

Tree trunks exploded around Patrick Carter's head as he dodged through the thick brush trying to take less hits than he already had; his energized nano mesh was starting to get worn down on his left side. Luckily, the horde of security drones spewing shots in his direction were being thinned continually and quickly. For every shot of theirs that landed on their mark, Patrick and his squad mate Marcus were dropping at least three of their adversaries. Not to mention, on a ridge two kilometers away, Carter's marksman was dropping any droid with a concentrated electromagnetic pulse weapon that wasn't crouched behind cover, the invisible ray of focused and highly magnetized radiation frying targets with impunity. Of course, any droid in cover from the sniper was being quickly thinned out by Carter and Marcus as they flanked the cover they tried to stay behind. It was a pincer movement that was proving to be even more effective than had been assumed before hand, even though there were at least twice as many droids than conservative estimates had guessed.

Splinters rained on Carter's face - or at least his armoured face covering - as he dashed through another brush that would have shredded his top layer of skin had it not been for the armour. He returned fire the best he could with his pistol, his longer barrelled and more powerful firearm strapped to his back and useless in the thick jungle. One more bot fell, and Carter found himself wishing the shrubbery wasn't so thick so that he'd have room to wield something bigger than a sidearm. He swung his attention to one of the few remaining security drones still standing, but instead took a full force shot to the chest and dropped hard.

Sucking air through a mesh that felt all too restricting as he tried to regain his breath, Carter lay flat on the jungle floor for half a moment, getting his legs back under him, but by the time he rose, the last of their attackers was felled. He looked down and saw that the armour had taken the hit just as it should have; the tiny projectile had been moving at amazing velocity as it struck his armour, but the dispersal of the force over several square feet of armour had taken the deadly penetrating force away from the projectile and simply winded him.

"Love those magnetized ammo blocks captain." Despite never serving in any formal military, Marcus seemed steadfast in titling Carter as the 'captain.' At this point Carter was convinced that he just did it to bug him, but there was still probably some lingering habits from his military service too. Who knew, perhaps it was his passive aggressive way of dealing with taking orders from someone who never did join the established military.

"I'm not a captain. And yes, they work great. Suddenly, taking out a knee joint equals a shut down. Come on, I doubt that mother-fucker is here, but lets see what we can find in his lab.

The smell of burning foliage and fried circuits from down security drones lingered heavily in the air. The firefight had been short but intense, the drones that had been left to defend the small series of high tech cardboard boxes firing constantly until they either ran dry of ammo or were destroyed. But they were all downed, along with significant portions of the labs, but still Carter and Marcus searched through the wreckage for any clues to where their quarry had run to. That's when the real threat revealed itself.

From the back compartment of the lab, a horribly pained and guttural roar rumbled through the torso of every individual present. Carter barely had time to turn before a massive Kro-orc - three feet taller than any he had seen before so that the top of its head reached ten feet - exploded through the laboratory wall. One look in its small and blood shot eyes and Carter could tell that he was enraged, crazed with pain and anger. The normally well kept fur of the species - often a show of pride in ones appearance among males - was longer than he had ever seen on a Kro-orc, and horribly matted and dirty. Blood was smeared on its bulk, and surgical looking scars could be seen on it's chest and cranium. All Carter could do was stare at what looked like a being that had lost its reason in that lab long ago.

A hurled piece of debris brought him back to the urgency of the situation as it nearly took his arm off at the shoulder. As fast as he could, Carter raised his pistol as the enormous specimen rushed towards him, covering the couple dozen yards so fast that he had barely a moment to get two shots off before he had to dive out of the way of the incredible bulk barreling past him. Skidding on a patch of mud, Carter felt the cold professional satisfaction of knowing that his two quick shots that he was able to squeeze off had landed their mark; two shots straight in the head, straight into the brain.

Carter pulled himself up after he had rolled away from the Kro-orc, realising that even in getting killing headshots, the beasts momentum would carry it through his space. Carter looked over toward the beast, expecting a hollow shell of meat where someone once resided, but instead the Kro-orc had slid to a stop, standing. More disturbing, though, was the fact that the creature was missing a significant portion of flesh out of the back of its skull, and with it a significant portion of brain material. Its eyes had lost a spark too; there was no longer any rage, no longer any real recognition of the world around it. Just a dull stare, like looking into the eyes of a simple computer program. But still the thing stood, swaying slightly, but still very much upright.

And then, slowly and clumsily, it turned to Carter again, and let out another scream as it charged. This scream was different than the first though, no longer pained and angry, it was a high pitch howling, empty and mechanical. The sound was chilling and horrific, and it struck Carter to his core.

Carter was so shocked he barely got a single shot off into its neck before it was on top of him again. But there were no rolls from danger this time. With an unsettlingly casual back hand, Carter found himself 12 feet in the air at the height of his trajectory before landing harshly on a patch of hard dirt. Pain radiated mercilessly from where the Kro-orc's bony, club like protrusions on the back of its hands had hit him. He looked up to see the creature approaching on him still, even though its midsection was being filled with more and more holes as Marcus fired and circled. At this point Carter sure wished they brought something other than ammo blocks specifically for droids. Even still, the thing should be dead, but as it raised a foot for a killing stomping blow, he figured he'd puzzle the mystery when his life wasn't in danger.

Carter rolled the best he could with what he suspected were a number of cracked ribs, but it was good enough to keep him from being flattened. Marcus's shots continued, now concentrating on the head, and soon most of it had been blasted away. Horrifically though, the thing still strode towards Carter. Clumsily, yes, but still threateningly. Taking a half moment to aim, Carter placed a grouping of shots into the headless things knee. It fell, hard. Several of the torso wounds oozed as the force of the fall had ground organ coming out. But still the thing crawled and hobbled its way towards where Carter stood. Marcus picked up on the new targets, and quickly shot out the beasts elbows as Carter shred the remaining knee. But still, it moved. Headless and with no means to really move itself, it still tried to writhe in Carter's direction. The scene was so horrific that he was nearly sick.

"What. The. Fuck." Marcus could only articulate that much as the ruined mass still tried to dispatch the two of them. Carter had no words, and each lung full he took caused enough pain that he didn't dare waste his breath on obvious profanity. All he could think to do was fire into the beast's chest, into the heart, as many times as it took to make the damn thing stop moving.

Carter awoke with a start, the thirteenth bullet he had fired into the abomination of a person over a year and a half ago the one that had ceased the twitching, and the one that caused him to wake up from the dream of a memory. He rubbed his eyes, trying to settle his nerves, the recollection of that Kro-orc they had faced that day one that stuck with him, a tar around his spine that would never shake loose. He went to his window to clear his thoughts.

The viewing port that looked out into the vast emptiness of space was small, but there really wasn't much to see out there anyway. The vessel that Patrick Carter was on was floating quietly through an empty patch of space in the middle of the void, the nearest habited solar system left behind in an illegal cross galaxy hop and a half hour chase through the void that would have been abandoned had it not been for a skilful and lucky shot that disabled the engines of the drifting freighter that now provided the only thing to see out the window.

