over-proofed rum, and a half cup of Corosis, a wine made from fermented peppers.

"Iron Five..." I turn to see Edria as she quickly approaches "...come with me."

The way she says it makes me forget my drink from hell and follow without asking questions.

She leads us outside and down the pathway, to a metallic pod that opens when we arrive. Inside, soft white walls envelop the small space and from a chair before a moving digital interface, Captain Obek turns to us.

"Gentlemen...Lady...I believe we have found your quarry. Ten minutes ago, we received a distress signal sent out on all channels. This signal was interrupted early in the transmission, suggesting that those who sent it are no longer with us."

"How do we know that it's not just a ship stranded or damaged in vacuum?"

Obviously choosing his words carefully, the Captain gives his response.

"Given the ship, and the nature of its captain, it is highly unlike him to do this. A distress signal to his clan would have sufficed, but on all channels? This is something different. "

"Okay, we'll check it out. Keep the search for the gate active. If this turns out to be nothing, we'll need to be re-directed quickly."

“Our network has scoured the system many times over, there isn’t any Raiku gate here...”

“Then search again. In the meantime, I want co-ords and everything about this distressed ship and her captain uploaded to us on the go...everything.”

I stop his protests before he can begin his argument.

“So be it. On-the-go, Captain Gant...”

His words drip with venom and no farewells follow, but this is fine, I do not intend to return either way.

\*\*\*\*\*

Fifteen minutes later, we are in the Condor and the ship lurches as the autopilot follows the station’s magnetic guidance. Above us, Eversteel hangar doors slide open and after passing through them, they close, locking us into a giant chamber. Within seconds, another pair of moving doors reveals the inky void of space.

With clearance given by the traffic controller, Dane locks the co-ordinates given to us by Captain Obek into the ship’s navigation system and I confirm it.

“Iron Five...” I address my crew and they all turn toward me, but there is nothing to say though our silent exchange speaks volumes.

“Fly brave...” Hound chimes in

“Fly strong...” Pitbull Answers

“Ahwoo...” Akita grunts

Without another word, Dane allows the AI to align our flight path and we make the jump.

An hour later, the loosening of pressure across my chest signals our arrival and the Condor’s Magnatech pulls us from Hyperlight.

“We’re dark...”

Pitbull verifies that the auto-camouflage has engaged and all communications modules are offline. With the engines asleep, we hang motionless in space. Above and on my right, Eru, a dead, ice-planet a quarter the size of Earth, hangs in space. According to the information fed to me, there is no breathable atmosphere there and frozen hydrogen makes up most of its surface. My attention quickly leaves it however as the computer reveals the reality around us.

Below, an ocean of war ships spread out and away in every direction, creating the illusion of a manmade black hole blotting out the distant stars beyond them. Across their monumental hulls, the red insignia of the Dynasty is only visible because of my enhanced vision and at the helm of the fleet; a ship like no other leads them.

“If that’s the lead battleship, then that’s where we’ll find Terrier...” I say it to myself.

"Um...boss..." Pitbull manipulates his controls, manually scanning the location so our enemies cannot detect any signals leaving our ship. "...That's not a battleship..."

"What is it?"

I force my Dees to enhance the thing four thousand kilometers away. It is like a wheel, rolling slowly, hauntingly through space yet holding its position. What makes it stranger, is that compared to the largest of the Raiku's battleships, this one is easily ten times their size.

"God help us..." I mumble, as reality hits home.

"The ship *is* the gate..." Akita takes the words from my mouth "How the hell are we supposed to destroy that?"

"The Reactor at its center, if we can expose the power source it should be enough to destabilize the entire ship." Pitbull replies.

"How do we cross four thousand kilometers in any reasonable amount of time without waking this god-damned giant?"

Akita's question sinks into my stomach like a bag of rocks. If we launch the missiles from this far, they would be intercepted within seconds and we would be nothing but dust and parts shortly after.

"We can't, but I can..." Everyone turns to me with questioning faces that seem to challenge my sanity "If the Condor moves at even the slowest possible speed needed to get there in any decent time, they'll detect us. If we launch the missiles from here, they will not make it and we will become one with the cosmos. However, if we can load the missiles onto a DAWG..."

"Forget it Alpha...forget it..."

"Just hear me out Akita. Load my DAWG. I will go dark and get beneath the fleet. If I can stay close enough to their hulls to take a piss on them, they will not pick up my movements. From there I can leap-frog to the gate and set a timed charge..."

"A timed char...Alpha, are you listening to yourself?" Akita's desperation overflows "You won't even make it past the first ship. Someone is bound to get a visual..."

"No they won't..." I counter "...Look, they've traded Everglass for reinforced hulls. There are no windows.

Dane cuts in this time "...And what if you are discovered, then what...we go to Highlight and leave you to die?"

"All of us need not die here and we all know the risks..."

"Save it Huski..." Pitbull now "...I'd rather we took the Condor to Hyperlight, and slammed it into that sucker..."

"I'm not asking permission. I'm giving you an order..."

"That's a bullshit order and you know it..." Akita again

"Hold on a sec, Alpha might on to something here..." Hound finally opens his mouth and silences their protests "You deliver the missiles and set the charge. Timing will be everything because we will have to make the jump



seconds before it blows. You should be able to maintain stealth even after you plant them..."

"But what if he's spotted?"

Hound continues, ignoring Akita "Alpha, if the shit hits the fan while you are out there, blow the damned thing and go dark. There are fighters and transports moving between ships even now and after a direct assault, they will be sending hoards to search the area. That would leave many docking-bays open and vulnerable."

I finish the thought for him "Ditch the Mecha, steal a ship..."

"Exactly..." He nods

"Okay, if you have to steal a ship, where do we rendezvous?"

I open a Star-map in order to give Akita a proper answer

"Tat'ra...It's on an unusual path around its parent star and should be safe enough." I log the co-ordinates of the massive, rocky planet one hundred and seventy light years away to our Dees "You'll have priority jump authorization from any Starport in this system, under the current circumstances."

"You've obviously given this some thought..."

Akita is right. I have been thinking this through and through, ever since we received the mission, and though it is still a hard pill to swallow, I would rather go out with a bang knowing that the rest of my team is alive in the end.

"What if we can't get out of this system?"

I turn to Dane and think on this for a moment, then adjust the map to find an option.

"If we can't safely leave this system, then we'll meet on Ji'i." A water-world materializes before us "There are no land masses here, and thousands of miles of ocean will make for a perfect hideaway if things get messy."

"Can we make the alignment for a safe jump?"

I ask the computer for the answer to the question and it gives us a clear path to the planet.

"That's halfway across the system!"

"You have a better idea Akita?"

"No, but we'll get there in an hour, not bad. I still think this is madness, but it's the best shot we've got." Akita finally agrees.

"I'll go strip the Novas and load the DAWG, Hound, Akita...with me. Pitbull, stay here and make sure we remain unseen."

With the plan now agreed on across the board, we are in the loading bay within the minute. Reconfiguring the missiles and my DAWG however, this takes us three full hours and by the time we are done, everyone is exhausted.

"Reminds me of the good old days when Hawk had us repairing machinery in the biting cold as punishment for our sins."

We laugh at the memory Hound has just conjured.

"Euga...damned planet nearly killed me."

I remember it well. Akita had collapsed from exhaustion, but we got him through it. "Good times..." I laugh, though there is no real joy behind it and swallow the last of an energy bar.

"Let this turn out to be the same, okay Alpha?" Akita stares at me, troubled.

"I'll get it done. Just be ready to haul ass if these bad boys go off before I can make it back..."

"Ahwoo, Captain..." Hound grunts our battle cry and pulls me off the floor.

The hiss of my DAWG as it opens plants a foot in my gut and at the same time, fills me with the thrill of adventure. I wait with flying bugs moving around in my stomach, as the cockpit spreads apart like a metal flower blooming.

"What do we do about Terrier?"

"One thing at a time Hound, we'll have to lure him out of hiding, but only after we blow the gate."

"That's if he's not on it when it gets an ass-kicking from these Novas."

Akita smiles as he says it, but in those words, I sense his anger toward our former comrade.

"It doesn't matter. We are here to make sure that these bastards do not make that jump, and that is what we are going to do. Terrier...that is another bridge we will cross when we get to it, if we get to it. Hound...?"

He turns toward me, his face grim.

"If the shit hits the fan, give these to Mirana..." I hand him my dog tags, a fitting name now that I think of it.

"I hope I don't have to..." He takes them, then nods and walks away.

I snap my helmet in place and lean into the cockpit brace. The sleek, gurney-like mechanism locks my body in place and retracts smoothly into the confines of the windowless Mecha. As the interior compresses me within the sealing cockpit, I am lost in a familiar split second of darkness and not being able to breathe.

The computer needles my brain with thousands of invisible fingers. Information streams through my mind in real-time and across my Digital Eyes, it takes form. My DAWG and I are one again.

"Huski..." Dane's words hit my ear softly "...are you ready?"

"Master-arm, good...Novas, offline...Auto-cannons, offline...A.I is with me. Cloak, good to go...Magnatech, engaged...Life support, online..."

After running through the rest of the checklist, I take a deep breath and move one of the DAWG's arms in response to Hound and Akita's salutes as they leave the loading bay.

Dane comes back "All systems are green. Cabin cleared and sealed. Vacuum in three...two...one..." She counts down, barely above a whisper, as though someone in one of the battle cruisers nearby might hear us.

The cargo doors beneath me open.

“Don’t go anywhere...I’ll be back in a sec...”

“Then hurry up...I don’t think I can hold my breath for so long.” She replies.

“Going dark...”

It is the last thing I say as I detach from the Ship. Beneath me, two Dreadnoughts hang in vacuum like colossal steel beasts but as long as I maintain the current rate of decent, my DAWG should remain cloaked.

With both engines cold and most of the electronics asleep, all I have is life support and the Mecha’s Digital Magnetics online.

I hear my own heartbeat...somewhere behind my ears...inside my jaw...I am not sure but I must remain calm. My bodysuit keeps the temperature just right, yet I feel sweaty.

I fall past the battleship at over five hundred miles per hour and come to a complete stop seconds later. It takes a moment to get oriented. With the enemy vessels now above, I suddenly feel as though I am upside down. From this position, in every direction as far as can be seen, the underbellies of the Raiku fleet flood my field of view. With a gradual increase of power, I accelerate and the Lizard Skin technology maintains its invisibility. At this pace, I should cover the distance in a little over five hours.

Seven minutes in, I come across my first problem. I have hopped from ship to ship twice thus far but this time, the distance is much greater to the next one. Ahead and between two monstrous cruisers, Raiku scout-craft zip back and forth, from port to port in a constant stream of traffic. My best bet would be to slip beneath them, even though it will extend my time in space.

So be it.

Without slowing, I dive, pulling away from the safety of the shadow above. I am not too worried though. With my Sol engines cold, they would not read me.

Out in the open, a few fighters slip past overhead, less than six hundred feet, but I’m still safe. The hairs on the back of my neck stand on edge and ice cold, prickly fingers cover every inch of my skin. I feel it before I see it. The DAWG’s AI burns a clear image of a Hollowtip into my mind.

The short, hollow, cigar shaped fighter with eight wings fully extended, rips past me at over a thousand miles per hour, compromising my camouflage but I hold it together. Keeping my frenzied heart rate in check, along with my breathing, I regain control and vanish from sight once again.

That was crazy. The Raiku pilot had grazed me by less than twenty feet, yet no one had noticed the flickering Mecha left in his wake. I reach out with my mind, pushing even further than before. The computer feeds me the data I seek, and every scout within range is imprinted somewhere into my brain. This action adds to my troubles, but being able to push past the invasive, exhaustive effects between our mental connections to the machine is why we survived Hawk and his training camps; and though it takes much concentration,

preventing another narrow escape will be worth the fatigue that comes afterwards.

It takes almost a half hour but I finally cross the divide between ships and blend into the hull of a carrier. This behemoth is a flying military base that can deploy hundreds of attack craft within seconds. Like a beehive, it buzzes with life as more Hollowtips go and come from open docking-bays that are well away from me but within sight.

Hollowtips are Raiku, next-generation fighters. With advanced Sol and Magnetic Technology, eight flexible wings protruding from their small bodies make them capable of technically impossible maneuvers at high speeds anywhere in and out of atmosphere.

I leave the looming carrier and cross a lonely divide to another vessel. Here, traffic is non-existent and I transition from ship to ship with relative ease until four hours later, my target finally comes into sight.

A thousand kilometers away, the towering jump-gate has the look of a small space station. It is a marvel to behold, a testament to engineering beyond anything I have ever seen; a gate that not only can be launched through hyperspace, but also can obviously launch itself...*crazy*.

I come to a complete stop beneath a Command Platform. These giants, used by all the powers in the galaxy, can enter a planet's atmosphere and set up shop surface-side as an almost impenetrable base of operations. Unlike those we saw on Keden however, this one, like all the others I have seen here, is an almost flat, five-sided Eversteel Pyramid.

From its gaping docking-bays, Holowtips leave trails of energy in their wake high above me, creating the appearance of yet another hive, but my concerns do not lie here. Beyond this, nothing stands between my objective and me. One vigilant pair of eyes could see me coming or going. One flaw in my cloaking would make my efforts a waste. I think of Mirana. Our lives are about to change in one way or another, but these thoughts must be subdued so I push forward, gliding smoothly by the grace of Magnetic technology and hoping that no sensor picks up the faint energy that guides me.

Eight hundred kilometers away and the enormous vessel hangs like a monolith build by gods. The slowly rotating outer ring casts shadows that form and vanish as the resident star, a distant eye at the center of the system, shines on it. From here, the true form of the vessel takes shape. It is not a wheel rotating through space, but a gargantuan, rotating disk.

*In space, up and down is relative*

I remember the words of the first instructor we had in flight school, and he was right. I approach the jump gate and my DAWG rotates automatically to suit its orientation while the lights on the almost fully armored ship, twinkle more fervently.

In the void between the Condor and my objective, I faze between the mission and the woman awaiting me back on Earth. What happens to her if this does not go as planned? How will it affect her? Will it even? After all she has seen and been through, would I simply be another scar to her? On the other hand, if we do make it out of this alive...what then? Are we truly ready to give up the only life we know, to trade it in for one of which we have no idea? Were we serious about what we said; settling down on Keden, sharing coffee for the rest of our lives? I smile at the thought. Maybe we do feel it. Maybe it is real. Maybe we were just being human in the face of death, caught up in the moment.

*God...I told her I loved her...*

We have known each other for years; years of strife, arguments, and angry clashes ending in resentment, yet something changed over time, I cannot deny that. Surviving Keden somehow purified our tumultuous past and in the end, here we are. Do I love her though? Love is such a powerful word. If left unchecked, one can fall through its cracks and end up in despair. What is love? I have asked myself this unanswered question too many times but now, in this moment, the answer stares at me in plain sight. Do I love her? I ask myself again as the foreboding jump-gate covers me in its shadow, no more than fifty feet away.

Gliding by the Eversteel hull, I inch my way to the center, where the Sol powered reactor glows white. Rows of Everglass windows appear and vanish along the colossal curve of the vessel and behind them, crewmembers go about their duties, unaware of the coming destruction.

My flight path takes me within pissing distance; thirty-eight feet from the unknown eyes that stare out into space every now and again. My pulse is raving within my body. If they see me now, I would have to detonate my payload immediately; not the outcome I was hoping for, but for now, I am safe, if carrying enough explosives to wipe out a city, can be considered as such.

Past the Everglass corridors and stations, all that is above me here is a pitch-black hull, illuminated now and again by lights within deep grooves along the structure. Exhaling the air that had unconsciously been stuck in my throat, I slow to a crawl as the AI guides me to a full stop. With anxious breaths and a thumping heart, I wince within as my Mecha comes to rest against the ship's core.