Not that it was much to look at. The blocky craft had obviously been fabricated in zero gravity and never seen anything else, it's massive and lazy design never intended to survive anything but high planetary orbit gravitational forces. It was elongated like any other deep space craft to allow it to dock in the most widely adopted docking platforms, but besides that it looked like a massive child had stuck a number of dark blocks together and affixed a propulsion system to the aft. Aiding to the ugly design was the fact that the freighter didn't even have an energy shield generator, so a thick biological mucous membrane enveloped the entire craft to protect it's hull from micro particles hurtling through space. Designed for battle or for speed and manoeuvrability it was not, quite likely one of the reasons Carter and his crew were able to track and disable it despite its massive head start. Of course, its inconspicuous nature helped it avoid detection for quite a number of months.

Carter looked at the time, and thought about how the longer they floated next to the craft, the more he disliked the idea of boarding it. It wasn't, by any stretch, the largest ship he had ever seen, but several orders of magnitude larger than he thought he'd encounter in his hunt through the stars. He estimated that the total area of the ship was comparable to a medium sized sporting arena; the ones you'd see housing sports popular to a particular solar system, capable of housing 100,000 fans. He expected to have to raid a ship similar in size to his own, where his crew and strike team totalled 50, and who were just a little crowded on their current vessel that could be walked end to end in 10 minutes.

As Carter had discussed with his friend and the ships second in command, Huy Nygene, the act of searching the whole ship would invite exhaustion and mistakes. They decided to scan the ship carefully before boarding, doing their best to find the most logical spot the labs would be

located, and the best place to breach the hull for the purpose of getting in and out of there as quickly and as easily as possible. It may have been a time consuming effort when they wanted to get aboard as quickly as possible, but both men agreed that it would save them time in the end. The crippled behemoth wasn't going anywhere, so they did their best to collect as much relevant information as necessary. Problem was, the thick polysaccharide mucous that covered the ship wasn't just a cheap alternative to energy based shielding, but it also obscured sensors and proved surprisingly resistant to docking attempts.

"This is taking too long." Carter said the words to no one really, just trying to let the tension he was feeling seep out. There was no one to hear his words anyway, as he was locked in his private quarters waiting word that they were ready to storm aboard their captured prize. He wondered about his state of exhaustion, having fallen asleep while waiting for word that they were ready to board.

The verbalization of his nerves didn't make Carter feel any better though. He knew every minute that passed was another one that Iago could use to hide better, prepare more traps, or even plan some form of escape; though Carter didn't believe that even this foe could elude him here in the total vacuum of space. The ship was large, but would need to be so many times larger if it were to house any sort of jump relay to the next habited solar system.

The knock at the door was light but efficient, and Carter knew immediately that Huy was on the other side of the door, about to tell him it was time to board. Carter gathered what he needed before he left to prepare for the boarding, trying to shake loose the notion that Iago could escape from this scenario. But he couldn't, because he knew what he was capable of; both morally and actually. All Carter had to do was remember that lab of his he had raided. The one that his subconscious would not let him forget, the sound of that creature burned into his memory.

The small hanger bay door exploded inwards as the terrific force from the boarding charges disintegrated the alloy that had been hiding beneath the thick, protective layer of slime; it itself having been burned away after a number of carefully placed pulses of laser. The five person strike team that Carter had put together stormed through the opening from the Connery before sealing the hole and letting her detach. While Carter didn't feel like the boarded ship presented any danger to his own, it was still a poor decision to leave ones ship in such a vulnerable position against booby traps or any other nasty surprises that the ship might have in store for them.

The first two members through the door were the Terrien and the Kro-orc. They were the largest two he had on his team, which was a good thing as they were both wielding the 200 pound nano-alloy weave boarding shields. The rest of the squad was hunkered down behind them for the initial entrance, always prepared for the opening salvo that would harmlessly reflect off of them. Carter thought of when available cover might have been acceptably covering in warfare scenarios past, but knew those days were gone. He was simply glad that he had the two shield carriers that he did; he had never met a human that could heft the items with such apparent or prolonged ease as these two did...nor had he met a human that could crush the life from an assailant with one should they get too close.

But no shots greeted them on their entrance. Nothing moved in the small bay, and not a sound was heard by anyone, except a slight residual vibrating and settling of debris from the initial entry. Crouched behind the shield, Carters science specialist was performing a quick sweep of the area, and doing a secondary one of the ship's interior so that the information they had garnered on the other side of the hull was still relevant. Finally, he looked up from his wrist mounted display. "Looks like some of the hallways we wanted to take either collapsed on our entry, or were designed to do that in case the ship was boarded. We'll still get to where we need to go, it'll just take a little longer."

"And what about potential ambush points on this new route?" Carter asked as he continued to scan the hold they stood in, still nothing moving.

"One obvious one. There's a massive cargo hold right before the lab that would be fairly open. The shields won't be as effective and we could easily be out gunned and out flanked in that much space." Carter thought about it for a minute before turning to the last member of the strike team he had for this, his sharpshooter, a Nelt.

"Change of plans," Carter told him as he exchanged his own compact fast repeating blaster for the Nelt's rifle, "We're going to go into that bay as four, and you'll be following twenty seconds behind us as carefully and as cloaked as you can. When we hit the ambush in the hold, thin the left side of the hold as best you can and regroup with us there as we charge and deal with whatever's left there. Then we hunker down and take the enemies head on, and rip them down gradually."

Carter's sharpshooter, as always, didn't say a word during an operation, simply nodded in

understanding and swapped weapons with Carter.

"How do you know that there will be an ambush in that cargo hold though?" The question from the science specialist drew a number of sideways glances, but he was new to their team so no one out and out stated the idiocy of such a statement, not when they were dealing with Iago; not when they had seen everything else. After a couple of moments of silence, the science specialist realized that he had just asked a question that no one on this squad for any length of period would have known. Not usually a big deal, but it reminded everyone of the recent loss. He bit his tongue and stayed quiet.

When they were all ready, Carter motioned for his team to move out, down the nearest hallway that would lead them to the labs. Lead them to their quarry. Carter's jaw locked in resolution as the five of them carefully and quickly made their way through the hallways of the ship. In some situations the smaller hallways would have felt constricting, but now they felt safe, impenetrable shields leading the way and leaving no real targets to shoot at. But no one was shooting at them. As they moved through the ship, they experienced absolutely no resistance. They heard and saw nothing, but continually staying on edge for when the inevitable onslaught began. But still nothing. Carter figured that everything that would stand between him and Iago would hit them in the cargo hold. He didn't want to think about what might be there. In the past, Iago had always been gone when he had arrived, but his booby traps and leave behind troops, whether they were mercenaries, assault drones, or his own twisted creations kept things dangerous and frustrating. He didn't want to think what he was about to face with his nemesis backed into a corner, but he practically salivated at the idea of having him in restraints, dragging him back from where he had fled.