I locate the missiles mentally and slowly raise the arm of my machine. I can feel the beginnings of the fatigue to come but the computer assists me. I breathe easier with its help and release the first Nova.

Guided by digital magnetics, it touches the outer shell of the reactor with a silent thud and stays there, locked in place by the AI's command.

*Do I love her?*

The question hits me like a hammer deep within my gut.

I raise the other robotic arm and deploy the second Nova. If I die here, it would not be in vain. Our world, the worlds of all who stand affected, my team, and all our families, will escape the Dynasty's rule by my sacrifice. Yet behind this curtain of patriotism I cannot deny one truth...above all else...she would be safe.

The third and final missile connects to the target. Once I set the charge, there will be no turning back and no time to spare. I give the computer the mental commands and fight to remain calm as the timer begins to flash in the back of my mind.

*Do I love her?*

I push away from the jump-gate to begin the long trek back to the Condor.

I can no longer deny the answer in the face of death here and now and in the face of life if we make it out of here...

Yes.

\*\*\*\*\*

The Oragon-Shi was one of eight System Gate Vessels currently operational under the Raiku banner. Ten times bigger than their Titan-class cruisers, the largest battleships in their arsenal, the Shi, as it was nicknamed, led the fleet now anchored in Adra. At its helm, Admiral Carlos Andrews stood tall. Dressed in the finest of the Raiku's black and red garb, he gazed into the abyss of deep space.

*Out there, beyond the edge of this star system, his destiny awaited.*

He thought.

*Those responsible for his death, and the hidden powers-that-be, the puppeteers behind their deeds, would soon pay for their treachery.*

It was not long ago that he accepted the gift of rebirth. Thanks to the Dynasty, he was born again and re-introduced to life with power and purpose. Left for dead, used by his superiors and discarded by his friends. These were the memories he conjured from what little had remained, and though the news of his demise had been difficult to accept, he was thankful that he had no memories of the time before it. His Raiku lord was right *"There was no honor among those who ruled the galaxy through tyranny and strife."*

*"Admiral Gatta..."*

Carlos spun on his heels at the sound of the new voice and saluted the man who now stood beside him. "Governor..." He replied, gave a slight bow, and as the superior officer responded in kind, he returned to the view outside.

"You are troubled. I can see it." The man spoke evenly and hushed, with words that stayed between them.

"Not troubled, just curious." Carlos replied all the same.

"Curious...? How so...?"

"I can feel them, somewhere in my gut, a faint whisper of their existence as though we are connected."

The Governor remained silent, processing these words. High Command had assured him that Carlos would never remember his past as a friend to Earthfront, but only the secrets he once had access to. The even erased his name as a precaution. Carlos Andrews was no more, and after his reintroduction to life, Admiral Aruda Gatta was born. They had approved him for service and with his mind wiped, regaining a memory lost to the void would be impossible. Yet here he was again, feeling something that no one could understand.

*How could this be? Maybe he should have ended him...maybe he should...but orders were orders, and the doctors had ruled his ability to feel past allies as a possible connection based on time spent hooked into their Neural Link.*

*This is of no concern*

They had said it repeatedly. He hoped they were not mistaken.

"Soon, you will set things right and those responsible for the corruption of our galaxy will be brought to justice."

"Eradicating the corruption of the Galaxy now lies with you and is no longer my concern. With my knowledge of Earthfront's systems, and how they work now in your hands, you should have no trouble with this task. I however, seek those responsible for the loss of all I ever knew; those who led me to my death and left me there to rot."

The Governor flinched within. The man they converted had now evolved into something unexpected. He was simply a tool, created for its knowledge of their enemies...one of many tools to lead them to victory over the galactic superpowers that kept them at bay. Now, as he stared into the digital eyes of the modified man standing before him, he could not help but wonder if this had been a wise decision to make.

"You are right Admiral, and you will find them but first, let us focus only on the task at hand."

"As you command, Governor..."

The superior officer left the bridge and Admiral Gatta returned to his thoughts. His gut convulsed again. Somewhere deep within, he felt a familiar presence. Who were they...those who had left him to die? How could he feel them now? His eyes spread wide with sudden realization.

"Alpha..."

As he mentioned the name, he felt their connection grow. Beyond the strong force that once again tugged at him behind his navel, he suddenly recognized the others...Akita, Hound, Pitbull...

"Iron Five..." He whispered it to himself, and in a flash of anger and rage, Admiral Aruda Gatta sent out a fleet-wide alert.

## FACT

The idea of terraforming a beast such as Jupiter has been a fanciful dream of men for hundreds of years, yet even with all of our achievements and almost god-like powers attained through Sol Technology; nature has always managed to remind us of our place in the void. Sadly, it is often only by the unforgiving penalties of our pride that she is able to keep us humble.

Thankfully, we are a race that learns from its mistakes.

The "Jupiter Crisis" was one such blunder. During a failed attempt to create a breathable atmosphere on Jupiter's moon, Europa, over two thousand lives were lost. By the hand of man, the once peaceful moon had become a permanently damaged world where electrical storms still rage without ceasing and bolts of lightning strike its surface every five seconds.

In the wake of this disaster, plans to alter the atmospheres of her sister moons were quickly scrapped and dense, Eversteel facilities driven by Sol Technology put in place instead. Today, Ganymede and Callisto hosts two of the busiest spaceports in Sol, with gambling facilities of galactic renown that attract millions of travellers daily.

**System: Ora**

**Location: Ankan Belt**

**0735 hours - System time**

Akata woke slowly. All around the bridge, the crew of Night-Train-Eight groaned as the hissing Induction System misted them with thick clouds of gas, filling their lungs with wintery air. Twenty days asleep in Hyperspace had left him disoriented at first but now, with the chill of icy oxygen in his lungs, he was fully awake.

Beyond the windows, hundreds of asteroids in the distance remained suspended between two habitable worlds. According to his Dees, they were Anka and Daran, named after the Raiku gods of twilight. The sound of everyone double checking their harnesses and reconnecting with the ship's systems filled the air and the prince remained seated as Roban directed the vessel toward a space station, ten thousand kilometers from the nearest planet.

"Time to go..." Captain Roban signaled to Akata "...elevator will take you to J-Deck. You will find our Deck Engineer, Alstan. You're his new assistant."

Akata's stomach growled. Even with the Induction System feeding them while they slept, no amount of vaporized nutrients could ever replace a hardy meal, but he would have to wait.

"On my way Captain..." He responded, and left the bridge quickly.

Through the corridor and into an elevator, he braced himself as the lift shot downward to the lowest level of the ship.



“Akata, I presume?”

A rough voice welcomed him after the elevator doors slid apart.

“Yes, and you must be Alstan.”

The well-rounded man with wispy grey hair sticking out in patches from a hat full of holes, nodded. “That’s me. Right this way then...”

They wound their way through narrow passages, deeper and deeper into the engine room, between pipes, wires, and storage units that looked older than the both of them did.

“Here we are...” They stopped beside an old terminal, whose wires had been stripped and left exposed “...you can help me dismantle and reconfigure this thing...oh...here they come...”

Akata followed the man’s gaze beyond the windows beside them and found what he was looking at. High above, the afterglow of Raiku scout-craft revealed their presence as they approached the Night-Train. Without warning, he felt a jolt, like a burst of static hitting his consciousness, and then space rippled and warped as a battlecruiser emerged from Hyperlight not far away.

“Is security always so tight here?” He asked the Engineer.

“No...it started the same day the war began...bastards police the system with an iron fist now.”

The battleship hung motionless. There were no windows as far as Akata could see and all along the broadside that faced him, massive cannons glowed with energy, recessed into to the ship’s hull like giant holes in a wall.

“Look sharp, buddy...” Alstan grumbled

Akata returned to the dismantled terminal as the sound of new voices came from the corridors behind. Within the minute, a man in a noticeably clean Night-Train uniform, the Chief Engineer by the look of him, rounded the corner, accompanied by four soldiers boasting the seal of the Dynasty.

Heart thumping, head pounding, skin temperature rising, Akata buried himself within the loose wires that hung beneath the unit and with legs spread and dangling out, appeared hard at work.

With each heavy boot clanging off the gritty floor, time slowed more and more until the footsteps came and went, disappearing into another section of the ship. He was safe, for the time being.

A little under an hour later, the security check was over and it was not until all of the military vessels had returned to hyper-light, that Roban sent word to return to the bridge.

“Alright folks...” The Captain spoke across the room after forty-five minutes of the station’s AI guiding them to a full stop. “...we’ve got an hour. Freshen up and grab som’n to eat before we make port.”

Akata unclipped his harness and locked eyes with Millennia.

“Come on prince...” Tik-tik waved.

“Not now Tik, I’ll catch up with you later...”

The jittery Deck Cadet followed his gaze and when she saw where it ended, she giggled and bounced away.

"You really should be prepping to leave this rig..." Millennia said, as she began walking toward the exit.

Akata increased his pace to keep up "My time here has ended, for now, and the necessary preparations have already been made."

She laughed, "Not smelling like that you're not."

Akata sniffed his arm as they walked along the corridor "I guess you're right."

They entered an empty lift and when the doors sealed shut, the Rokan woman turned to face him.

"Be careful with Tik. She's had a rough life and the less she thinks about it, the better off she will be."

"So I was correct in my thinking..." He replied "...There is more to this..."

"And it is best to leave it alone..."

"What really happened to her? What did this man Marlo, do to her?" The elevator doors opened and they entered a common room that was alive with crewmembers, all of whom were eagerly waiting to get off the ship.

"You have a delicate mission that requires all of your attention, Prince. You needn't worry about Tik-tik, she is safe here."

Millennia lingered for a moment, captivating him with her gaze and in her glistening eyes, he saw a woman begging him to leave the issue alone, and then she walked away.

### **Time: 0735 hours - System time**

Akata stepped from the space station onto a chartered shuttle. Captain Roban walked with him and they both sat at the rear of the cabin.

"I've sent the data to you regarding our associate. He owns a flower shop on the outskirts of the city we are going to and when you arrive there, you will meet Dalia, his wife. Ask for a bouquet fit for an Emperor and just follow the info I have given, from there. My contact is good people. She'll get you safely to Gena."

"Thank you captain, for all you've done." Akata clipped his harness in place just as the ship bucked from its disconnection.

"We're in dangerous waters here..." Roban continued "...One wrong move and we'll all face a swift execution. The emperor is a brutal man, so get in, keep your head down and get out. You have two days. We won't be able to wait any longer without raising suspicions."

"Two days is more time than I need. I'll be there." Akata reassured him.

"Good. I just want this whole ordeal over and done with."

Through his window, the green shell of the port grew distant and as the shuttle rotated away from it, the planet Anka filled their view. This Star System

was new to him. Anka would be the first Raiku world he would ever set foot on and if all went smoothly, Gena would be the second.

"Captain, I have questions that I would like, answered." Akata drew the man's attention from the approaching planet outside.

"I suspected as much but it will have to wait until we're planet-side. This is not the place to discuss, *delicate* matters."

The prince nodded in agreement and let the captain return to the view that had changed in color and intensity as they burned through atmosphere.

An hour and forty minutes into the flight, the shuttle descended into a spaceport on the outskirts of Ojuda; a bustling coastal city where sea vessels from distant lands filled the open bay and birds cawed and chattered on the wind. Within minutes, the crews of Night-Train-Eight were out, and about with intentions to indulge in whatever their hearts desired for the next forty-eight hours.

"This is nice..." Akata said, sitting on a deck at a small restaurant overlooking the ocean.

"That it is..." Roban replied "Big city, no sky-high buildings to clog the view, just that good, open, old-world feeling."

A waiter appeared, placed their meals on the table between them and left without a word.

"Akata, there is something you need to know, and the only reason I'm going to tell you what you are about to hear, is because you might be with us for a while after your business in this system has concluded."

The prince nodded, took a sip of his drink and gave the captain his attention.

"You have become somewhat of a fascination to Tik. She has taken a liking to you and do not get me wrong, it is not in a bad way. However, there is reason for concern. You see, Tik has somehow been able to lock away her past in ways that we still do not fully understand. What we do know, is whenever she gives a recount of her story, she gains a new memory."

Akata interrupted "This is a good thing though, is it not?"

Roban nodded negatively "No, in this case it is not. She has come a long way. What you see now is a functioning human being, mended and healed by much care and support. I fear the memories, if recollected, could result in her devolution."

"What happened to her?" Akata asked

The captain took a deep breath and stared silently, carefully deciding his next few words. "We were on an ore run in Ara'ad a year and a half back. We had docked off-moon and while surface-side, I stumbled across Hannah and Millennia. They were on the run from some bad people..."

"Marlo...?" Akata cut in

“Yeah, local arms dealer and such. Word was that he took children from the surrounding villages as slaves. Drugged up and brainwashed, he sells them to shady off-world traffickers for hard credits. Millennia, a longtime friend of the girl, had tracked her to Marlo’s compound a few weeks after she had gone missing. Amazingly, Millennia was able to help Tik escape and after four days on the run, a contact of mine, coincidentally the person from whom Millennia had sought help, told me of their plight and they’ve been a part of my crew ever since.

There is not much more to go on. Early on, during her time with us, Tik spoke of him beating her into submission and tormenting her with electrical instruments but then everything changed. One night, she was in tears and opening up about what had happened, and then the poor thing passed out. In the morning however, she simply became silent; woke up as if nothing had ever happened. It was a few months before she started talking about her dreams...”

Roban’s eyes glistened with controlled moisture. He emptied his drink in one guzzle then refilled the glass.

“Those dreams became a story from her past and over time, the story grew. All we have now are a mix of memories that pop up every now and again. You won’t know it, but when she had first arrived, the poor girl was nothing but a walking, almost empty shell.”

“I see why it might be best to let sleeping dogs lie, when it comes to her memories...” Akata said “...however, her facing those demons might actually be the best thing for her.”

“*Might*, is not good enough...” Roban countered.

“Confrontation takes strength, which leads to victory and ultimately closure. Closure then becomes peace...” Akata recited a line from his father’s book.

Roban disagreed “She’s been doing well so far. The last thing she needs is to relive the hell that she’s been through.”

“That call is yours to make, captain...” Akata assured him “...I just wanted to know.”

“Well now you do...”

“...And you needn’t worry, I will not undo what you have worked so hard to accomplish.”

“Thank you...” Roban smiled, lightening the mood “I’ve got some supplies hunting to do and you need to find your ride to Ora. It’s been a pleasure having you and I look forward to meeting again soon, with you in one piece that is.”

Both men stood and shook hands, then went their separate ways.

Once out on the street, Akata followed the directions on his Dees to a location Roban had given. The digital lines ahead twisted and turned down side streets and through alleys that ended at a flower shop beside the shoreline.

This planet was beautiful, and what Akata found most interesting thus far was its old, European setting, an obvious modern re-creation from the age

before the Exodus. Another interest was that the noise of the metropolis had become almost entirely faded. Here, waves lapped gently on the flat, sandy shore and fishing boats pulled in nets filled with the day's catch.

The scents of fresh fish and baked breads from bakeries nearby made him wish he was here for leisure, but reality stared him in the face and he pushed the door open.

Door chimes tinkled as he entered the small shop and a woman, his mother's age, looked up from behind a counter.

"Good day..." Akata greeted her with a smile.

"Good day to you, handsome..." She replied all the same.

"I'm looking for Dalia..."

"I am she..."

"I was told that you have the best flowers in the city. In that case, I'm looking for a bouquet, fit for an Emperor."

She eyed him curiously for a moment "You're taller in real life than you appear digitally. Come, I've been expecting you."