"Carter, we just round this bend and then we'll be facing the cargo bay doors. Do you want me to prep some smaller shaped charges?"

"Yes, but lets keep moving." The four of them continued moving cohesively around the corner, with the Nelt following behind at some distance. Carter thought he could see the tell tale ripple of a cloaked individual, but he couldn't be sure. The cloaking field was one of the most sophisticated available, and the user one of the most experienced with them. At 100 feet from the door, they stopped to allow the science specialist to finish with the charges, but it turned out to be unnecessary.

As they stood there, facing the doors that would surely cause problems for them, they slid open as smooth as could be. The boarding shields were immediately raised, and Carter brought the heavy but powerful long barrelled blaster to his shoulder in anticipation. The assault began, but not in the way that Carter would have ever imagined.

Two Brarmium's came through the door, because that was all the hallway would allow through at one time, but Carter could tell there were many more behind the first two, waiting to follow the leaders. The Brarmium's looked fairly normal to how you'd find them in the wild; they're multi jointed limbs swung as they walked, their thin and wispy fur moving with the swinging motion of their arms. They carried no weapons, and they moved with no urgency. They looked content and relaxed, like you'd expect someone would after a satisfying but not overly filling meal would, and Carter could see what biologists had been saying about them for years; that they were the perfect study case for a species emerging into a sentient one. There was obvious intelligence in the eyes, but it was the sprouting intelligence of a child. Carter couldn't help but compare the look in their eyes to the ones he had seen in dolphins, though slightly sharper, slightly more aware. But they bore the scars of Iago's work, even if they were slight and hardly noticeable. Carter didn't trust that, and as they got closer, he increased the pressure on his trigger, but still hesitated on firing into the first row of Brarmiums.

"What are they doing? Are they attacking? That's suicide in this hallway, especially without any weapons. Do you think they're friendly?" Carter's science specialist sounded on edge, urging Carter into reassurance or action.

"I doubt they're friendly," Carter responded, before trying one last step before opening fired, "STOP! This is consulate business, and you WILL stand down, turn around, and stay out of our way." Carter knew the commands were a long shot, especially considering that the species before him was not known to understand formal language. He was just hoping the emotion or general message of his statement would get through.

It didn't. At the end of his commands, the odd and lanky aliens began to bob and advance faster, odd smiles on their faces as they did. They looked so authentic, so genuine in their good naturedness. But something was missing in them, something that scared Carter, something that left only one course of action left. He turned to his science specialist.

"Jordan, draw your firearm, and cut those things down." Carter turned away as Jordan started to ask why with a blank look of confusion. There wasn't time to explain, not if those things proved a real

threat. He opened fired.

The high velocity rounds slammed into the first two individuals right below the neck; instant kill shots against the species. Designed to mushroom inside the targets though, there was no carry through, and Carter had to fire once for each creature that approached their position with good natured hope and cluelessness in their eyes. The Terrien, with its one arm, could not assist in dropping targets, but next to him, the Kro-orc slung the shield over her back and began to fire with the side arm strapped to her leg. More blood splattered the walls as more Brarmium's dropped in instant death. And still they poured into the hallway. Despite the fact that there was nothing but death and destruction in that hallway for them, they continued filing in, stepping over their fallen comrades and moving down the hallway with a childish look on their face. Carter felt sick, but kept pulling the trigger, kept destroying the flesh of the semi-intelligent creatures that approached on him. Beside him, Jordan looked horrified, and tried to shout over the sound of the shots; not that he had to contend with the volume of the shots, just the earplugs as they cut out any noise as the decibel level reached a certain level.

"Sir! You have - op! They're no -at to anyone! Th- ust...they do- at they're doin- You need to cease -." Carter ignored him, targeted another Brarmium, and squeezed off a shot that split its head in two. The clueless animal crumpled. In that moment, the marksman showed up, and started putting shots into the approaching hoard in brilliantly quick succession, all of the shots hitting a target. Between the three gunmen and the width of the hallway, there was no threat, no tension borne of danger. There was just cold efficiency and a disgusting pile of bodies that piled ever higher, so much so that the back ranks of the Brarmium's had to literally climb over their fallen brethren, which they still did willingly and happily, as if they were children climbing a snow bank on a day off school. Jordan could hardly stand it, and grabbed Carter by the should, his grip demanding his attention.

"Sir! This isn't right! They don't know what's going on! They're practically kids! We can't just massacre them! This is sick! This isn-" Without a word, Carter spun on him and shoved him against the wall, the pain of his actions burning in his eyes as he started Jordan down.

"Don't you think I know?! This is Iago's final stand, his final test of our will and conviction. These things are his creations, which is why they don't register the threat we present, the carnage we're causing. But I promise you, if one get inside a striking proximity, we're all fucked. Now, I gave you an order; FIRE!" Carter stared Jordan in the eye, and without a good reason to not draw his weapon beside his own revulsion, he raised his side arm and slowly started squeezing rounds into the nearest beings. Just like the dozens before, it fell, a heap of flesh that once had life inside it. Carter nodded in satisfaction and returned to firing himself, hiding the pain in his eyes for having to give such a disgusting order. Still, they fired into the advancing creatures, just how much they understood of the situation anyone's guess. All that was known was that the orders had been given, and everyone's safety was dependent on them being followed.

Three, full, minutes, passed. Not once was there a break in the shooting, not once was there a creature that hesitated in its approach on Carter's small strike team, and after it was over, not one still stood. When the advance finally stopped, it was almost unbelievable; all those concerned expected the waves to continue at any moment, despite the fact that hundreds of creatures had just been cut down in what could be described as a morbid shooting gallery.

Carter looked around, and while not all of the people around him were human, he could read the emotion on all their faces. The disgust for the horrible mess and carnage, the horror for the lives twisted and ended by their own hands, and the rage they felt for the one that put them in that situation. Carter knew he had to say something lest the anger of the situation was focused on him and this mission instead of where it belonged; squarely on Iago's shoulders. He looked directly at Jordan as he began to speak, starred into the eyes he practically threatened only minutes before. "This isn't right, in any sense. These creatures were whole before Iago got his hands on them; they were true beings. But not after. Not after he got into their brains, not after he destroyed forever what they were and what they could have been without his evil touch infecting them. But he will pay, and this time we'll have him. Remember that." Without anything else to be said, Carter motioned for his square to progress again, the shield wielding pair out front, still ready for trouble in the cargo bay.

The five person squad waded through a sea of gore to get into the hold, ready for the rest of the deterrents that Iago had left for them. But as they stepped into the massive space, they didn't find anything but hundreds of stasis tanks, arranged in perfect rows and all now standing empty. At each turn Carter expected something else to leap from the shadows, some twisted aberration to appear and assault them. A Kro-orc with a secondary nervous cluster wrapped around its heart that would allow it to attack even without its head, another hoard of Brarmium's brainwashed and lethal, or something else particularly disgusting. But dust didn't even shift in the hold, and the five of

them made it through without being harassed.