She locked the door at the main entrance, ushered him into a back room and then out into the back yard. Here, they stood before a landing pad where a ship that looked like a sleek, silver wasp, slept.

"Nice bird..." Akata said, admiring its smooth contours.

"Thank you. I won him in a race..."

"Him...?"

"Yes...I'm a woman...I like men...my ship therefore is a, He."

"Fair enough..." Akata laughed

The sound of distant thunder rumbled as large clouds rolled across the green-blue sky and a barely noticeable change in temperature signaled the rains that were almost upon them.

"Come, we must speak, your mission has been updated."

*A wise man learns to speak from listening. To listen is a lesson taught by your ears, who are in fact, the best teachers.*

The words of Akata's father resounded in his mind and as he wondered about the update, he chose to remain silent.

Once onboard the ship, Dalia sealed the cabin door "Jha has gone missing. Our sources report that a raid took place at her apartment complex and after it turned violent, the authorities removed one victim from the scene in a body-case. Though it has not been verified, her being missing and the timing in relation to the raid gives us reason to believe that she was the target."

"Has anyone been able to investigate the area?"

"No. Raiku surveillance now has its eye on the place. To go there would be a death sentence. With this development, your objective is to confirm her status. If she is dead, consider your mission dissolved and follow the updated protocols sent to you. If she is alive, then you are to find and extract her as intended."

"Where would you suggest I begin my search? You know this world better than I do."

"We'll start at the Three Gates. It's a bar in the Kao district..."

"Kao...? If I'm not mistaken, isn't that located on another world?"

"It is..."

"Permit me to ask...how does a planet, a billion miles away from my objective relate to this mission?"

"We have a mutual friend who resides there. She was assigned to watch over our asset and would be better suited to point you in the right direction..."

"I don't like this..." For the first time since leaving Earth, Akata was worried "How many people know that I am here?"

"Only those who matter, your mother has gone through much trouble planting her seeds this far from home."

He stared at the woman. There was a lot more to her than he had first thought. She knew about his mother and the plan to find Jha. How much did she really know? Who was she?

"What's the name of your friend?"

"All in due time..."

"Is there anything else I need to know?"

"You'll be flying in undetected. If they scanned you in vacuum, then they will recognize you when they scan us again and that is bound to raise a flag. You'll have to get rid of those clothes too."

"That is not a problem. I have my gear. I am curious though. How do we hide my presence?"

"I have a function to attend on Gura...big-wig official's daughter and all that. I'm bringing in the floral arrangements and with the help of a concoction that I, acquired, some time ago, you'll be invisible to any scanner the galaxy has to offer."

"Acquired...?" He asked

"Acquisition is the word of the day among us traders. It is what keeps us going; what provides us with what we need to survive."

"What is this concoction, and how does it work?"

"What it is, is illegal in every system under law, and it works by altering your body's chemical make-up, reducing your overall temperature, masking your pulse and heartbeat, controlling your biological signature. It makes you invisible to anything digital."

"What about visuals? They physically checked the ship when we were in vacuum."

"To search this ship would mean that they have to search them all; a task even the mighty Raiku would find impossible. Now get changed, there..." She pointed him to a very constricted room at the back of the cabin "...then strap in..."

Dalia opened a storage unit behind the cockpit and showed him where he would store his discarded suit, then handed a vial of the liquid he would have to drink.

Without another word, Akata entered and battled the tiny restroom, and barely won, emerging five minutes later in full gear. He paused beside the storage unit and mumbled a blessing to himself, then downed the fluid in one gulp and winced as it burned a trail along his throat like rum.

"You didn't say it was fire..." He exclaimed after controlling himself.

Dalia threw her head back and laughed herself beyond words.

The prince shook his head in disbelief and climbed into the seat beside her.

"If I'm sitting here when they scan us, won't I be seen?"

With the touch of a button, Dalia deactivated the digital windscreens and darkness engulfed them.

"There are no windows on this ship..." She said, "...We can see through it, but the visual only works one way."

Akata smiled. His love for the spacecraft had just doubled, and while his Dees readjusted to the light of day as the virtual windows returned, the engines woke.

Forty-five minutes later, they slowed to a halt before a space station, twenty thousand kilometers from Gura. The Neptune-sized planet was in its night phase and from this distance, a spectacular display of cities scattered across the globe, illuminated the world above them.

Dalia spoke to the command center and signaled for Akata to remain motionless while the port scanned her ship, then gave the thumbs up when cleared for entry.

"Your invisibility to their scanners will last until most of the chemicals leave your system. I would say, forty or so hours. The more you perspire, spit, piss etcetera will speed up this process. So get in quick and get out."

"Thank you..." He looked to her with a smile, though he knew she could not see his face through their helmets.

Approaching the monstrous blue and green orb at forty thousand kilometers an hour, they entered atmosphere in a little under thirty minutes. Akata focused on his mission as the cockpit shook. Even here, a billion miles from Gena, Eos waited, and he was ready for it. With his presence masked by the concoction given earlier and the technology of his country's greatest minds on his body, he was in no way worried about discovery.

Dalia entered the airspace above Etra, a capital city located near the equator of the small planet. Here, the House of gods stood at the heart of the metropolis as a representation of the seat of power a billion miles away. At forty thousand feet, the core of the sprawling Evercrete jungle appeared as towering lights in the distance while beneath them, the outskirts came alive with vehicles moving in constant streams throughout the sky.

"I'll take you to what is known as, the Lots. It will be a routine stop-and-resupply for me, so nothing will appear out of the ordinary. Normally, I do it after my deliveries so you'll have to wait it out until I've off-loaded my goods." Dalia said, as they merged into the highest lane of traffic.

They descended into the city, guided by the ship's AI until the House of gods came into view.

"The local ruler's lair..." Dalia said with a grin, "...the most secured location on the planet."

Akata marveled at the structure a mile and a half away. At its center, two Everglass towers stood side by side and a waterfall flowed between them. Upon further inspection, the towers were in fact one structure and the cascading water, simply a feature like none other.

"Raiku engineering is beyond me..." He said to no one in particular

"You have no idea..." Dalia replied.

The gushing water fell into a river at the base of the building and flowed between glassy edifices and into a manmade lake. Akata imagined the sight of it all beneath the sun, breathtaking, he thought. Even the gardens and trees that filled the outer ring, though they stood in shadow, appeared far more splendid than those back home.

"Here we are..." Dalia jolted him from his thoughts as she brought the spacecraft to a landing pad on the roof of a building high above the streets on the planet surface.

"Stay here..." She said, before leaving the cockpit.

He gave her a thumbs-up and returned to the sight in the distance. From this position, with so many buildings between them, the palace rose high above all. It amazed him how peaceful this world was. All was well here, calm and beautiful while far away, a war raged in Sol. He wondered if Earthfront had been able to find and destroy the Raiku system gate in time. If so, then it should have been a success already.

Out across the cityscape, somewhere in the towering complex where magnificent lights made the night sky come alive, one of the emperor's lords resided. Was he asleep or awake...anticipating the outcome of this war or enjoying life's pleasures?

Akata's mind wandered to the palace in his own country. What was his mother doing at this moment? Had the war arrived at their doorstep? She was not one to hide in a bunker, of this, he was certain. Was she thinking of him, coordinating assaults, having meetings with the other rulers, or was she in the skies over Afrika firing bullets and missiles at her foes? Whatever she was doing, he hoped to see her again soon.

Ten minutes later, they touched down on a busy landing pad high above the city streets. Connected to a parking lot made up of over a hundred landing



pads, the Imperium glowed with neon lights that flashed in sequences, matching the dull thump of muted music seeping through its sealed doors.

Akata made an effort to keep up as Dalia led the way to an elevator nearby, and once on the ground floor, they left the complex and hailed a passing taxi just as a crack of thunder shook the air around them and huge droplets of rain pelted the lively boulevard.

"Three Gates..." She said to the driver as Akata closed the door behind them.

The man in the front seat pulled the hover-car out and into the busy lane, taking them through a maze of intersections until they pulled up to a grungy Inn where Jetbikes, all painted in the same colors, lined the block around it; a watering hole for one of the city's resident gangs.

Dalia led the way past the guards at the main entrance and then the bar. Above and behind a monster of a man who wiped the counter with a thick rag, a sign too big for the space caught Akata's gaze.

*The customer is not always right. In this establishment, Assholes will be treated as such.*

The prince smiled as he read the message. Overall, regardless of what he learned growing up, he agreed with it.

"Have a seat..."

Dalia brought him to an empty booth in a faraway corner where she sat across from him and a sultry waitress approached, then left to get their orders.

"How is it that the Emperor allows gangs to exist in his utopia?" Akata asked, leaning casually into the leather couch that wrapped around their table.

"They are allowed to thrive because they offer something of value...information. You will be amazed at what they know. Their networks span the depths of the galaxy and in exchange for this knowledge they are given space in which to operate as independent organizations, as long as they do not overstep their boundaries."

"And how do we fit in? I noticed that no one even looked in our direction."

"They know not to meddle in the affairs of those who run the show..." She said with a sly grin, amused at the young man's reaction. "Enough questions for now. Follow my lead and do as I say. These men may be my subjects, but I trust them no more than I do a stranger on the street. As you will learn if you haven't already, in these parts, everything and everyone can be bought."

"Bought, yes, but I always thought the emperor to be above this, that his own government networks were next to none. It appears that Earth is not as behind the times as it is said to be..."

"There is a book, an old tome read by all who hold power in their hands. From kings and queens, to criminals and business leaders, the great and those who wish to be. It is The Tide of Deception. In its opening chapter lies a quote that embodies everything the book teaches. The message, simple but fundamental, tells us that currency is only as valuable as the information it can

buy. Do not be fooled, this very book sits in your library and it is what keeps the Domain you hold sovereign, abreast with her enemies.”

Akata flinched within. He had never thought of these things before. Of course there were criminal organizations that flourished back home, but to be allowed prosperity in exchange for information...by his own mother...his father...his mind fell into a haze of disbelief, or if he was to be honest with himself...willful naivety.

The waitress returned with their drinks and Dalia requested her services, offering to pay with her own funds, drawing a curious eye from the prince.

“Relax...standard behavior around these parts...” She reassured him.

The woman in the alluring outfit sat and leaned comfortably against Akata.

Still glaring alarmingly toward Dalia, he wrapped an arm around the other woman just as she encouraged him to do. His mind was a torrent of thoughts that flitted over and around and through each other; too fast to think on any one for any reasonable time. Who was this woman? She was an agent put in place by his mother...knew of the asset, Jha...had a legitimate business that gave her access to the system’s hub without scrutiny...is tied somehow to a local gang...one that is in bed with the emperor. This was more than he had expected and regardless of protocol, he intended to have a lengthy discussion with his mother when he returned to Earth...if he returned.

“What is this about?” Akata asked, with his heard only by them.

“I like to watch...” Dalia responded “...This is Ni’sha.”

Akata did not respond. Instead, he sat quietly, listening before opening his mouth, just as his father had taught him to do.

Dalia continued, “Ni’sha, my friend is looking for someone special... someone we can both take home. She must be mysterious and have no reservations when it comes to...risk...”

“Ni’sha adjusted herself, shifting even further into Akata’s embrace “I know the perfect person for this, but she’s no longer with us...”

“No longer with us? Did she pass away?” Dalia asked, looking at the unlikely couple across from her as though enjoying the show.

“No. She’s just a bit tied up at the moment with work...you know...bondage and such...”

“Never knew she was into it...”

“She isn’t...but times have changed...”

“Where can we find her? She’s exactly what we’re looking for...”

“The Old Fort hotel, tenth floor, room twenty eight...”

“Thank you.”

Dalia slid a credits card to the woman now rising from the table and from what Akata saw across its digital surface, this contact had just made a ridiculous amount of money.

“Go with her...” Said the older woman

“What is this about?” He asked, going against his father’s urge to remain silent until the right moment.

“Play the part young prince. Go with her.”

Akata followed the swinging hips of his new companion into a dim corridor where no one cared who you were as long as you paid in credits, and into a room where he, according to Dalia, played his part.

\*\*\*\*\*

“Are you going to tell me what that was all about?”

Akata broke the silence in the cockpit as Dalia took them high above the city streets and into an overwhelmingly busy lane of traffic.

“She is my inner-city contact, an invaluable source of information that cannot be compromised.”

“I take it that your conversation was about Jha?”

“Very perceptive my young prince, it was.”

He fell silent, waiting, but there was no response.

“Well, are you going to elaborate?”

“I do not play games Prince. If you want an answer, ask for it.”

“What did it all mean?”

“Jha was not killed, but captured. The Old Fort hotel exists but it is also a moniker for the prison, in which she resides. The tenth floor means the dungeons beneath it, and room twenty eight is the interrogator’s block.”

Akata stared at the woman. The set up was simple but effective, and right under the watchful eye of Eos.

“So how do I get into the most secure prison on Gena?”

“It will be swift and your window of operation will be small...”

“Something tells me that this is not going to be a covert op...” He replied.

“You and a team of ten soldiers will be dropped in via Magna-rail. Once on the ground, they will intercept any opposition while you push to the location transmitted at that time. You will meet everything the facility has to offer. It will be heavy, but our assets within the Raiku’s system will assist you...”

“Assets...?”

“Agents put in place for this very day. They will help clear the way and provide interference where needed. Your primary objective is Jha, but you will be re-tasked with further instructions once her escape has been secured...”

“Put in place for this very day...what day? How could anyone have known that this day would come...or when it would come?”

“This is bigger than Jha’s capture. Her imprisonment has just accelerated the inevitable. Today, we will bring the war to the Raiku.”

“How is this possible? This system is too well defended for any straightforward assault...”

"When capturing the impenetrable fortress or taking that which cannot be breached..." Dalia asked with smiling eyes.

Akata thought back to a passage in his father's book and glared at her curiously "...a cunning tactician draws upon the power of internal strife." He replied.

"Be assured my prince, this day has been long planned and awaited..."

"Then you must have known about the Raiku's intensions years ago. Why else would you have orchestrated this? Why else would Earthfront have risked their people being integrated into the Raiku system?"

"You believe that Earthfront is responsible for this?" She asked with a laugh.

Akata wrestled his brain into submission as the unexpected statement threatened to throw his mind into chaos.

"Earthfront is a part of a much bigger whole. Internal strife has nothing to do with external forces..."

"So there are powers within the Raiku vying for control?"

"No, there are royal heads of state that do not agree with the Emperor's actions, past and present..." She smiled as comprehension blossomed across his face "Now you understand, and now you know. Your involvement in the matter places you at the heart of a carefully planned operation and your success will be a deciding factor of its outcome. You, my dear prince are the catalyst we have been waiting for."

"I take it that you have an assault package waiting for me."

"Straight to business, I knew I would like you. Yes. You'll gear up and receive all updated info en-route to the launch."

"What's my window?"

"Fifteen minutes. The clock begins ticking once the alert goes out. Retrieve and deliver Jha for extraction in that time, she has information we absolutely cannot afford to lose, then complete your mission."

"What is the second objective?" He asked, knowing her answer already.

"That will be given to you on-the-go, same goes for your exit."

"You know what it is...my mother also knew but chose not to relay it..."

"Then you know the importance of secrecy, especially in the event that you are captured."

He remained silent for a while and the woman allowed him the moment.

"Will I return from this?" He asked indifferently.

"That depends entirely on you, and how willing you are to die."

Akata stared at the planet now hanging beside them as Dalia interacted with one of the space stations that orbited the world, then braced for the forces that pushed him into his seat as she accelerated beyond it.