"Don't like this...whatever else Iago left for us should have been in there. Where was it?"

"We'll ask him Jordan, just have some charges ready for the lab doors." Carter refocused on their progression through the last hallway before they would reach the labs, and as they rounded the last corner saw the entrance. He could always tell they were getting closer to Iago's space of work by the way the aesthetic shifted, just as it had the past several times.

The black and dirty grays of the rest of the ship shifted to gray, then off white, then a brilliant pure white. The heavy metal doors of the rest of the ship gave way to Iago's penchant for glass door ways, much like the one that stood before them to allow access to the throne of this madman. Everything took on a sheen of pristine cleanliness and sterilization; fairly important when one's entire work was centered around probing in the layers of tissue that constituted a person's being. Microbes didn't respect the work of a genesis, mad or not.

Unlike the doors for the cargo bay, the lab doors didn't slide open to greet them. The awesome force from a pair of boarding charges took care of that, and they crossed the threshold.

"Not a fucking thing!" Jordan's frustration was clear after a second and unnecessary sweep of the labs yielded no results. The four operating rooms and the office were bereft of a single person. Even the blood spatter that accompanied the labs of Iago's that they had raided in the past was absent. Things looked carefully put away; not the scene of someone that was caught off guard, of someone that ran into the bowels of the ship to hide from Carter and his crew, or even of someone that was informed that the Connery had appeared on sensors and that they needed to flee immediately.

Carter had to fight with every bit of his resolve not to scream in frustration. He hoped that Iago had faltered in his obsession with appearances, with convictions, and had fled into the ship, but he knew that there would be no escape, and he only looked like a panicked fool if he ran and hid somewhere on the ship. Iago hadn't run into the depths of the ship...he would have greeted him as they stormed the lab, sitting behind his desk in composed defeat.

Iago wasn't here, and Carter felt the crushing realization sitting on his chest. He was still out there, and he needed to keep moving after him. So they did what they did when they found an old workspace of Iago's.

"No, he's not fucking here. Damned if I knew where he gave us the slip, but he had to be in more of a hurry than most other times...we're getting closer. We'll scan the office like always, take photos, and then we can all get a little therapy by blowing this shit pile of a junker to hell when we've gotten everything we can from it." Carter knew that it was protocol for this mission to turn over all seized property to Daugherty, but this far from anything resembling a relay - especially a legal one - and a ruined primary engine, it was stuck here. Might as well purge the bad memories and the frustrations this ship had caused.

They made their way into the office, and as Jordan did his best to pull what he could from the cleared files, Carter went behind the desk, looking for the conflicting item he had found the three times before this. And sure enough, on the seat of the comfortable office chair was a rather novel item; a piece of paper. Not just imitation stuff, but real, honest to God, made from wood, paper. And sure enough, the same scribbles from the last two times; coordinates for a communication line.

"Again sir? What is this guys deal?" Carter looked over his shoulder to where Jordan tried to get what he could from the computer drives, who was looking back himself at Carter. By now, the crew was as familiar with Iago's habit of leaving a channel for communication behind in the labs he abandoned.

"Don't know, but let's see if we can't get a hold of this guy and ask him." Carter took a minute and talked into his com, "Huy, what's the word from team Beta?" After a couple seconds delay, Huy's voice came through to Carter.

"Made it to the bridge without incident. Crew committed suicide though, dead end there. They did a scan of the ship for anyone else hiding in a corner using the ships tie ins for life support, and they only found themselves and the activity in the lab...the five of you," there was a long pause on the other end before he continued "He wasn't there, was he?" Carter could practically feel the disappointment radiate through the com, the pain of Huy's ruined left side laced into the sad tone.

"Not this time, but we're getting closer."

"That's not saying a lot Carter."

"No, but it is saying something. And he left us another communication line coordinate, so we'll see what becomes of that. Pull the ship around to our entry point, we'll be there soon."

Back on the Connery, Carter was glad to be free from the armour that bound so tightly to him

and back into his normal garb...usually a casual suit. It wasn't that the energized mesh of nano fibre was heavy; in fact, considering that it was upwards of 5cm thick at its sturdiest spots, it was remarkably light. But it was restricting. To make sure the armour did its job, it binded tightly to the user, which was particularly trying as it pertained to the neck and face. Even with the padded guards that resided under those portions of armour, the effect was the feeling that you were almost being smothered by a trillion tiny wires.

He was also glad that Iago seemed so arrogantly confident in his ability to stay ahead of Carter and his crew that he left coordinates for a line of communication in his labs for him to find. Why exactly that was the case was anyone's guess, but he felt that this conversation would prove to be more fruitful than the last one, him still being so on edge not knowing if Huy would pull through from the injuries he sustained in raiding the second lab of Iago's they had unearthed. He stood on the bridge, waiting for the line to be opened up. If it was anything like the last couple times, Iago would answer the hail inside a minute. The waiting just came from getting the line open. Because of his obvious care, Iago made sure the line was extraordinarily complex, and incredibly difficult to track. Really impossible, best that Carter figured, unless the line was left open for hours. But because Carter needed to exhaust every angle he could in tracking down in prey, he still made sure that they were set up to track the data stream for as long as it stayed open.

"How's it coming Delphine?" Carter didn't really need a status update, and was more that confident in his communications specialists abilities to make sure the futile trace was as good as it could be. But he needed to feel like he was staying on top of thing, keeping up with the progress and not just testing his engines in the pilot bay, as the expression went. The young woman looked up at Carter.

"Coming good, almost there. Though you do know, sir, that he'd have to stay on the line a minimum of 130 minutes to get a location." Carter smiled sadly and nodded, and she went back to work. He briefly thought about the terribly frightened look she had when she was doing small arms training to be part of his crew, how uncomfortable she looked while trying to hit the target that would have been close for a child and still missing wide. She still seemed to hold onto a bit of that discomfort around the ship, and Carter would occasionally wonder if she was best to have along on a long term mission like this, but all he had to do was remind himself of what she had lost to Iago to be convinced of her convictions. These halls weren't those of the university she attended and fast tracked through, or the inter-system communication companies that were lining up with job offers for her, but she fit in her own way. Every member of the carefully vetted crew did; Carter made sure of it.

So despite his discomfort in doing so, Carter paced a couple minutes more, surveying again his surrounding. Terminals lined the wall, controlling all aspects of his ship. He found his eye gravitating towards the pilots, like most peoples did. It wasn't without good reason though that people looked in that direction. There were three of them, and interestingly enough, triplets too. Each sat in a somewhat elevated chair, each somewhat reclined, and each with the full faced interaction mask that was becoming the standard in space piloting; though Carter and the Connery were first wave adopters, Carter having immediately seen the utility of the technology.