\*\*\*\*\*

An hour later, when Dalia entered the hangar of an unregistered freighter with its bow positioned for a quick jump through the solar system, Akata knew for sure that this was the point of no return. The hangar opened to the rear of the behemoth, a not-so-popular design in most haulers of today, and at the center of it, a number of railguns shaped like large cylinders stood anchored to the Eversteel floor.

"That's your ride..." Dalia said.

"Looking forward to it..." He grinned.

"This is where we part ways son..." Her voice became serious.

"If we never meet again..." Akata held an outstretched arm "I thank you for all you have done."

"And you young prince." She grasped his arm and shook it firmly.

He left the ship and a greasy mechanic with a myriad of tools dangling from his belt approached.

"Welcome aboard Commander!"

Akata responded accordingly to the title that Dalia had chosen for him. Even though Earthfront had conscripted the freighter, there was no need for the crew to know exactly who he was.

"Happy to be here..."

He lied, and followed as the burly man led the way toward the team that would accompany him on this mission. As he drew near to them, Akata noticed that these were no ordinary fighters. Scars and grizzled faces, emblems across shoulder and forearm plates, and eyes that matched his own, told him that they were well seasoned and marinated in the art of warfare. They stood in a loose circle and snapped to attention upon his arrival.

"Commander..." The mechanic said as he walked, gesturing for them all to follow "...this is your unit, call-sign Brimstone. Get familiar with them as-you-go. They will provide heavy support...three teams of five...Brimstone Two, led by Captain Jaxon..." He signaled toward a rough looking woman that nodded in return. "Captain Roga... Brimstone Three..." A man whose facial hair had long since merged into one gave an informal salute "...And you are Brimstone One..."

The greasy man halted his march nearby the Assault packages. The grey, armored suits stood side by side; soulless humanoid sentinels waiting patiently for their parasites. Behind them, the whine of Dalia's ship drew Akata's gaze as it rose gracefully from the hangar and vanished into space.

"This here is Ha'ku. Your very own Heavy Assault Combat Unit." The man said, explaining the acronym and breaking Akata's reverie as he initiated the suit's start-up sequence.

Akata marveled at the tech for a moment before climbing into it, then took a deep breath and flinched as the AI merged with his own consciousness. Assault packages were reinforced bodysuits designed for soldiers on the

ground, and though they were far less durable than Mecha, they more than made up for that in agility and maneuverability within close quarters.

"Commander..." The mechanic's voice came through clearly.

"I read you..."

"Load up..."

Akata walked toward the launcher and slid into the open canopy of the capsule connected to it; headfirst, lying face forward.

"All co-ords and info will be updated as-you-go..." The voice in his ear said, while the memory-cell material around sealed him in place.

"Roger that..."

"Your Magnatech is good...weapons are good...navigation...good. Eon Drive is alive and kicking. Relay Digitals..." The mechanic requested.

Akata, following the checklist, took over "Digital Magnetics are online. Harness is good. AI-connect, good..." He thought through a digital sequence that took control from the onboard Artificial Intelligence and did a personal check "Manual controls are good..."

The mechanic came to him again "Link up..."

"Brimstone One online..." Akata said

"Brimstone Two online..." Captain Jaxon joined in

"Brimstone Three online..." Rogan grunted

"All Reads are in the green..." The mechanic came back "Reengage AI and brace for launch..."

There was no countdown. Silence was all that came and in its eerie presence, the thumping of his heart amidst the hornets in his stomach was all that Akata felt. He noticed the constant chill and warmth on his skin as his suit adjusted ever so often to maintain the right temperature within its shell. At six hundred and seventy one million miles per hour, he would arrive at Gena in thirty-nine minutes.

His secure channel came alive.

"Godspeed, Prince Akata. May your guns never fail and may your victory be swift."

The words took him by surprise. Who was the greasy mechanic? He was obviously not a lowly maintenance man, this much Akata had earlier concluded, but it was too late. With a sharp clack that lasted a millisecond, all his questions were now pointless as they shot into the blackness of space.

\*\*\*\*\*

Akata woke suddenly as the suit's systems drew him from unconsciousness with a jolt. They were now thirty seconds from atmospheric entry into Gena, with the capsule's Magnetic Technology slowing them to a speed that would allow a safe transition from vacuum.

His eyes were wide, his blood pumping and his mind fully alert, as the suit's system pumped his body with chemicals. There was no time to think, no time for fear or doubt, only the overwhelming desire to hit the ground and complete the operation. This was what Ha'ku was designed for...the rapid, efficient deployment of troops in any hot-zone without interference of human emotion.

Detections of tracking systems and interceptors flashed through his mind as the AI imprinted all of its knowledge across it. Magnatech missiles and Sentinel drones were only seconds away yet none intercepted him...Dalia's assets at work, no doubt.

According to the information racing through his head, he was at twenty five thousand feet and would be on the surface in twenty five seconds. Akata braced himself for detachment when the AI burned the message into his skull and a split second later, with twenty thousand feet to go, the capsule snapped and cracked around him, then split apart in all directions. As this happened, four missiles that were embedded within the disintegrating shell ignited and streaked forward.

Brimstone descended into the city of I'Jin like judgment, and the missiles released from their capsules led the way with death and destruction as they hit the prison complex with devastating results. Dalia's assets had also done their jobs. With the prison's air defenses in disarray, Akata and his team swooped in unhindered.

He pushed his feet downward and felt his stomach protest when the Magnatech slowed his suit to a stop, then dropped him ten feet through the air. The armored legs encasing his own bore the impact and with his weapons drawn, he and his unit opened fire on what remained of the Raiku forces in the prison yard.

*"Commander...!"* Jaxon's voice was in his ear *"We've got Mecha inbound..."*

*"I have them...thirty seconds out...maintain the push. Let's get inside!"*

Akata replied.

The rattle of their machine guns filled the air, and explosions caused by the assault, blossomed into almost beautiful, fiery flowers that expanded into the sky.

*"They're here!"* Roga shouted, just as they entered a breach in the prison wall.

Akata led the charge and tore through every guard who stood in his way. Bullets pinged off his body armor and by the time they had descended to the next floor level, the suit warned him of its failure.

*"Reinforcements are on their way."* Roga said, *"The Mechs are on the outside...got us boxed in..."*

*"Don't worry about it..."* Akata reassured them *"...get to the objective..."*

Level by level and cutting a gory path of death into the depths of the building, they made their way.

Ten minutes into the assault, Akata's Assault Package failed. Warnings flashed in his mind and the AI's protests resounded in his ears. He had no choice but to abandon the unit.

With hisses and much clanking, he and a few of the others whose suits had also taken a beating, left their Ha'ku behind and continued on foot. With one level left to go, the remainder of the Assault Units formed a blockade and they approached the Interrogator's block with a run.

Even without the suit, Akata's Digital Eyes fed him with information relayed by the leaders of his team. Within the blink of an eye, he knew where the guards on the other side of the blast-doors were and without breaking stride, his team tore through and entered the open space without mercy.

"Secure the room..." Akata gave Jaxon the order and turned to Roga "Make sure no one comes down that corridor!"

"On it..."

The prince left his team and jammed a new clip into his semi-automatic, then made his way into the prison cells beyond the walls nearby. Across his Dees, digital lines and markers led him down unguarded hallways where prisoners shouted for their release, but they were not a part of his mission and the last thing he needed were unchecked criminals making a mess of his operation.

At the end of the corridor he came to an Eversteel door and opened it after one of their assets, from somewhere within the complex, disabled the locking mechanism.

The room was nothing more than a ten by ten, fully enclosed metal box. There were no windows or visible ventilation outlets in sight, only a single bed and a bucket filled to overflowing with shit that smelled as though it had been long expired. Beside the bed, but leaning against it, a young man sat staring at the opposite wall. Were it not for his vitals streaming across Akata's Dees, one would have thought that he was dead. On the bed however, the body of a frail woman lay unmoving, face down.

He quickly approached her and administered a cocktail from his med-kid and within seconds, the woman stirred and rolled onto her back.

"Hello Jha..." He helped her to sit up "Afrika has not forgotten you. We are here to take you home."

The chemicals in the cocktail kicked in and the woman suddenly became alert. She stood urgently.

"Reddo...!"

The woman exclaimed as she turned her attention toward the young man sitting on the floor beside them. Then she looked to Akata.

"Do you have any more of the rejuvenation fluid?"

"Yes...but..."

"Please...we must help him..."



"This operation does not cover him. We are here for you..."

"I will not leave him. Were it not for him, I would be dead. He saved my life."

"Very well, I will revive him..." Akata conceded "But he will be on his own. He cannot return with us."

She contemplated the proposal for a moment "At least he'll have a chance to escape this place."

Jha took the syringe and drove it into the man's shoulder, then stood back and waited until he became responsive.

"Kathlyn..." He whispered, as the chemicals in his body sped up his heart and woke his mind "What's going on?"

"These are my people..." She said "...they are here to rescue me. Come with us. Let's escape this place together."

"Jha...!" Akata urged, "We need to go...now."

"I can't leave him behind..." She replied, still unmoving beside her friend "Reddo saved my life."

Akata knelt beside the young man "Reddo? We must leave this place. To remain here, is to die..."

"I'm sorry, but I fear the worst and I am not willing to risk getting caught." The man whispered, "You are both going to be found out and the consequences will be worse than you have faced thus far. Kathlyn, don't go."

They were wasting time and at any moment, reinforcements could be barreling down the passageways toward them.

"So be it, we will leave without you." Akata turned his attention to Jha once again "Let's go..."

She was still hesitant, still trying to encourage the scared man to leave with her. Akata however, had endured enough and it was time to take action. With his bare hands, he pulled Reddo to his feet, took hold of his throat and broke it.

"What have you done?" Jha exclaimed, looking at the prince in wide-eyed disbelief.

"I have done what is necessary. They sent me to find you and bring you home, alive. In his state of fear, he would have jeopardized our mission. Now let's go..."

Jha began to walk but signs of her struggle were evident. Pain, sadness, fury, and fear vied for control within.

"How could you just kill him? Are you not human?" She asked angrily.

"Remember to whom you speak..." Akata replied calmly "I am not your common brother. You have orders to return to your Queen and you will do so without question."

The girl ignored his threat and continued "He was no more than twenty...a child scared...in need of our help. How could you just end his life and walk away, as though he were nothing?"

"To have no tolerance for the weaknesses of the unwilling, especially when you've been fighting your demons without fail, is nothing more than self-preservation; a natural order of those who defy all odds. For example..."

He faced his charge and saw her recoil from the coldness he projected  
"...If you say you don't have the strength to go on, I will carry you, but if you tell me you are unwilling to try, then I will leave you behind. Lost is he who allows himself to be dragged down by the man who refuses to try. You will do well to remember this."

As the words spilled from his lips, Akata felt his father's book, tucked away within his bodysuit. He had quoted it yet again, and though the loss of his mentor still haunted him, he felt ever-lingering and unexplainable warmth.

"Commander...!" Captain Roga shouted as Akata and Jha returned to them  
"Green light!"

Akata focused on the Neural Network between them and received the incoming message.

"We've got a clear path out of here?" He asked though the answer was obvious.

"Affirmative...are we done here?"

"Yeah...lead the way!" He ordered

The team moved through the desolate passageway ascending through the complex, angling and stepping around or over what was left of fallen prison guards. On the ground floor, the sound of gunfire met them as Mercenaries, Dalia's assets, engaged Raiku forces in combat.

"Brimstone...!"

A familiar voice came through to them and Akata answered the call.

"Dalia?"

"*Evac in thirty ticks...get out here...now!*"

Formed as a barrier around Jha, Brimstone broke into a slow run, firing into the fray at any enemy who strayed near enough to pose a threat. Through a monstrous hole in the wall, they moved into the courtyard where a Drop-ship touched down and soldiers of fortune secured the area.

The men around the aircraft hoisted Jha onto the open bed of the vessel and the rest of his team stepped away.

"Commander...?"

Jha reached out to him, but Akata signaled for her to remain where she was and turned away.

"Go, go, go...!" The soldier securing their prize shouted and Jha rose into the battle torn skies over the city.

"Brimstone..." Dalia's voice came to him

"We're here..."

"*Make your way to co-ords received...*"

Another Drop-ship swooped over the outer perimeter walls of the prison and touched down nearby, raising dust and other loose particles into a wall of

brown powder that enveloped them as they walked toward it. Akata let his men get onboard and then jumped onto one of the external seats along the side of the craft.

*"Brimstone..."*

*"Awaiting orders..."*

*"Re-tasking is as follows. Make your way to the palace. Assets will be awaiting your arrival. Find the emperor and kill him. Resistance is minimal. Our forces are keeping all defensive systems busy; however, the Emperor is no fool. He will be surrounded by his most elite guard."*

"Nothing we can't handle..." Akata shouted across the noise of the open ship.

Dalia was right. Within hours, the core of the Raiku Empire had erupted into a full-blown war and he was smack in the middle of it. Did his mother know this would happen? Was this what she had hidden from him while they spoke, back on Earth? He marveled at the possibility and even in the face of death, admired her work.

Over the walls of the emperor's palace and they landed on one of its massive lawns. Around them, the battle raged and within seconds, Akata's team was on the ground and moving quickly across the compound. Five of them still wore their Ha'ku and led the charge.

*BANG!*

The sound was deafening. The bullet struck Captain Roga with enough force to split his armored suit in two. Jaxon jumped into action. Locating the source of the attack, she emptied her clip into the sniper on one of the upper floors as the rest of the team secured their fallen comrade.

*"Keep moving!"*

Akata gave the command upon seeing the fallen captain. Roga was no more. The armor-busting bullet had torn him to shreds but there was no time to mourn. Shots pinged from armor, and cut holes in the soil around them as automated sentries approached from the left and right.

Captain Jaxon pulled Akata toward her "Commander...get inside. We'll keep them off you!"

*"No, you won't last long out here!"* The prince countered.

*"We won't get to that building without cover-fire. Now go...kill that bastard! We'll come to you when we're done here!"*

She was right. He knew this, but he also knew that they would most likely never see each other again, but this was what they signed up for and now, here, there was no room for error. Akata nodded his agreement, readied his weapon and ran toward a destroyed doorway nearby. Shots rang out behind but he did not look back, and with nothing but the guidance of his Dees, he quickly put what was left of Brimstone out of his mind, and blasted his way into the main hall.

\*\*\*\*\*

With barely a sound, Akata walked along a corridor on the highest floor within the palace. Bright flashes of light, from the battle raging in the skies above the city, illuminated the dim passageway. He was alert, searching for signs, a sound of a boot, an out of place scent, but there was none. This was easy he thought...too easy. He quickly covered the distance and slowed before the open arch at the end of the walkway, then removed two blades from their sheaths; he had long discarded his guns.

After fighting past surprisingly few of the Emperor's elite, he was out of ammunition and unless he could hack the weapons of his enemies, their firearms would be no more as effective than a common stick.

Beyond the intricately carved opening was a spacious room with a large desk and throne-like chair behind it. Near the Everglass wall on the other end of the chamber stood a noticeably broad-shouldered man, dressed in a body suit of what appeared to be black scales; his hair, blood red and plaited, was pulled into a dragon's tail.

"You are Akata...son of Sol...Prince of East Afrika..." The Emperor spoke in a clear and controlled voice, pronouncing each syllable flawlessly.

"Welcome. I have made arrangements for your, accommodations with us. After all, you are a guest of royal stock."

The crimson haired man turned to face his would-be assassin with hands folded behind his back.

"You have been expecting me?" Akata said, standing in place, careful not to betray his unease.

"My Specters detected your presence the moment you landed..."

The emperor noticed the questioning eyes of his guest and smiled; a dark smile that chilled Akata to the bone.

"To me..." The man said calmly and almost immediately, as though materializing from thin air, armored guards formed a semicircle around them "Specters...my elite guard...dedicated to one thing...the protection of their master."

With a slight movement of his palm, the black-armored soldiers vanished, their technology obviously masking their presence better than any Akata had ever seen.

"I must say, your attempt has been a disappointing one, losing the element of surprise by retrieving your spy; poor judgment on your part."

"Disappointing...how so?" Akata maintained his stance, knives still in hand, gauging the distance between him and his target.

"I always hoped that my assassin would be incredibly talented; skilled enough to outwit my sentinels. Instead, here you are, led to me by my will, spared the fate of sudden death by my command. You have presented no challenge."

"If I have presented no challenge, then why is there a war raging over your city...and why am I still alive? It's quite obvious that I interest you, regardless of my shortcomings."

"A bold one you are. I almost like that, but your boldness is obviously a facade and nothing else. Your spy was bait. Used to draw my enemies from hiding, she did. Even now, Dalia...she who played you like a common chess piece, a pawn...and her associates, believe that with your help, they've initiated this failed coupe. But they are wrong..."

The emperor gazed into his eyes with a cold, calculating stare and laughed.

"Fool! Did you think that I would not know? I am lord of the most powerful dynasty in the galaxy. My roots run deep..." The chilling smile blossomed into a broad and satisfied grin "...even as far as the palace grounds you know and hold so dear, tell me Akata...how is my oak tree growing? I hear that it is in bloom..."

Akata remained silent, his mind a torrent of thoughts over which he fought to maintain control.

"It was a gift you know..." The emperor casually walked toward the Everglass wall and stared at the goings on outside "...I gave it to your father; a gift to symbolize the strength of our unity. Oh how times have changed."

"You lie..."

"Do I?" The emperor turned to face him again, this time coming within striking distance "Things were different then, but this no longer matters does it? After all, *time is our most valuable commodity, for as soon it is spent, we can never get it back. In truth, the present is all we truly have.*"

Akata spiraled within. His enemy had just quoted the opening sentence of his father's book.

"You see, son of Afrika, I know many things for I have had many alliances and even though your mother blames me for your father's untimely demise, it was by his own unwillingness to accept my offers that he died. As for this *war* that is raging, as you put it...it will soon end and all of these traitors who fight in vain will know what it means to suffer."

"You are wrong. Today you will see the weak become strong as your enemies rise to stand against you for the crimes you have committed..."

"Crimes...of what crimes are I guilty that Sol has never committed?"

"By your command, hundreds of thousands, if not millions, your own soldiers and citizens included have died for nothing."

The emperor's eyes narrowed and his face contorted into a portrait of controlled rage "You know nothing of the true war that is taking place. Your home world, the Kedenian Tri-rulers, the Galactic Nine, The Rok and every corporation and government that rule the twenty-one sectors of known space vie for the ultimate prize, but what would you know? You...a simple pawn...existing only to run errands beneath the guise of royalty, you are no more than your mother's puppet."

For the first time since their conversation began, Akata smiled "Your battle with the powers-that-be over who develops the technology to travel to another galaxy is old news and does not justify the deaths of countless human beings."

The emperor relinquished the anger etched across his face "Maybe you are not the pawn I thought you to be...a Rook or Knight perhaps...either way, useful until its sacrifice becomes necessity, a sacrifice your mother was willing to make. In the end, I stand firm in my beliefs..."

"And what are your beliefs?"

"That, my son, is a tale for the living."

Akata breathed deeply, controlled, waiting. The adrenaline in his body, amplified by his suit, was building to a point of bursting within.

"You underestimate me, Excellency."

The emperor stance did not change, not once. He was as a trap waiting to be sprung. His patience betrayed his confidence and Akata knew that to kill him, he would have to be faster than the unseen guards nearby.

The lord of the Raiku smiled again and just as before, it pierced the soul of his foe "Do not worry, my guards will not interfere for I have made this so. I am weaponless, too far away for an ordinary attack to be effective, but you are not ordinary are you, son of Sol?" The emperor spread his arms downward and away from his body "...Here I am...let me see what you are made of."

Akata launched toward the man with blinding speed and leaped the last ten feet. His weapons glinted beneath the white lights above and slashed at the throat of his enemy.

The emperor was no longer there.

A crack, like that of a bullwhip, shattered Akata's mind. Colors and shapes filled his vision as the blow had struck true to the back of his head. Dazed and fighting to remain balanced, he turned to see the emperor standing not far off, hands once more behind his back, smiling.

"Tell me prince...did you truly believe that you could end my life?"

Akata steadied himself and lunged at his target again, more careful this time than the first, and met nothing but empty space. It was as though he was battling the air around him.

"I have not maintained my position as ruler over the greatest empire in the galaxy because I am weak..." Another blow connected, driving Akata into a wall nearby "I have not allowed you to enter my chamber because I am frail..." The emperor moved with incredible speed, driving his fist into the stomach of his opponent with enough force to crush a block.

Akata fell.

"...I am Lord of the Raiku, and I will not be bested by you, a lowly assassin sent on a fool's errand; n expendable pawn on your mother's chessboard!"

An explosion shook the floor violently and the emperor spun toward the source of the blast. A blue mist filled with highly charged particles crackled and popped as it expanded, revealing the hidden guard. The sight was

mesmerizing. The Raiku elite remained suspended, flickering where they stood as the Magnetic flash grenade used their technology against them.

A team of mercenaries entered the room and gunfire exploded, neutralizing the electrically charged men with ease, but the lord of the Raiku was not a common man. The augmentations throughout his body allowed him to absorb the crackling currents that arced and extended away like tendrils of white-hot light, and he launched himself toward his nearest foe.

Hidden blades appeared along his forearms, cutting the nearest man down with deadly precision. A split second later, before anyone had registered what had happened, the emperor moved to his next target. A sickening gurgle filled the air as the mercenary's throat opened into a gushing fountain of crimson.

Guns fired while the crazed monarch moved with deadly accuracy. Bullets pinged off his armor plating as he slashed his way through four more men and opened the throat of yet another, and then his enraged assault came to a sudden end.

It took the emperor a moment to realize what had happened. In his blind rage, he did not see Akata moving toward him and even now, as the blade of his assassin held him in place, he struggled to accept this reality.

"Impossible..."

He said, taking hold of the edge protruding from his chest, but Akata held firm, wrapping his forearm around the throat of his foe.

"Even a pawn can kill a king..." Akata whispered, then violently twisted the blade and withdrew it.

The emperor stumbled forward and a mercenary drove a heavy boot into his chest.

"Aru F'kska Sor'ru kanau ro...!" The emperor said, his words dripping with contempt.

"No..." Dalia stepped forward from among her soldiers dressed in heavy armor "...this is not temporary. Today you will die and this senseless war will be over..."

"My brother will take my place..." He answered, gasping, "This treachery...for it, he will make you suffer..."

Dalia pointed her firearm toward the fallen noble "Negative...of this treachery you speak...it was your brother who ordered it."

The gun shook and the Emperor's head snapped backward, hitting the floor with a sickening crunch.

It was over.

## FACT

After eight hundred years, few things have remained the same from the era before The Exodus. Bullets used in firearms for example, though designed and forged into endless forms and outfitted or augmented for countless applications, still rely on gravity, velocity and unbending obedience to the laws of physics. With the dawn of Magnetic Technology, weapons governed by it quickly became susceptible to hacking and counteractive body armor. Smart bullets and Cognitive projectiles were suddenly more dangerous to those using them than their targets and so, reversion to what had worked in past times proved the best solution.

## IRON FIVE

**System: Adra**

**Location: Colloid Belt**

"Iron Five, bullet to rendezvous and relay mission success to Earthfront Command. I'm moving to secondary exit!"

An overdose of warnings flash through my eyes and were it not for the computer's ability to access my subconscious, stark-raving madness would embrace me.

*"Going to Hyperlight...don't keep us waiting Alpha."* Dane's voice hits me in the gut.

The com goes dead and I feel my team vanish from the Neural.

I have to get to one of the carriers in order to steal a ship capable of interstellar travel. The closest one reads at four kilometers but too many fighters make it impossible to slip onboard unnoticed. The computer slashes images of its findings into my mind until a supply ship comes into view. This is my way out.

A powerhouse vessel nearby provides the cover I need alongside its monstrous hull and if I could remain invisible for at least ten minutes, I should make it to my objective without incident. A few fighters zip past me, too far away for their static bursts to disrupt my camo but too close for comfort. Operating in swarms, they comb each sector within their perimeters and eventually, if I do not get out of here, they will discover my location.

I push on.

With six minutes to go before I arrive at the open bay, my heart drops into my stomach and slowly churns in what now feels like mud. A ship, more like a machine, like the dismembered body of a snub-nosed shark, black as night and moving toward me, is on the hunt. By the look of it, I doubt I could create a



dent big enough to stop it before being ushered out of existence. According to my computer, it is unmanned, fully armed and not alone.

I expand my thoughts and my DAWG feeds me the information I desire. The Raiku have deployed hundreds of these things; angels of death in the form of unmanned drones but if I remain calm, I should be able to navigate around them. Slowly...five hundred miles per hour...I ascend, if I can call it that, along the side of another ship and remember to exhale. My chest tightens and arms tingle. My entire body is on edge as the probe moves away from me and then in an instant, I am out in the open and crossing the gap between the Transport I just left and the Supply Ship I intend to board.

This is it. It is all or nothing. Once I enter that hangar, my cloaking will disengage and I will have to face whatever forces await me.

Iron Five should be far across the system and beyond Raiku detection by now. As soon as they leave Hyperlight, they will contact Earthfront Command and within a day or two, Kedenian and Galactic Nine joint-strike armadas would have our enemies dead in the water and surrounded. Maybe this nightmare would end then, or maybe this will simply do nothing but send our forces into Raiku space on a witch hunt that will birth a new age in the Milky Way. I hope to God that it is the former.

If we do end it here, then it will be about two days before we get back to Sol...my team at least. In all truth, I am not sure where I will be in the next few seconds but one thing is for sure...wherever I end up, it will not be without a fight.

I push the image of Mirana receiving my dog tags from Hound out of my head.

*"Lizard skin offline"*

My computer alerts me five seconds before the camouflage disengages. It is time to kick ass or go out with a bang.

I descend from the blackness of vacuum with my guns beginning to rotate and hit the hangar floor running. A split second of info streams through me as my targeting system highlights every threat and I open fire, carving a morbid masterpiece of scorched death and explosive destruction into the canvas around. The soldiers running for cover, taking aim while dashing toward parked combat units are no match for the monster Mech that I pilot yet even in this moment of triumph I would be a fool to let my guard down.

The onboard AI presents the best option from among the nine starships in the hold and I run toward it. Overriding the controls, my computer connects to that of the vessel and the cargo ramp opens. I might actually pull this off.

More soldiers are coming but they are nothing compared to the Raiku hordes that are now en route to my position. In two minutes, the first fighters will arrive and I will not be able to defeat them all.

I run my Mecha into the hold, activating the pilot release program that will allow me to exit with haste. There is no time to secure the machine so I close the

cargo bay and run to the cockpit, jump into the pilot seat and activate the sleeping computer. Relief washes over me, though short lived due to the enemies that are seconds away from converging on my location. I connect to the ship's Neural Interface and ignore the prickly ants that signal my mind to computer connection. This way, although riskier, would be faster than operating with the controls manually.

*Neural access initiate. Linkup initiate. Lift off...*

I think it and the ship responds. The rear end dips with a bang, pushing the nose toward the roof of the hangar. The unsecured Mecha in the cargo hold has just tumbled, slamming against the walls that do not appear breached in any way. *Thank God.* Images of over a hundred fighters and drones, fifteen seconds away burn into my head; this is it, all or nothing. Bullets ricochet from my cockpit glass as soldiers on the hangar floor surround my ship. I access the control module that links my helmet to the Novas now attached to their jump gate.

*Neural connect...Nova class ordinance...Relay active...Detonation protocol one two one nine seven eight...Initiate.*

A split second later, what seems like artificial sunlight illuminates the vacuum beyond us and bathes the hangar in brilliantly flashing light as the Oragon Shi, pulverized by the blast, breaks apart within a colossal explosion of raging fire and twisted Eversteel.

I use my suit's AI to hack that of the ship. It would do within seconds, what I would in a month on my own.

*Eon Drive online*

The spacecraft alerts me and shudders violently as the massive engines designed for vacuum come alive within the simulated atmosphere of the supply ship. Once I engage them, everyone within the hangar will vaporize in a split second, maybe even me; it is insane, but I would rather die by my own hand today.

*Hyperlight active...Go to Hyperlight!*

Before the thought is even complete, the ship lurches forward, driving me into my seat with bone twisting forces that do not kill me, thanks to the protective layers of my bodysuit.

The hangar, the exploding jump gate and everything around it vanishes with a split second crack of sound as I launch into the blackness of space at eighty three point three-three-three times the speed of light.

*Hyperlight Disengage...Eon Drive standby.*

Seconds after my escape, I exit Hyperlight somewhere in vacuum and summon a map of the solar system. Hovering digitally before me, I select my destination but issue the command for the ship to remain in place for the moment. I take a deep breath. We did it. They are dead in the water. Waves of relief wash over me but I am still unsafe.

Out of my seat now, I make my way into the cargo bay and survey the mess there. My DAWG is on its back. Storage units and bins, destroyed beyond repair from my fallen Machine, lie in twisted pieces everywhere. I access the Mech via the Neural Link and wake its systems. With a harsh whir and much noise, its auto-balancing system kicks in and it stands tall, then lowers itself to the floor and shuts down. All systems are green, to my relief, and after securing the Mech with straps designed to hold cargo crates in place during Hyperspace travel, I return to the pilot seat once again and initiate the jump.

An hour and thirty-seven minutes later, I leave the rippling fabric of space. Ten thousand kilometers ahead, a rich, blue water world identified as Ji'i, greets me with its almost entirely clear skies. It will take me thirty minutes to begin atmospheric entry but I am not sure I can take much more of the anxiety that is beginning to overflow. This is a Raiku vessel and they would eventually be able to track it so I need to get within range of the planet, exit the ship and destroy it, then get surface side and wait for extraction. The plan is sound, but an old woman once told me in the days when I was a wild, starry-eyed teenager, to always have a plan F. She said life often has a way of making plan A and B null and void before your piss could even hit the wall, and she was right.

*Twenty-five minutes to go*

I have no choice but to bear the journey of edgy nerves and uneasy gut pangs. As far as I know, there could be a Raiku squadron in Hyperlight and en route to my location at this very moment. I run a scan of the slowly growing planet beneath me but pick up nothing. I know that my team is nowhere near this locale or I would have felt them through the Neural, but checking just in case calms the nerves in a way.

*Eighteen minutes left*

Mirana must be worried sick. We have not heard from each other since my time in Csyro. I bet Hawk has her busy though. Busy with duties that would keep her worries at bay for the time being. I wonder if Iron Five made it out of this system. The lack of their presence at this rendezvous point tells me that they have made the jump to Hyperspace. If this were so, then my rescue team would arrive when Earth's forces take this system. Either way, it will...

All of the ship's sensors erupt within my mind and ears. Twelve Raiku warships have just entered normal space a little over thirty thousand kilometers behind me, and they are already locking onto my position. I set the autopilot on its course, disconnect from the ship's AI and initiate the link to my DAWG. Scrambling from the pilot's seat, I enter the cargo hold as my Mecha opens for me, detach the straps holding it place and slip into the cockpit.