Instead of having sensor gloves only and a floating interface, the mask allowed a level of immersion that the interface did not. Facial movements could be used to send commands, outside stimuli were completely shout out, and - thanks to a number of small, pore width electrodes that inserted into the nerves close to the optic nerves - the range of sight was much better and more complete than a screen could provide. The technology even was able to augment the peripheral vision of the used so they could simultaneously see 200 degrees of focus. Each of the triplets focused on separate thrusters to better have their attention on their task; one for main propulsions, one for fine manoeuvrability that was most important during a weapons exchange, and one for the 'in-between' engines. Not a word was spoken between the three, but they practically resided inside a shared brain that was the piloting computer that took the information from each brother and relayed it to the others while carrying out the commands. Each was directly neurally linked to the other two and the computer, forming what Carter assumed for a very, very, very crude hive consciousness for the sole purpose of craft navigation. Still, it was strange for him.

"All set Captain." Carter shook himself from his idle thoughts, realizing he was starring at the brothers. Not that they'd noticed; only communication though a direct line would be heard by them when they were hooked up.

"Thank you. We'll see if I can't keep him talking for a couple hours." Carter stood directly in front of the bridges view screen, and commanded the bridge computer to open the communication line. The image that showed the view out the nose faded and an off yellow colour flooded the bridge as the view screen showed only that as all those without somewhere else to be stood off to the

sides to see what happened next. For nearly a whole minute, it seemed like the 40 people in attendance held their breath as they saw nothing but yellow. But then the screen flittered and Iago stood there, calm as always. Carter swallowed the impulse to swear at him, attack him for what he had done, the most recent massacre of the Brarmium's standing at the forefront of his mind, and simply took in his adversaries appearance as he felt Iago doing the same to him.

The scientist stood at a very average height, slightly short of 2m, as opposed to Carter's fairly tall mildly over 2m. Iago's face carried its 47 years well but obviously, the straight and slicked back light brown hair streak with gray, while Carter's 35 years looked closer to 25, the black hair he would have been sporting shaved down nearly to the roots. Their facial hair was also in contrast, with Iago's managed stubble out of line with Carter's clean shaven visage. They rounded out their stereotypical looks for a scientist and a mercenary/lawman with a thin gait and built frame, respectively. The moment of sizing up passed, they looked each other in their oddly similar gray-blue eyes and talked awkwardly. It could hardly be surprising though, one sworn and paid to hunt the other that had caused so much pain.

"Patrick."

"Dr. Iago."

"I'm surprised you didn't try to get a rise out of me by calling me mister."

"And I'm a little offended you don't think it necessary to address me by my proper title, especially considering how careful you usually are with the proper appearances of things." Iago and Carter paused, still trying to find the level of civility that they would need.

"Well, I'd apologize if I thought you'd accept it, but--"

"But you know that your apologies are worth shit to me, doctor."

"A touch crude, but fair enough. Good to see that the Brarmium's didn't get to you though."

"So they were a threat, weren't they."

"Only some of them actually; one in five, specifically. Every fifth one had been conditioned to act like the others, until it was close enough to get its limbs around you. And if you've ever seen a Brarmium take down it's prey, you'd know those arms are fairly adept at constricting the breath from anything with lungs."

"You're fucking sick, doctor." Carter said, the memory of those hundreds of creatures being cut down still to fresh for him.

"And you're short sighted. But if you'd prefer not to talk with a sick man, I can end this call, though I'm sure you're hopeful I might stay on long enough to allow you to trace to my position. What do you think it'll take, maybe an hour, two hours? I'd love to stay and chat, but just don't think that I can spare that much time. As I'm sure you know, I have to set up another lab." Carter swallowed his anger again, trying to clear his head. He wasn't going to be able to trace Iago's location, so he had to try and get something else out of this. Needed to get him talking about where he was going, or where he had been, or himself really. Anything to glean some information about who Iago was.

"And why is it so important to be establishing another lab doctor? What are you driving at? Or is it even you that's in charge? Is someone pulling your strings?"

"You have the opportunity to find out something about me, and you ask about backers? Surely you have all the information about me you could find in private channels, and you know about my vast personal fortune. Why would I work for someone else when I could buy and sell a dozen 'backers' that would try and approach me?" Carter did indeed know of the doctors wealth; before he had gone off the grid and become a wanted fugitive, the doctor had made incredible amounts of credits through his patents on neural implant technology. The biggest cash cow had been a device that was able to stave off mental deterioration in old age. There were millions of rich and aging individuals in the 27 known systems of the galaxy that paid exorbitant amounts of money to retain their memories before the contaminants of the device eventually killed them. Most hailed the device as a way to remain fully themselves up until the end, and with minor modifications the doctor was soon able to sell them to the rest of the species of the galaxy, many of whom, like humans, would pay dearly to retain their mental functions into the last seconds of their lives. His true wealth was usually beyond most scope of estimation. On the other hand, the doctor seemed to be mildly offended that someone else would have say over his research's direction, and he was talking now. Carter did his best to keep him doing just that.

"Very well. Why don't we talk about why we're even talking right now. Why is it that you would risk exposure and everything you're working towards by talking with me, the man that's been paid very handsomely to find you. I'm very good at what I do doctor, and these sessions are only helping me find you; which, by the way, is an eventuality."

"Arrogance doesn't suit you."

"I like to think that honesty does."

"It doesn't anyone. I figured you would have figured this out by now."

"You still haven't answered the question doctor. And its not just that you're looking to brag to your pursuers...you've only shown interest in talking with me." It was true, as the first time they had opened a channel with Iago Carter had refused to talk to him, and he refused to talk with anyone else. "I just figured that you might tell me why."

"That, I think, will become obvious with time."

"I assume you think that the sick acts you perform in your labs will be come to be understood too, with time, then?"

"They should be understood now." And without another word exchanged, the line went dead. The crowd on the bridge seemed to let out an uncomfortable breath they had been holding in as they began to murmur. Carter couldn't blame them; the exchange had been particularly uninformative and puzzling.

What was going to become obvious with time?

2

Iago stood from the expensive but common cross system communications booth that he had been using for the past several hours, making arrangements for his next step and most recently, talking with Carter. It had taken a number of hours before that to set it up to the point that he felt confident to use it, but the relay terminal was busy and full of them, and no one stopped to question how long he had been using it. He checked the time and headed in the direction of his flight, not due to board for several hours, but he had nowhere else to be.

It was one of the three relays of the Korben system, but the largest and busiest. Millions of being passed through every day, be it on business, personal trips, or even if they were just moving freight. All system to system travel had to be handled by a relay, and instead of having numerous ones, government officials build only a small number and monitored them carefully for illicit movement. Of course, smugglers had and still did build illegal relays on back corners of most systems, much like the one Carter had chased the last ship he had been working on through. But with only so many legal avenues of travel, the relays were often massive stations, in orbit around an uninhabited world of the system so the massive structure would not interfere with the lives of beings on the nearby world. But they were veritable bee hives of space travel, with countless ships not just hopping from system to system, but also many more ships doing innersystem runs; many of those travellers on system to system trips found it less expensive to transfer to a smaller vessel to get to their final world destination than staying with the much larger and expensive intersystem cruisers to get to their final destination. It was so rare that people would stay on the system hopping ship to get to their final world that most major tourist transport lines didn't even offer the option to stay with that ship to get to your original destination.