"All systems active..." I shout it to the AI and the machine responds, standing to its full height. I select vacuum flight and with five minutes left before atmosphere, the cargo ramp opens and I jump into space. There is no time to waste. I ask the DAWG for power and my Magnatech pushes me away

from the doomed starship. Missile alerts flood my senses as the Raiku on my tail launch their first assault, but I am two steps ahead of them. With enough distance between us to see me safely to my destination, I launch three Catalysts and watch as the missiles tear into the stolen ship and blossom into a noiseless explosion.

*"Atmospheric entry in five, four, three, two, one..."*

The computer echoes the words into my mind as I burn through the outer levels of Ji'i's atmosphere. Around, debris with billowing trails of smoke and blazing metal in a fiery descent, fall with me. According to the scan, my enemies are still ten minutes away, however, once within the airspace of the planet, there is no way I would be able to outrun them.

I initiate my communications module and send an encrypted signal to my team. It will be some time before help arrives, but I have survived worst scenarios than this.

High above the global ocean, light clouds appear scattered across the expanse. There are no landmasses on this world, only remnants of abandoned cities that breach the ocean's surface from their submerged foundations. The nearest one reads at ninety miles away as I approach the rough waters at four times the speed of sound.

At this rate, the collision of this plunge would crush my armor, rendering me no more than a pulp within it so I do the unthinkable, and slow to less than a hundred miles per hour, seconds from impact. As the Magnetic Technology on my machine does this, the forces become too great to withstand and I vomit into my visor. The machine hits the water with forces that elicit digital warnings, almost shattering my mind and the violence of my crash is enough to stun me into senselessness.

My body aches within the protective shell of my DAWG and in the dimness of my almost unconscious state, the easiest way out of this mess would be to give in to the coldness that welcomes me. Sensing my dilemma, the onboard AI takes over, initiating what its Pilot Protection Protocol. Overriding my command, the machine takes charge, pumping hydrating salts into my body while sucking the rancid liquid and food particles out of my helmet. Chemicals designed to rejuvenate me flow into my oxygen supply and fire and ice flood my veins.

My eyes open wide and I take a deep breath. The stench of vomit still lingers but most of the mess is gone. Encased within the fully armored torso of my Mecha, I retake control of the machine and scan the area.

Raiku drop-ships have already breached atmosphere and are almost prepared for deployment. If I remain here, they will find me within the hour. I run a final scan, shut the systems down and engage my camouflauge. I will have to maintain stealth if I am to survive.

With a deep breath of mildly vomit-scented oxygen, I move forward, six hundred meters beneath the ocean surface.

\*\*\*\*\*

A thousand feet above Husky's drop zone, where massive waves clashed leaving no trace of the Mecha that had entered them twenty minutes past, a metallic monster descended. A Cyclone, the only one left of its kind, scanned the waters beneath it to no avail.

*"Admiral, we are in position...what are your orders?"*

"Hold..." Admiral Aruda Gatta replied and without question, the small fleet under his command, five hundred miles away, obeyed.

He recalled the scene in vacuum a few minutes earlier. His missiles had hit the ship containing his enemy but the timing of the explosions was off. Deep within, he knew that his foe had somehow escaped even though all sensors indicated otherwise. His forces had followed the trail of destruction all the way to the planet surface but he knew better. Ejecting into space before atmospheric entry, his course led him here. No one had questioned his actions, but there were those who watched his every move, ready to relay the events to his superiors. He did not care...this mission was personal.

Even now as he came within fifty feet of the churning waters, Terrier could feel it, an unnatural link embedded somewhere behind his navel, tied to that of his prey, Captain Richard Victor Gant.

"I know you Huski. I feel you. I will find you." He muttered to himself before dropping the huge Mecha into the ocean.

## HUSKY

Wide eyed, I speed along an unpredictable path. If these bastards are going to find me, then they are going to have to work for it. So far, I have had no trouble navigating the waters of this long forgotten planet and I intend to keep it this way. If I maintain my current depth, roughly midway between the ocean surface and its floor, the chances of encountering one of the native behemoths that lurk here should be next to zero.

According to the information from my navigation module, one of the planet's abandoned cities is not too far away. Going to it seems to be a sensible thing to do. I can search for supplies and hopefully, food and wait out this predicament, but on the other hand, searching the cities might be the most practical thing to do when it comes to the Raiku who are looking for me.

I scan the structure ahead as I make my approach. I will have to be fast. Find a safe place to park, get in, locate and collect whatever I can and get out; twenty minutes tops.

Most of the city's submerged areas are above me. At this depth, what seem to be massive rectangular doors line the outer shell of the lowest part of the complex; docking bays designed to receive aquatic craft, were I to make a guess. My AI tells me that the electrical system is still operational and without much difficulty, I override the ancient computer framework and enter one of the slowly opening doors.

The sight is impressive. Somehow, even with the door opened and the ocean flooding in, I breach the surface of the giant chamber, as the waters no longer fill the space. It must be old magnetic tech. I jump onto the dry docking bay and lower the cockpit. This is going to be risky, but if I am to survive, then there is no other option. First things first though...helmet off...I wash and clean what remains of my vomit, then after a bit of scrutiny, it returns to my head; makes no sense to endure the lingering odor of puke when I can actually do something about it.

I leave my DAWG behind and take comfort in hearing the cockpit reseal itself. The presence of my functioning machine somehow dulls the emptiness of being alone. It is time to make my way into the bowels of the structure, armed with nothing but my semi-automatic.

In the dark, I find my way with the night vision capabilities of my Digital Eyes, ready for anything that might have made its home here. To my relief, as I push onward, up flights of seemingly endless stairs, I am alone.

After five minutes, I leave the underground and come out onto a sidewalk beside a wide street. The winds here are brutal but I move on. A building nearby gives me the first reprieve from the heavy air currents that blast across the ocean, but there is nothing here. With a quick scan of the block across the street, I find what I was hoping for; a military surplus outlet with heavily weathered Eversteel walls, greets me with a well-worn sign above its entrance.

*Kaleb and sons - Tactical supply depot*

I brace against the wild winds and stagger into the derelict building. The first thing I see is a wall filled with guns of yesteryear and armored suits that would not even withstand a handgun today. They line shelves encased in Everglass.

I grab hold of my stomach and hold onto a nearby counter to stay my balance.

"What the hell?" The words escape my lips.

The presence of a long gone connection stabs me like a knife. Within my Neural Link, a presence that is none other than Terrier forms a fist in my gut.

*How is this possible?*

I run to the door in time to see a Cyclone barreling down the desolate avenue and I make the decision to dash across the street. There is no time to waste. He will be here in seconds and if I make it to the staircase leading to my DAWG, it will be only by the skin of my teeth.

*RRRRRRRRREEEEEEEEEE*

Dread embraces me at the sound of his auto-cannons. Chunks of Evercrete tear up nearby and rush toward me like death on the wind but I dive into the store in which I had first sheltered just as the front wall explodes in a hail of powder and heavy projectiles. Without hesitation, I am up again and pushing my legs for more speed. His screaming engines echo across the avenue as he turns to get a clear shot. His gun howls at me again as I run into the open and down the stairwell. I know what is coming next and as I clear the hallway at the bottom, missiles connect with the opening and seal it shut with a deafening boom.

My feet leave the ground, levitated by the concussive force of the blast, helplessness embraces me and a nearby wall does not cushion the blow. He has knocked the wind out of me, but I am up and struggling to remain standing. Down the corridor, flights of stairs, into the darkness below, my mind is a storm of worry and pain. If Terry has found my Mecha, I am done for. I burst into the underwater hangar and relief fuels my steps. I open the DAWG by mental command and jump into it.

The computer connects to my brain and I scan the surroundings. He is still on the city surface, still searching; I will not keep him waiting. Into the water, I dive out and away from the monstrous complex, then ask my engines for power and launch into the sky. My tracking system quickly locates my target and as it locks onto the Cyclone; my guns erupt in a flash of superheated streaks.

*"Husky!"* Terrier's voice hits me *"I found you..."*

*"Terri...what the hell is wrong with you?"*

I cease-fire and move toward him but he's airborne, rocketing into the sky like a bat out of hell.

*"You will die by my hands Gant. Where is the rest of your team?"*

He rotates his torso and the muzzles on his cannons light up. I move away just in time as the bullets flash past, and release two Catalysts.

*"Terri...!"*

I shout, but he is unresponsive, plunging downward, leading my missiles to watery graves.

*"You left me to rot! You had me killed!"*

The rage in his words is bone chilling and I watch, in pursuit, as he pulls away from the rolling waves just as the Catalysts strike and are no more.

*"Terri, what happened to you?"* I ask, hoping that he would respond before everything ends in a blaze of metal and body parts.

*"You happened to me..."*

With a manoeuver too fast to follow, he rolls upside down, rights himself facing me and opens fire.

I drop from my flight path and dip beneath the waves. My sensors indicate that he is on my tail. Beneath the water, our bullets would do little damage...the AI floods my mind with warnings as he releases five magnetically

guided missiles...unlike bullets, these projectiles operate within water almost as efficiently as they do in the air. Into the sky again and back to the city, a cloud of Magnetic Decoys detonates the incoming assault, but he's already off my line and burning hot from a new angle of attack.

A wave of energy explodes from the incoming Cyclone and rattles my world before I could react. The blast throws my computer into chaos and I hit the ground, regain my balance and look skyward for my enemy.

*"Goodbye Alpha..."*

Within these few seconds, Terri climbs to a height that puts him out of my range. Reality hits me. I scream mentally at my DAWG for power and the engines cry out. The forces of my sudden acceleration pushes the onboard AI to its limits in order to keep me from passing out just as bright flashes ignite around the Cyclone. Barrages of missiles leave its launchers and descend toward me. Within a few seconds the street and buildings within the blast radius shatter into burning debris, exploding up and outward as red-hot chaos rises into the sky and billowing clouds of superheated material expands outward.

I come to a halt a hundred feet above a street on the outskirts of the metropolis. From here, the still ballooning explosion rumbles across the skyline. If Terrier wants to end this here, then so be it. The Cyclone slashes through the air and halts its advance six hundred meters away, and then drops to the surface below; his guns still aimed in my direction and I do the same.

*"Tell me Alpha...did you take pleasure in having me killed?"*

"Terri, how could I have had you killed? Don't you remember what happened on Solace Five?"

*"Solace Five was the reason you had me killed!"*

"That makes no sense Terri! I told you to remain in the ship! And you, against my orders, joined us in battle and got yourself killed!"

Silence comes back. I hope to God he remembers.

"Terri!"

The Cyclone raises its arms with cannons spinning and runs toward me and I respond in kind. Bullets bang off my armor and mine spark like fireworks across his. Alerts of overheating and breaches assail me but I push forward. The seconds fly by and as we come within range, I jump toward him and we collide.

The impact splinters the ground beneath us, disintegrating windows nearby as he rolls past me and I regain my balance. The ground under my feet bursts into flying chunks of Evercrete that shatters against nearby walls. Guns up, revolving and spitting fiery streaks toward my target, I am in the air again and trying to lock onto him, but Terrier was and still is a master pilot.

With agility that I did not expect, he slips behind a building and rushes up to meet me, launching two missiles before opening up with all his guns could offer.



In the split second between life and death, I release a cloud of chaff and MD's then drop to the broken street below. Terri appears above me for the kill. With my machine damaged and in the open with nowhere to hide...it is checkmate.

The Cyclone hovers in place, missile pods active and guns aimed but silence fills the gap between us. I wait, choosing between a dozen options fed to me by the computer.

*"I wanted to save you..."* His voice is calm and weary *"You would have died out there..."*

If you remember this, why do you insist that I had you killed?"

*"You used me..."*

*"To what end? Think Terri! What would I gain from it? We lost you that day and I sacrificed myself to kill the man responsible for it."*

*"Aaaargh...!"*

Missiles leave his machine and bullets light up the distance between us, but his opportunity to end me is lost and I will not give him another. I demand power from the DAWG and it lunges forward, under him and out the other side.

*"I'm sorry brother."*

I raise my cannons toward his back and my cockpit vibrates with wicked jolts as I unleash everything I have.

*"Alpha...!"*

My catalysts tear into the Cyclone with merciless precision and from the expanding flash of burning parts, I track Terri's ejection pod and make my way to his drop zone.

Around a corner on the destroyed block, I see the wreckage. He is in a bad way. The magnetic tech on his seat must have failed. I lower the cockpit to the ground and exit my machine.

*"Terri!"*

I pop the canopy around his encased seat and drag him through the crazy winds to the shelter of a building nearby. His eyes are not the ones I grew up seeing. *"My God...!"* They augmented him. I remove what we need from my med-kit and administer a shot of rejuvenation fluid, then sit back and wait.

*"Alpha..."*

I point my weapon at him, careful to keep a safe space between us.

*"Terri..."*

*"You got me..."* He takes a few raspy breaths and drags himself to lean against a nearby wall.

*"What happened to you?"*

*"I died by your hand...seems like history is about to repeat itself."*

I lower my rifle *"Terri, snap out of this. If I wanted to kill you, don't you think I would have done it already?"*

*"What do you want Gant?"*

"I want to know what happened to my brother. I want to know what the Raiku did to you...how they changed you...brainwashed you into thinking that I, Richard Gant, son of D'ara and William Gant, could kill you?"

*"D'ara...Mrs. G..."*

His eyes glaze over and he convulses in a fit of painful seizures accompanied by terrible screams. I drop my weapon and pin him to the ground.

*"Hold on buddy, I'm here. Don't die on me!"*

He goes still and cold and just as fear begins to claw into me with icy fingers, his eyes open and he reaches for my shoulder.

*"Alpha, please..."*

I glimpse the man I knew for a moment. He points toward my gun. The thought of what he asks kicks me in the gut.

*"No! We'll get you through this."*

*"Kill me...please. The memories are painful."*

This rings a bell. I remember something about it from our training days. They must have wired him with a failsafe, something that triggers pain in the event of regaining past memories. Alcohol would numb the mind enough to withstand it, but where can I find alcohol here? *My med kit...*there is a bottle of disinfecting spirit used to clean areas around open wounds; this stuff could rival the strongest drinks on the market.

I lift his head and drag him upright.

*"Here, drink this..."*

I guide the liquid into his mouth to keep him from spitting it out. With a loud groan, he coughs and spasms and I make sure to keep him in place as I administer the last of my rejuvenation fluid.

*"Alpha...?"* His words are hoarse.

*"I'm with you buddy."*

He pushes me away with more strength than I can withstand so I let him go.

*"You look like shit...what happened to you?"* He grunts, making his way to a counter nearby.

*"I survived your efforts to kill me."*

*"Damned piece of shit Walborough..."*

*"What?"*

*"Commander Walborough sent me to Kona."* Terrier held his head with both hands and bore a wave of dulled pain that swept through him *"Iron Five was under investigation."*

*"Kona, the base on Proteus...and what investigation...by whom...?"*

*"They thought we had something to do with the conspiracy on Keden, but it was just a well-orchestrated lie and we were the fall-guys. I was helping to prove our innocence but they got me at Kona."*

*"What happened there?"*

*"Implants probably, set to become operational when the time came. After my demise on Solace, they patched me up and took control." He took hold of his head and shook until the pain passed again, "Alpha, you have to kill me."*

*"Negative. I finally find you alive and you want me to end your life?"*

*"I can't go back. Earthfront would have me executed for treason and the Raiku would do the same."*

*"Then disappear. The galaxy is big enough for you to go unnoticed."*

*He laughed within a spasm of coughs "Still the same Husky, always finding a solution. Tell me Alpha, how would you get me off this ball of water without anyone knowing? Your ship is destroyed, your Mecha is damaged and couldn't leave atmosphere even if it wasn't."*

*It is my turn to smile "I might not have a ship, but you do."*

*Realization dawns on his face "I'll need your helmet."*

*I wonder for a split second if this is all just an act. If it is, then it will not end well for me. However, with his augmentations, I would be no match for him in hand-to-hand combat. If he did desire my demise, I would have already been dead.*

*I hand him my helmet and he slips it over his head. "Hunter lead...this is Admiral Gatta. Verify voice and approve order. I have killed the enemy and acquired his Mecha. Send a Starship to my co-ords, return to Battle group and await orders."*

*He pauses for an unusually long time and I wait with baited breath, then he removes the helmet and tosses it back to me.*

*"Smells like vomit in there."*

*"A product of Magnatech and the human body..."*

*"Ah...I know it all too well."*

*"So, did they fall for it?"*

*"They don't fall for anything."*

*His words worry me for a moment*

*"I give the command and they follow it without question. A ship is on the way and by now, the rest of the fleet should be readying to leave. But there is one other thing...the Emperor is dead."*

*We did it. The image of scattered Raiku forces without a leader brings a bittersweet relief to me. It is either over, or the war is about to truly begin.*

*"So what's the next move?"*

*"Earthfront and its allies have locked down the system. The Raiku battle group stationed here is as good as dead."*

*"Dead...? But if they surrender, then..."*

*"There is no surrender." He said it as though it was a programmed response "My men will fight to the bitter end."*

*The sounds of powerful engines approaching rumble the air around us.*

*"Stay hidden, I'll handle this."*

*To my displeasure, Terri grabs my gun and exits the building, waiting as the ship descends. Hiding behind a counter with my breath on hold, I peer*

around it to see the pilot and another soldier step from the ramp; their salutes, crisp, then one, two, the shots ring out as Terrier kills them both.

*"All clear alpha!"*

I stand boldly, mimicking confidence while at the same time, fighting to keep my unease at bay. Terri throws the rifle to me and I follow him outside, into the heavy winds.

With my DAWG secured in the hold, I join him in the cockpit.

*"Feels like old times."*

The sight of Terri behind the controls brings back memories of our past, moments not so long ago.

He turns to me *"You're going to fly us out of here. I'll have to hide if I want to make it past security at the Starport."*

*"Where will you go?"*

*"You know I can't say. You'll be debriefed when you return and it will be by your own eyes that you will suffer."*

I lift us into the clear skies above Ji'i

*"Actually, I barely escaped alive after being captured by you. You took my weapon and my Dees then left me when past memories began haunting you. It seemed as though there was a conflict so great within, that you just could not end me there and then. You fled the scene and I overpowered the two soldiers left behind, took their ship and escaped. Given my scars and the damage to my Mech, I think I could spin this tale in the right direction."*

*"They'll know you are lying."*

*"No! Hawk will know, in the back of his mind, but I'll work my way around it."*

*"To the Starport then...?"*

*"Too risky...I have another way out."*

*"System gate...?"*

*"Yeah..."*

*"Who's going to allow you access to their gate to help Earthfront's most wanted man escape?"*

*"A new friend of mine, a member of my network..."*

*"You and your networks..."*

*"They work don't they?"*

*"You've got a point." He laughs.*

I enter the co-ords and the starship jumps into space.

We come out of Hyperlight and slow to a twenty thousand mile per hour crawl, thirty thousand kilometers from a now familiar ball of ice. The frozen world of Udo welcomes us as we shoot through its atmosphere and enter the subzero skies.

*"Unidentified Raiku craft, state your intentions, follow landing co-ords and power down."*

A no nonsense voice hits our ears and warnings of anti-aircraft targeting systems fill the cockpit.

I respond "Byra command. This is Captain Richard Gant, here by request of Xai. We are non-hostile with commandeered Raiku vessel and requesting guidance on link."

Within seconds, two sleek Mechs, their matte white skins illuminated beneath the sunlight, appear on either side of us, armed to the teeth.

"Captain Gant, welcome back. You have guidance on link. Follow escort and go auto."

"Copy, follow escort and go auto..."

"Just like that huh?" Terri asks with a slight laugh.

"Just like that..." I answer.

The frozen landscape beneath us rushes by until we enter high above the snowy city, and the digital magnetics guides us into the resident spaceport.

Unlike the first time I visited as Iron Five, we land at a docking facility on the far end of the port. Through the windscreen, over a dozen armed guards take their places.

"Look alive buddy." I pat Terri on the shoulder as I leave my seat "You've got a welcoming committee."

"That is not funny."

He unclips his harness and we exit through the cargo ramp at the back of the ship.

"Hands...!" A very large and well-built soldier shouts, as he approaches us, gun pointed in our direction. Lines of wear and tear furrow his face along with scars that imply a time well spent on the battlefield.

"Clear!" He yells again and nods toward a direction out of our line of sight.

"A son of Sol, Earthfront soldier of the highest order, and his fallen brother, enemy of all galactic powers-that-be...If someone had told me a month ago that this trouble would one day appear on my doorstep, I would have laughed in their face and had them banished for such idiocy. Yet here we are."

I turn toward the familiar voice "Xai."

"Gant..."

He gestures for us to follow and we do, across the open hangar into a small office nearby.

"What do you know about my, *fallen brother*?"

"Oh come on now, Gant. Iron Five may be the unverified subject of whispers and hearsay across the galaxy but the one-percent, those of us that know how to extract fact from fiction, always see what is and what isn't." He turns his attention to Terri "Carlos Andrews, call-sign Terrier, Terri, recently Admiral Aruda Gatta. Now wanted by Earthfront for treason and sought by the Raiku for subversion and desertion." Xai's mouth splits his face with a wide grin "We are the one-percent. I assume you are here to *vanish* into the night?"

Terri remains silent; their eyes locked in a wordless battle of wills.

I cut in "I need repairs for my Mech and access to your System Gate."

"What you ask, is for me to risk my entire operation for your reckless decision to help a wanted man." His smile broadens "One billion Earth credits and you have a deal."

"I don't have that kind of currency. One million..."

He laughs "Nine hundred million."

"One million five..."

"Don't play this game with me Gant. Eight hundred and ninety nine million..."

"Forget it." I turn to leave.

He is quiet, so I continue and Terri joins me. We walk to our ship and the muscular soldier we first met steps in front of us.

I act without thought and Terrier moves with inhuman speed. The man ahead of me shifts too late as I relieve him of his weapon, plant him back first onto the floor and jam the barrel of his gun to his head. Across the space, Terri has done the same but better. Beneath him, two unarmed men cower as he points their weapons at the remaining guards.

"Stand down!" Xai shouts across the cavernous room and his men immediately lower their weapons. "Let it go Gant!"

I step back and allow the fuming soldier to stand before returning his weapon, and then Terri does the same.

"I have information that you might be willing to pay for."

I cannot read his gaze but Xai's statement has caught my interest. My willingness to trust this man has now gone from none existent to impossible but there is something in the way he said it.

"I'm listening."

Xai bares his teeth in his slimiest smile yet "I hear that a certain Earthfront Commander has, *flown the coop*; A man by the name of Darius Walborough. Word around vacuum is that he's wanted for treason, not unlike you Mr. Andrews."

I despise his satisfied grin. "What do you want Xai?"

"Access to Earthfront's System Gate in Sol..."

"I'd sooner shoot you here and now."

"Come now Mr. Gant, you can't blame a man for trying? Four hundred million credits and his whereabouts are yours."

I battle a potent dose of anger and the ego fueled by it, but for information regarding Walborough...I would be a fool to refuse. "Is the intel solid?"

"I stake my reputation on it."

"How about your life...?"

"There is no need for threats Mr. Gant. In our world, a man's reputation is worth a hundred times more than his life. My word is sound."

"Alright, A hundred million, that's my deal."

"Three hundred and fifty..." He counters

"One fifty..."

"Three..."

"Two hundred million..."

"Come now Gant, your repairs won't come cheap."

"Two hundred and fifty mill..."

"Deal..." He grips my hand.

My Dees flicker as the information appears.

"Be aware, Gant. Killing Walborough might be the obvious thing to do, but remember, Earthfront always ties up its loose ends." His eyes move from me to Terri and back "You should do well to remember that."

We walk away. Iron Five is not a loose end yet his words somehow needle me in the gut. What if he is right...after all, they were willing to throw Terrier to the wolves without question. I am overthinking this. Either way we will be vigilant, as we always are.

The sound of our airlock sealing shut is a welcomed noise. The interior setup of this Raiku ship is similar to what I am accustomed to, but it is the minute details here, and there that separates us. Red and yellow lights instead of soft blue and white; symbols etched and beveled along Eversteel walls instead of smooth lines; aerodynamic angles instead of straight edges.

"Driver's seat is yours." I gesture toward the console and he looks to me, silently questioning the offer "Call it, my struggle to let go of the past."

"You must let go Alpha. The past teaches us nothing but regret."

"I agree, but it'll take time. I've accepted that."

"Old times..." He says it more to himself than to me "...a past that can never be relived."

"You sound like a machine."

A flicker of sorrow ripples across his wrinkled face, now pensive. He dons his helmet and I do the same. I think I may have struck a nerve.

We rise into the evening's fading light and thick snow on gusty winds clash and slide across our cockpit glass. The city vanishes amidst a wild, white blanket and space embraces us. Our Eon Drives become active and shove me into my seat and we slice through the solar system.

\*\*\*\*\*

"For a while there, I wondered if Xai was about to go the way of Toros."

"If Toros had been honest with me, things might have been different. He brought it on himself and Xai would have been no different." The memory of Toros is strangely painful.

"You've changed Alpha."

"We all have. And now we get to personally thank Walborough for it."

"Where is he?"

"In Cenza, safe and sound in Hell..." I send the location to Terrier.

“Hades...?”

“Yeah, a valley known as The Pits and it’s only a hundred lights out. What do you say to one last mission together?”

He meets my gaze and nods in agreement. “Ahwoo...”

Ahead of us, Xai’s System Gate grows as we approach and I have never seen anything like it. A mismatched amalgamation of Eversteel parts and what appears to be space junk. At least it is operational. I connect to the mental interface of the Gate’s A.I. then feed our codes and intended co-ordinates to the massive structure with the speed of thought.

Hundreds of tiny ants walk across the inside of my scalp as information passes within the mind-to-computer connection. Virtual lights and verifications projected by my Dee’s signal clearance for the jump and I brace for the initial shock as white-hot electrical currents dig into my stomach and all conscious thought becomes nothingness.

**System: Cenza**  
**10,100 Light Years from Sol**  
**Location: Hjim**

The golden glare of Hjim’s toxic atmosphere bathes the cockpit in bright light reflected from its parent star. At four million kilometers away, the colossal world looms ahead, like an ethereal orb, beckoning us to its depths. An hour and twenty minutes has gone by since our jump but it seems like a second.

The induction system has us wide-awake but I still feel nauseous.

“Got it...” My tracking system locates Hades.

The mountainous and fiery planet is hurling around its parent star at such close proximity, that one day is equivalent to fourteen Earth hours, six of which exists in daylight.

“Hades is locked in and we’re going for Hi-light.” I give Terri the signal to make the jump.

“I’m not a machine.”

I look to my brother and resist the flood of emotions that threaten to overtake me. Childhood friends, teenage partners in mischief, flight-school boys, Iron Five brothers...and then he died, we lost him, now he’s here, never to be the same again.

“I know you’re not.”

“I miss Iron Five. It was easier when I didn’t remember, but now I do.”

He goes silent, gazing into space.

“You’ll always be a part of Iron Five.”

“Kind words Alpha, if only reality mirrored them.”

“Terri, your seat will always be ready and waiting for your return.”



A burst of static hits us. It is our secure comms and my heart bounces across my chest. I hold my composure.

"It's the General."

"Hawk...?"

"Yeah, shut up and stay out of sight. I'll handle this."

General Madison's chiseled face appears between us.

"Husky!" He barks my name like the good old days.

"General?"

The unnerving eyes of his digital image look away from me, searching.

*"Terrier...! Don't be stupid, the both of you. I know you're there Mr. Andrews."*

I gesture to Terri with a shrug.

"General hawk, sir...!" Terri replies, his voice even and indifferent.

*"Gant...! You have a wanted man in custody and it appears that your ship is off course. Sol does not lie in that direction."*

"Sir, let me expl..."

*"Don't interrupt me soldier!" Eyeing us threateningly, he continues, "From my years of dealing with it, I know exactly what stupid looks like and believe me, I recognize it on the both of you now more than ever. Husky, what you did was foolish and very questionable. You had orders to bring Terrier in alive. Why is he not en 'route to Earth?"*

"We have unfinished business."

"Don't bullshit me. You don't intend to bring him in."

"Sir," Terri interrupts "I'll come in after..."

*"What did I say about interrupting me?" We go silent and Hawk sighs heavily "Gant, you 'had' orders to bring him in. Our war with the Raiku is over but a new race has just begun. I need off-book assets throughout space, active in vacuum and boots on the ground when necessary. Terrier, you will be my eyes and ears. You will report directly to me and only me. Naturally, I expect you understand this conversation to be beyond classified?"*

We both acknowledge the statement disguised as a question.

"Good. Terrier, I'm assigning you to a safe-house in Florence."

"Florence?" Terri cuts in "That's on the other side of the galaxy."

*"Three hundred and fifty thousand light years from us to be exact. You will meet with our contact there and mission objectives will become available on the go. Husky, you are to rendezvous with Iron Five in Sol and report to me at Nabal where you will receive new tasking orders. We've got work to do."*

"Aye sir...!"

*"Don't aye-sir me. I told you that I see stupid carved into your faces, and I know why you are in Cenza. Gant...you are to stand down!"*

My skin goes cold and Terri glances at me with eyes reflecting the way I feel.

*"Walborough is beyond the reach of Earthfront in Cenza. If we so much as fire one unauthorized bullet within the territories of the Kul, we will have another war on our hands. Do not interrupt me soldier!"* He silences the argument before it begins

*"However, as of this moment, we do not know the whereabouts of Admiral Aruda Gatta. Earthfront is seeking his capture and is in no way responsible for the actions of the rogue Raiku soldier." He turns his attention to Terri "Walborough is no longer on Hades. Intel reports that his transport made the jump to Hyperspace a little under an hour ago. You'll need clearance codes if you want free access to certain Starports across vacuum, without being recognized and arrested that is."*

*"Got'em." Terrier says as after receiving the encrypted transmission.*

*"Get yourselves to Xad five. Husky, you'll have clearance to dock as directed."*

I conjure an image of our destination and thumb through the intangible information before me. Xad, a gas, super-giant rotates too quickly for its ridiculous size, and spread out and around it, over a hundred moons rotate at varying speeds. Some, I notice, rotate clockwise around their planet while others move in the opposite direction.

I find Xad Five and tap the air to get a better view. I imagine for a split second how ridiculous we would look to someone without a pair of digital eyes, poking and prodding at nothing in the air around us.

*"An Earthfront moon-base in Kul-space...who would have thought...?"*

The General ignores my words *"Terrier, a fighter registered with Nebula's Core is your way out of the system. The mining company has free movement in Kul-space and your presence there would be nothing out of the ordinary. You are to track, locate and kill Walborough. I would be foolish to believe we could extract him alive, or that you will even follow the order were it given. Your debriefing will be on the go.*

*Gant, an Earthfront vessel awaits your arrival and a jump to your team's location will be via System Gate. A lone Raiku ship in controlled vacuum will in no doubt raise alarms, so you cannot risk using it any longer. I suggest you say your farewells and such. I doubt you will be seeing each other again anytime soon...and Gant! Don't keep me waiting."*

Hawk's brutish face vanishes.