As Iago sat down at the gate he would eventually depart from, he checked the contents of his briefcase yet again, the only piece of luggage he had, containing everything he owned in the galaxy. Inside was nothing particularly noteworthy; a number of small toiletries tucked away in the corner, a fresh set of under garments if he was stuck anywhere for a notably longer period, a small side arm hidden in a secret compartment, his travel information and fake identification on a small data pad, and a number of charging tools for his implanted and worn computing devices, of which he had numerous. He had common audio implants for listening to whatever he wished, be it music, spoken word books, or even his own recorded field notes (which he recorded using another implant not far from his jaw). Natural conduction meant that he didn't need them hooked into his nerves, which he was grateful for because the implants that were hooked in sure hurt like hell going in. He had another array of sensors to monitor his health through diet and immune activity. In his right calf he had implanted a memory storage device so that all his files could be back up, be it his research or simply his music and video collection. All this information was managed by the most important implant; a rather sizeable implanted computer in his left forearm. Ever so slightly too large to fit comfortably under the skin, it caused a mild bulge, but luckily caused him no pain. Directly hooked into his nervous system, it was a one of a kind model that no one to date had been able to replicate. The computer was controlled directly by Iago's consciousness.

Never before had a computer been able to be successfully hooked into a human consciousness. Many leading researchers felt the human brain too chaotic to give clear signals to a computer, and settled on things like autonomous signals, like when to beat the heart or how to move a stomach to digest a meal. But Iago had cracked the issue, albeit after he disappeared due to the nature of his research and the enemies that it had created for him. He wasn't sure if he would have tried to patent the technology or not, feeling very attached to it and glad to have it above all others. He didn't even need to concern himself with the contamination issue, the distance from his brain and

the device keeping his mental state safe from poisoning.

On top of his implants, Iago also had a number of augments he could wear to integrate with his inserted technologies. Glasses could display anything that was stored in his arm as if he was starting at a 3m screen, a wrist cuff could provide a more easily navigated and robust operating system than a strictly mental one. Iago had to admit, practically having a computer living neighbour to his brain was odd to get used to, and accessing and navigating the several hundred exabytes of data he had stored there could be mentally draining from times, so he was glad to have a more standard interface to work with from time to time.

All those items needed to be powered, and while they were able to absorb enough energy from his metabolic processes most of the time - especially his implants - the amount of food that he found himself eating just to maintain his weight was upwards of 10,000 calories daily. It was much easier to place a device or battery on a public recharge mat for a couple second that try to choke down a third cheeseburger.

He pulled out the data pad that was sitting in his briefcase before closing and locking it again, and reviewed the data. Travel numbers matched, he was at the right gate still, the ship was still scheduled to leave on time, and he was receiving no notifications that there would be any issues travelling into the Wardren system. He smiled slightly, then unlocked, placed the data pad back into the briefcase, and relocked it. Settling as comfortably as he could into the seat, Iago closed his eyes and mentally scrolled through some musical options, eventually landing on some Muldivian punk.

The surface of the planet Quarnis was 87% water, and less than half the land mass was habitable without the assistance of heated shelter. The Celsians population on the planet through their evolution had always been rather small, limited by the amount of habitable space their population could inhabit. It wasn't until their industrial revolution were they able to expand their numbers in any significant capacity. Soon, harbours extended off the mainland on the shallow reef area for many kilometers, on some smaller islands increasing the amount of habitable space two fold. As technology increased, more resources could be pulled from the deeper areas of the seas, never before explored, allowing for even greater extensions of these dock and boardwalk cities. But the then unified planetary Celsian government realized that it was a temporary solution, and each storm that hit these offshoots of the land caused more and more damage. A solution was proposed; the Celsians had always been master boat crafters, and a new super ship was commissioned by the government, one designed to be a floating city, but a sustainable one. One that could pull what it needed from the sea, one that could stay at sea indefinitely.

Two years after its commission, the first of these super tankers was set off onto the ocean, with the first brave 10,000 individuals as the test pool. The success of the boat was immediate; sociologists and psychologists hailed the ship for its relative larger amounts of space for helping those aboard score a full standard deviation higher on a life satisfaction scale than those that were on land. More ships were developed, with both private and public funding. Dozens of ships, even larger than the first, were soon out in the ocean, each tailored to different types of lifestyles and even governance. Several hundred years after the launch of that first ship, the land masses were mostly for specialized factories, with a small number of the smaller islands purchased and lived on by the super wealthy. Almost the entire local Celsian population lived on these massive floating cities, moving through the oceans. Tens of thousands of these ships made their way through either prescribed routes or stayed in roughly the same spot, depending on the specialized industry of the ship and the wishes of the population. The planetary government was a shell of its former self, the real power over the population resting with the captains of each ship, turning the planet into a large number of city states, with votes by the captains cast when there were larger interplanetary matters to be decided.

It was here that Iago landed, on one of the smaller of these mobile cities; not even 20,000 lived on it. The shuttle from the Wardren systems main relay was able to take him right to the boats landing pad. As he debarked, it was already in the air and off to the next boat before he had taken a dozen steps. It still had a great deal of passengers to deliver to a great number of these ships. "Dr. Hart!" Iago's contact came out onto the pad to greet him from a shadowed overhang, using the assumed name that would be his as long as he worked on this ship. "So good to meet you." the Celsian offered out his hand and Iago shook it warmly, thinking to himself with a private smile that he'd feel rather like a giant while he conducted his work on this ship.

Celsian anatomy was still in keeping with what seemed to be an intriguing galactic norm; two arms, to legs, all attached to a torso that contained the majority of organs with a head attached, which housed the brain and most sensory organs. But that wasn't to say that there weren't some radical physical differences between Iago and his host, the first being the height difference. Most

Celsians grew only 100cm over a meter, and the one that shook hands with Iago certainly followed that trend. The hand that he grasped with was, like the rest of his body, covered in light and small feathers, and only having two main digits along with an opposable one. The toes were much the same, with the creatures knee joint bent backwards instead of forwards. The head had four eyes, oriented much like a humans, though there were no nostrils and no chin, with an oddly placed mouth that seemed to point straight down. There were only holes for the ears, but Iago had heard their hearing was rather exceptional...something to compensate for the lack of olfactory senses. What was most interesting was the folded pair of leathery wings that each Celsian had. Not capable of flight like their long lost evolutionary ancestors, the Celsians instead could leap incredibly high – usually three times their body height – with the aid of their wings and their hollow bones, which greatly affected their interior design choices. Stairs didn't exist aboard the ships, just drop off's for individuals to jump up and jump down from. Though luckily there were hand holds for those that didn't have their wings could use to climb the walls. Iago felt that this would greatly aid fortification should this lab be discovered.

“Dr. Evang I presume.”

“Indeed. I trust your trip was well, if a little long. I'm sure it was a nice benefit to be the first drop off on your shuttle.”

“Well, I like to think the rather sizable tip I produced secured that for me.” His host Evang laughed at the comment and Iago thought that he seemed to be trying rather hard to be liked and to put his guest at ease. Hardly surprising though, considering the amount of money that he was spending on this ship to establish his work space and some subjects and assistants. Iago had chosen this ship because its main economic trade was scientific work and education, but of all the ships in the ocean like it, this ship hovered in the low middle of the pack for prestige and recognition. It was certainly good enough to have everything that he'd need, but not so high profile that they'd attract a lot of attention, and not so high profile they'd be in any sort of position to turn down the sum of money he had offered to work on their ship in an open ended contract. He just had to ensure his work space would have ceilings higher than two meters. After a bit of stooping and a couple of hop downs and climb ups – which Evang apologized profusely for but Iago was secretly glad for – they arrived in his work space. With one look around Iago knew that his money had been well spent. Four separate operating tables were evenly spaced around the right hand side of his lab, while six lab tables were even spaced on the left. In the back of the lab there were eight brand new research terminals that had hardwire control to the mechanized lab equipment overhead, as well as hard drives to back up any and all information collected on lab book wrist devices anyone working in the lab would be using. In the middle of the room stood six research assistants in white lab coats, each at a near militaristic level of attention as their new mysterious and rich boss came into the lab space. Each had beat out at least four other applicants to stand before him, and each had been personally vetted by Iago through long distance communication with the ship. Each was smart, hard-working, eager, and young. No one here had very much experience in a lab setting, which Iago preferred. Not only were they less entitled and set in their ways than their older counterpart, not only did they usually work harder through a mix of being able to and having more to prove, but their youth meant that they had spent less time around ethic committees, that they had been tested less to set their own moral compass. In the past, Iago had found that invaluable in pushing his research goals forward. Not to mention, usually he would pick an individual or two to have an affair with in these settings, though he doubted that that would be much a consideration.

“Dr. Hart, I trust you're pleased with the laboratory set up?” There was a tinge of nervousness to Evang's voice, and Iago wondered how the ships local economy was doing at the moment.

“Very pleased doctor. I'm so glad to see that I won't have to stoop in my work space here.” Evang let out a bit of a bark of relieved laughter.

“Yes, of course. We had to remove a ceiling here to meet your specifications, but of course we're here to accommodate you for as long as you need. And if you follow me this way, I'd be happy to escort you to the remainder of your workspace. Walking right through the assistants, Iago smiled as he noticed the youngest female staring up at him with something that resembled awe and nervousness. They moved towards a door that was obviously custom built for a human, and once on the other side Iago felt even better about the large expenditure of this laboratory set up.

A large office and living space greeted them, with pristine clean glass desk and an immaculately folded bed in the corner. Over and over again Iago had been offered to have a separate bedroom built for him in his time here, but he preferred just having the one area he could work in and relax in and sleep in when the mood struck him. He found his sleep habits shifted wildly during the course of a research project, from very normal eight hours at night, to nocturnal patterns, to polyphasic sleeping patterns. In the midst of it, when he needed to sleep and resenting the act as

the necessity it was, he liked being as close as possible to his work. There was an en-suite washroom that was both lavish and spotless, and several terminal screens along the walls on the office, which were now flashing generic nature scenes from other planets that weren't just endless ocean vistas. And behind the desk were a pair of chairs, one fitting perfectly within the aesthetic of the room as it was rigid and clean and black, the other standing out noticeable. Deep brown, leather, and stuffed just a little too much, it looked perfect for quiet moments reviewing research.

"Evang, this is everything I could have asked for, thank you." The Celsian doctor practically beamed as he shook Iago's hand again, and he wondered if he would have spit on him instead if he knew what he was planning.

The bar was noisy, from both the music that filled every corner of the place and the people that filled almost as much space as the music. It was always crowded, and for good reason. The area was well used, the food could never be complained about, and the drinks flowed cheaply. Of course, the most important thing that any bar in the galaxy depended on more than anything else was reputation, and this little bar titled the "Continental Dropoff" (in English anyway) had reputation in spades. Unlike most, it actually had a location that afforded windows, and while endless ocean occasionally broken up by a city sized boat on the horizon wasn't much of a view, it was an incredible draw, especially for those venturing from the bowels of the ship many stories underwater who might not have seen natural sunlight for weeks as they laboured to keep the inner workings of their boat city running smoothly. It also made the very smart decision to offer all military service personal discounts on all drinks and food. The discount was only 10 per-cent, but that was certainly enough to have soldiers frequenting the bar regularly. Because of the nature of the ship's economy was based on science and research though, not a great number of military personal called the ship a permanent home. That meant that the bar wasn't an exclusive military hangout, and allowed commingling of those that had fought and trained in the military, and those that wanted to buy a drink for a serviceman or hear a story from the front.

And there were plenty of stories to be shared in this day and age. The Wardren system was like many of the day; it was essentially a self contained entity, much like individual countries would have been in a century like the 21st. And like any state, it had its own set of solar system wide laws, a military, a number of smaller inhabited territories (be them planets capable of sustaining life, outposts, or floating space stations), customs, histories (for example, roughly half the 32 bordered solar systems in the galaxy did not spawn life themselves, but were colonized by species from other systems and eventually grew together and formed their own government), and of course, allegiances. It was because of this last point that the Wardren system had found itself entangled in armed conflict. Five years ago a small, uninhabited system was discovered with a particularly high number planets with particularly rich deposits of everything from extreme mass alloys (on both ends of the spectrum) to utilizable radioactive material, and rare elemental deposits. It was unfortunately located incredibly equidistant from two systems - the Crartret and Montoetu systems - who had tense relations from before. Both laid claim to the system and its resources, and soon five other systems were attempting to assist in a diplomatic sharing solution before all out warfare could erupt between the hostel parties.

It might have worked too, but in trying to plan for a diplomatic breakdown, and realizing that the Cratpret systems military sway was greater than theirs, the Montoetu government commissioned a small black bag operation on the only planet capable of sustaining prolonged settlement and life in the small mineral rich system. Previously known by nothing but an ugly amalgamation of seemingly random letters and numbers, it would soon come to be referred to as Ver-salies - which was a rough and bastardized way of saying 'ninth circle of hell' in Fracharian, which was the predominant species type of the Montoetu system. The Montoetu government knew that if diplomatic relations broke down, the only way to control the system was to control the habitable planet so that there could be a system defence garrison permanently stationed and sustainable. The small team started decided on a base of operations in a massive stand of massive trees; each at least ten stories tall and 10m around. Upon first landing, half the team started to construct a field office to direct war efforts should it even come to that, while the other half started an experimental program of manipulating the natural environment to serve their purposes; trees in the forest were injected with liquid metal polymers that gradually converted them from ordinary bark and broad leafed trees, to mostly metal towers capable of withstanding medium ordanance and supporting inner atmospheric artillery. A couple tightly clustered and converted trees could even support anti-orbital shock cannons. And they did. Over weeks of negotiation, a significant portion of the forest was converted into a fortress of solid metal defence towers and offices for troops, logistic planning, and communication. The team had did the job more than admirably; though the setup was so limited on

such a large planet, they possessed such an entrenched position that they felt the system could be theirs through militaristic means, even through being at the disadvantage militarily.