*"Well, this changes everything."*

*"Yeah, and I'm not sure if it's for better, or worse."*

*"Doesn't matter, you'll be on the other side of the galaxy, well away from Raiku or Earthfront's reign and still working with us."*

*"It's not perfect, but it'll do." He concedes*

Terri points us toward our new destination and distant, cosmic lights bend and stretch. Reality ripples, distorting beyond the impression we create in vacuum at eighty three point three-three-three times the speed of light and as it is with any jump, my mind keeps up with the ship while my body feels left behind.

Cognizant transitioning they call it; the body's way of handling the forces of hyper-travel through mental projection and physical distortion.

The computer alerts us just as the outline of a hazy dot appears one light year ahead. Speed, and time and distance remain merged in an unfathomable union as they defy man's desire to know their secrets. The dot grows into a

colossal planet and I relax, fighting the urge to stiffen my gut. The ship vibrates, hitting what feels like an invisible wall of sponge when we exit the short jump.

Even at nine hundred thousand kilometers away, the planet Xad fills more than fifty percent of our windscreen. It's dense sheet of methane clouds and eternal storms appear orange and yellow in the light of the binary system's suns. The intense forces generated by our Eon drives press me into my seat as Terri steers us toward our waiting moon base. We have three hours before we get there but navigating through monumental asteroids, moons and mountain-sized chunks of ice will be more than enough to keep my mind occupied.

*"Raiku Starship...Xad Five Command has you on scan...link and rep live."*

I accept the incoming transmission and send the identification codes given to me by Hawk.

*"Welcome to Xad, Captain Gant. Sync up and go auto."*

The switch from manual to station guided control is noticeably smooth.

"Not sure what awaits us here and it's possible that we might not have a chance to talk much but Terrier, I want you to know that Iron Five will always have your back."

"Husky..." He stops me with a raised hand "...There might not be an Iron Five once you return to Sol. You know the General. He wants his orders followed so he'll say anything, but once you're back within his area of control, you know damned well that he might not present you with the picture he just painted."

"I know, and as *you* know, we've seen worse days. Just remember what I said about your place with us."

"I won't forget."

"Man you really do sound like a machine."

"Ph'koff Alpha"

I laugh and to my relief, just as I had hoped, he joins me.

We glide past an asteroid covered with jagged mountains and wicked valleys, and our destination appears as a pinprick of light among many. Trillions of tons of ice and rock float and shift, flung around their parent world by unseen forces and without a doubt, the only thing keeping Xad from being pulverized by nature's destructive hand is the hidden base's Magna-tech.

"Don't dialogue..."

"I won't" Terri answers, as though reading my thoughts.

"Good. He deserves a swift end."

"I'll make it swift, but it won't be painless."

"You'll need support when it comes to getting around his personal guard."

"I've got all the support I need. Besides, the best way to get a job done is to do it yourself."

"I hear you, but why risk it alone when you can have backup?"

"Because as you so rightly put it, I am a machine..."

"No you're not, as you've proven."

"I am when I need to be. I will be fine. You, on the other hand, need to be careful when you get to Sol. Don't be a loose end. We both heard what Xai said."

"Yeah I heard him, but he was trying to rattle me. I have been around long enough to know how the system works. The rest of the team knows this too, so we'll be on alert."

"Is Akita still gallivanting behind every woman in the galaxy?"

"Have you ever known a planet to change its path? What's funny though, is that he seems serious about returning to Riara...you remember that one...at the Starport in K1?"

"Yeah, now I do; swore he was a changed man. Are you telling me that he's serious?"

"Yep, so far, so good..."

"What about the Battle-axe on Keden...O'Canon?"

A wrench materializes in my gut with this question. What has happened? Is she on Earth, or is she on some assignment off world? Is she alive?

"I don't know for the moment, but she returned to Earth with us."

"With you...and how did that go? Must have been an interesting trip..."

"It was. I asked her to marry me, well, not outright, but I damned sure suggested it."

In the dimness of the cockpit, Terrier's silhouette removes his helmet and turns to face me. "You did what?"

"We got close, got to know each other, we connected, we kissed and the next thing I knew, I was telling her that I wanted to have coffee with her for the rest of our lives."

"My God...you're serious!"

Terri rubs his forehead and returns to the controls before him. I wait, unsure if I should say anything else. His laughter hits me like a blunt object. Holding his stomach, my old friend spasms and guffaws into hysterics and I am unsure whether to be offended or happy.

"You're marrying the battle-axe and Akita is settling down! I leave you people for one minute and Iron Five goes off the rails. What's next, Pitbull finds a woman who likes engines?"

"Actually..."

He cuts me off before I can begin "Don't even think about it Husky."

"Dane, your replacement from Rouna, she's a nova-tempered, fire-fox and ex-girlfriend of our Akita. A gearhead like no other, and now that I think of it, they do spend a lot of time together. But you know Bull, professional as ever."

"Yeah...professional, but human and this, Dane...is she a pilot?"

"Yeah, and a damned good one too..."

Our coms come alive "Captain Gant...you are synced for docking on platform D nineteen. You have clearance for lodging until oh six hundred...welcome aboard."

"Copy docking and clearance, thanks for having us."

We glide into the structure and touch down beside a military discovery vessel. Even at a safe distance, the Janus class explorer dwarfs our ship in its shadow, towering above with over fifty levels of decks and platforms.

Belts unclipping in the now sleeping cockpit, feet shuffling, gear unloading, we move to the rear of the starship and I open the access ramp.

“Captain Gant!”

A formidable looking woman draws our attention, armed and armored as though scheduled for frontline duty.

“I am Deck Master Straus. I will be overseeing the servicing, repairs, reloading and transfer of your Mech to your new ship but first, come with me, let us get you both readied for departure.

Four hours later, we are standing on a balcony overlooking a Vector; a matte grey space fighter boasting the black symbol of Nebula’s Core imprinted over its dusty grey skin. The emblem on the sleek vessel is interesting to watch. Under passing lights, it glows with a color my mind cannot register.

“How do you plan on doing it?”

Terrier looks curiously at me, knowing exactly what I mean.

“Walborough...are you gonna send him a present, hit him from afar, or is it gonna be up close and personal?”

“I’d say that’s a tale for another time. I’ll see you around Alpha.”

“Ahwoo...”

“Yeah, Ahwoo...” He nods and gives me his classic half grin, then walks down and onto the hangar pad.

The cockpit of the insectoid spacecraft bends toward the floor like a bird lowering its head and opens. Terri climbs in and it returns to its original position, locking into place with a hiss. He provokes the humming engines and within the minute, the titanium legs retract and the Vector glides out into vacuum and jumps into the void.

The walk to my ship is a lonely one. I have done this so many times before. Alone in space, assignments on my own for months at a time but here and now, my mind torments me. Why did Toros turn on me? How many times have things gone south with no regrets? Why do I regret that one? Where is Mirana? I refuse to believe she is dead. Now that it is over, how do we really feel about each other? Is it all really over? Hawk said we have work to do. What does that mean? My team is in Sol awaiting my arrival. Will Dane still be with us after we are debriefed and re-tasked? Terri is gone.

*“...nt you are cleared for exit to vacuum and highlight to Starport co-ords uploaded.”*

The flight director’s words grow louder, fazing into my reality as though I am coming out of a dream.

“Captain Gant copies clearance for launch and jump to co-ords given.”

“Copy that. Have a safe flight”

I push the throttle forward, retract the landing gear and gradually move toward the tumbling backdrop of ice and rock ahead. I wonder if Mirana will be awaiting us on Mars. It has been a while since I have seen Nabal, Earthfront's most active base on Red Earth.

I align the ship until the AI gives me the green light and jam the throttle forward. Shoved into my seat, the tri-Eon Drive configuration of this transport ship lurches forward and the world behind me along with all of its chaotic rings vanish as I accelerate to Hyperlight speed.

## FACT

"Saturn. Like a parent star to its planets, so is he to his moons, watching over them for all time." - Orion Eos

Amidst the mining colonies of Titan, Mimas and Dion, the Harvesters of Enceladus, Tethys and Iapetus, and the Military outposts within Calypso and Helene, lies a modern marvel. The Spaceport, Zeniths Landing, accommodates thousands of vessels on a daily basis and is home to over four hundred ultra-resorts, making it the seventh largest port of its kind in the galaxy. Situated twenty five thousand kilometers from the outer ring of the resident gas giant, the structure offers magnificent views of space and stunning vistas of Saturn and his necklace of ice and rock.

**Three months later**

**A cozy village on the coast of the Minera**

**Keden**

**15:30 Hours - Local time**

The day was a perfect one. After a ceremony fit for royalty, courtesies of Keden's Tri-rulers, here we are, overlooking the calm mineral waters of Keden's only lake; I see her on the opposite end of the sundeck and she stares back.

"She is a gorgeous woman Alpha."

"Coming from you Akita, I'm almost afraid to take it as a compliment."

"Oh it's a compliment..." He nods toward Riana "I've put my old ways behind me, my brother and besides, I know better than to try and tame a wolf."

His laughter rings out and he walks away waving his hand, dismissing me before I can reply.

"Congratulations Gant. I wish you both all the best, even though you've cost me one of my best agents."

General Hawk closes in with his usual purposeful walk and shakes my hand with an iron grip. Ever since his arrival on Keden, he had been nothing but an annoying, overprotective vulture, watching and protecting Mirana like some feral father unwilling to let go of his little girl. Even as he walked her down the aisle, it took three tugs to get her away from him.

"Her decision General, not mine."

His eyes swish side to side and his voice drops to a gruff whisper "And here, of all places? How could you let her bamboozle you into living on this ball of dust? You've grown soft Alpha."

"She's been planning this long before I showed up. That's a question you're going to have to ask her."

"Hello boys." Mirana, appearing beside me causes Hawk to snap upright. "I hope all is well over here." She eyes us suspiciously.

"Why wouldn't it be?" The folds of her dress envelop my arm as I pull her toward me.

"No talk of missions and objectives on my wedding day. I swear, if I hear one thing about Iron Five and Earthfront..." She turns to me "...I'm locking you up..." She turns away from me and glares at the General "...and I'll have you deported back to Sol."

"We're talking about your choice of...settlement..." Hawk braves the storm and puts voice to thought.

"I'm not having this conversation again. Now get back out there..." She gestures toward the dance floor to a woman eying him like a piece of meat "Miss Tormina needs a dance partner." The General nods, glances at me then shuffles away.

She pulls me off balance "And you...come watch the sunset with me."

Keden's setting sun paints a glistening picture across the clear waters that stretch out toward the horizon. Hom and Dama, two uninhabited islands in the distance, glow golden under its light and the sound of lapping waves on limestone shores add to the music in the air.

"Hey, you two..."

"Hound..."

He steps between us, shoulder to shoulder and grips us in an almost powerful embrace.

"This gives me hope..." He says, beaming

"How so...?"

"If the two of you can fall in love, there's definitely hope for all of us."

His laughter spreads like a wildfire and we join in.

"What's all this?" Pitbull slaps me on the shoulder while Dane, Akita and Riara hand us glasses of deep red Fermentia.

"To Husky and Gunner; their love shine like a hypergiant!"

"Ahwoo...!" We all howl at Pitbull's toast.

"To us...!"

We howl again.  
"Iron Five!"

A gruff voice draws my attention and as we turn toward it with glasses half raised, General Hawk captures the moment in a picture worth more than a thousand words.

## SCARECROW

The sky was a cloudless, black window that opened into the depths of intergalactic space. Here on the outer edges of the galaxy, with the entire Milky Way behind it, no stars were visible at this time of year on Gorse Nine. Located in the solar system of Ara'ad, the habitable moon often boasted breathtaking views of its parent planet, the gas giant Gorse, according to their rotations around the local sun but that season was still two months away.

On a hillside overlooking a wide valley, a young boy gazed into the void above. Billions of light years away, galaxies presented themselves as hazy dots across the night sky and he wept. For some seven year olds turning eight, a birthday meant celebration and happiness but for him, it marked the day his sister went missing, exactly one year before.

"Stupid traffickers" He spat, wiping the tears from his eyes.

In the middle of the valley below, a sprawling complex dominated the surrounding lands. Behind its high walls and fences, machinery and vehicles moved along their routes, delivering and exporting nothing that was ever good. These men were pirates without a ship who traded in all things illegal, from narcotics to weapons and contraband, to humans. The boy wiped his eyes again, and then prayed silently for God to bring judgment upon his enemies...and then he stumbled backward in fear.

From the heavens, a shadow descended and without warning, erupted with flashes of fire that lit up the world beneath it. Burning fingers extended, reaching out like the hand of death and thunder shattered the land as Marlo's compound ballooned into fiery explosions.

The Scarecrow fell from the night and hit the ground running. Akata identified all targets within range, locked them in place and unleashed the apocalypse. Beneath every thunderous footfall, the planet surface shook as dirt and rocks splintered and broke apart. Arms outstretched, guns rotating, his missiles left their launchers with sharp thuds. The first volley hit their marks and the perimeter wall, along with a guard tower exploded into a cacophony of chaos. Streaks of destruction spilled from his auto cannons and left wisps of



superheated air in their wakes, reducing men to vapor and chunks of flying flesh.

According to the information purchased, the last shipment of humans was already off world and those who remained were nothing but dead men walking. Soldiers scrambled to mounted cannons and four hover tanks tore out of their storage units toward him. Their guns belched shells that exploded nearby but the Scarecrow was on the move, easily avoiding the incoming fire until the tanks were no more.

Akata's AI scorched the image of a two hundred ton monster into his mind's eye and flooded him with options. The colossal machine was rising into the sky eight hundred meters away and taking aim just as he entered the base amidst flames and pulverized Evercrete. Bullets ricocheted and shoulder fired projectiles exploded as the Scarecrow's auto-defense systems did their jobs.

Fury burned through his veins. Roban's words during their return to Sol echoed in his head and the thought of what Marlo did to Tik fed and watered the seeds of vengeance that were being reaped today.

Akata jumped into the sky and engaged the heavy Mech. His guns rattled the cockpit in the exchange and while the enemy may have been better armored and equipped, it still was no match for the speed and agility of Afrika's best.

In the skies above Gorse Nine, Death fell upon its prey and Akata's targeting system locked onto the doomed Mecha. The fight was over. In a desperate attempt to escape, the enemy pilot ejected, still expiring within the expanding ball of burning destruction that rocked the air a few seconds later.

The prince turned his launcher toward the complex, gave it a target and released an Arbiter, then demanded power from his machine and it willingly obeyed. Engines screamed and rows of broad spoilers, like plates of armor across his back, adjusted for the maneuver as he rocketed skyward just as the complex and everything within it, bloomed.

As the thermomagnetic ballistic missile, designed to obliterate only that which was within its blast radius, detonated, his communications module lit up.

*"Unidentified pilot...what is the meaning of this? Who are you and why have you come?"*

Akata scanned the skies until he found the fleeing aircraft and took off in pursuit.

*"Unidentified pilot..."*

*"Marlo...?"* Akata broke his silence.

The frantic voice on the other end of the transmission took a moment to reply. *"How have I offended you? I should at least have the right to know why my life is required, and by whom."*

The Scarecrow lingered on the wind, trailing its prey. *"Hannah...do you remember this name?"* The Scarecrow set its sights on the fleeing vehicle five miles away and the computer waited for the command *"The girl you tortured*

four years ago...the one who made you laugh...the one who gave you that mark across your chest?"

*"Oh god..."*

"No, you don't get to speak to him here..." Akata squeezed the trigger and the cockpit shuddered under the immense pressure as thirty missiles left his launchers; their vapor trails crisscrossing the sky ahead of him like demonic spider webs. His task was complete. In the distance, amidst desperate screams and shouts over the open comms, Marlo and his Aircar burst into flames beneath the onslaught until there was nothing left but ash and smoldering metal falling to the planet's surface.