Soon, though, the base was discovered through a mole in the Montoetu government, and diplomatic relations soon broke down. The Crartret system demanded the immediate take down of the base, along with their own presence on the planet surface. The Montoetu negotiating team stalled on every turn, the attitude being that the established base of operations - now discovered - was a bargaining chip not to be underutilized, and that soon the Crartret system would yield primary ownership of the system to them, in exchange for something like them being the second and only system to allow their mining companies in there. But the insult was delivered, and the bad blood between the two systems helped propel the two of them into open war over control of the system.

Because of the distance between two systems in open space, the only real way in was through relay stations, and so direct hostilities against either system was difficult; though the war did see its share of ugly espionage and sabotage missions but individual agents and small teams. But the newly discovered system was open to access from either side rather steadily, so all the military operations were waged there. And while there were some battles between the fleets in space, it really did come down to control of Ver-salies. Whoever controlled the planet had a permanent stepping stone in the system. Ship yards could be constructed, and any enemies could be choked and withered away should they enter the system. So Crartret and Montoetu fought for control of Ver-salies, with Montoetu having the large head start, if not the smaller force.

Both systems had allies, some more committed than others. The Wardren system, and the Celsians that constituted the majority of the population within, were obliged to go to war with their allies the Crartret system. While not physically imposing, their unique physiology was often helpful in storming enemy positions with the aid of such high jumps and small, fast moving frames. Many fought along their larger counterparts in the largely human Crartret army, and after three years of brutal fighting on the planet surface, the progress often inchingly slow, they wrested control from the Fracharians of the Montoetu system. But two years later the effects of the war could still be felt; more than any other point that living Celsians could remember, were there so many wingless among them, and more than ever were there mechanized and assisted ways of navigating the floor transferring drop-offs of Celsian ships. It was to the point that most who had reduced use of their wings were just assumed to be veterans in what had become dubbed the Ver-salies war.

And in the Continental Droppoff bar, one look around the room and you could tell that it attracted many who had fought for the Celsians and their allies. Everyone respected their sacrifices, and regardless of the discount, they often found themselves having drinks bought for them, the war two years done but still so fresh in so many peoples minds, the idea of being wingless haunting those that had lived their entire lives under appreciating such a traditional and assumed Celsian trait. It was here that Iago and his team often found themselves when they would take an evening off from their work. Iago's laboratory location was close to the bar, both of them being in the more desirable locations aboard the metro-ship. It was popular among the younger of his researchers, and especially the women who often enjoyed stories from veterans. But most importantly, its clientele allowed recruitment into their volunteer program.

While working on the approval process of getting his lab space, Iago hadn't simply relied on his sizable wealth to secure the type of set-up he desired. He also sought to exploit the veterans of the Ver-salies war for his experiments and make it look like he was providing a much sought after service to the Celsian population. The removal of one's wings was as bad as paraplegia in human communities, except that it could not be reversed through cybernetic enhancement. The nerve ending that constituted Celsian wings were many times more complicated than those that were found in human legs, and their physiology many times more fragile. Normal enhancements could not fully return a wounded Celsian the ability to do the incredible leaps that so much of their architecture was built around. So Iago had framed his research as the type that would regrow the nerves lost in combat, and from there it was known the jump to fully functional prosthetics was a short one. Of course his research project was granted when his proposal was combined with his wealth, but of course no one yet knew of his researcher's true intentions.

"Dr. Hart! We're trying to settle a bet; were you a Crartret field surgeon in the army proper, or were you a merc doctor from the Oberon system? Because I think that anyone who cares for the Celsian plight like you do, you had to fight along them, on that humid crap hole of a planet. But my esteemed partner here thinks that the only way you'd be able to afford the set up that we're all so very happy to be working in, you probably did merc work through Crartret's casual ally in the conflict." Iago could tell that the speaker, a gifted researcher by the name of Azrin, was incredibly intoxicated on the mixture of fermented wormwood and fermented kelp beer that was a favorite drink of Celsians the planet over. In the laboratory setting, Iago made sure that the highest level of professionalism was maintained, and nothing even close to this topic of

conversation would have been broached. But that was the lab, where every level of sign and measure of professionalism was sought to be maintained. That meant that the lab coats and the specific dress that Iago demanded made it feel like a uniform, and everyone felt closer linked because of it. Personal conversation was disallowed while working, and while it increased boredom, there was focus on the work that they all believed in. Everything was kept neat, perfectly categorized, and squared away. They grew together through the rigours of their work, and then by the very dichotomous unwinding that they would enjoy a couple of times a week. They started to confide more, to share more, and to feel closer. Iago depended on this, so that everyone felt trusted and closer and loyal, especially when the true nature of his work was revealed. He always tried to avoid this as long as possible, and preferred not to let slip his true intentions at all if he could help it, but it was often an eventuality, and if they looked up to him, trusted him, and most importantly, didn't want to betray him, things moved along a great deal better.

But this was not the lab, this was the bar, and Iago encouraged questions and sharing here, to help them get through the times when they'd be slogging through the same procedure over and over again, hours and days at a time; not to mention that he liked how probing questions brought people together as their speculation and curiosity reached a head. He thought it so helpful that he purposefully never divulged any of his made up personal information to his research assistants, relying instead on them to broach the subject first. Surprisingly, though, Azrin and his fellow researchers were incredibly close to guessing the back story he had created for himself in his assumed identity as Dr. Hart.

"Right down the middle actually. I worked as a mercenary through the Oberon system, but not as a doctor for returning servicemen, but as a field surgeon on the planet service." There was a quieting around the table, and he knew that it was an oddity that any mercenary from the Oberon system would have taken work on the surface of the planet Ver-salies. Everyone involved in the conflict knew that the fighting on the planet surface was a horrible affair, and to be avoided at all costs.

"Why would you decide to go down onto the planet itself doctor?" The question came from the same woman that had given him the doe eyes his first day walking through the lab, seemingly so long ago but only now a month and some past (in Earth calendar measurement anyway).

"Because I saw an opportunity to get paid, for sure, and the planet surface was where you got the most premium pay. But also, because I did believe in fighting the aggression and underhandedness of the Montoetu system, and I wanted to do everything I could to help in the struggle." The line that Iago used was a common and popular justification for the Celsians being so involved in the conflict, and Iago hoped it didn't come across as hollow sounding, like a mercenary trying to sound more noble than anyone would ever believe him to be. But looking around the table, he saw most looking at him with respect for the work he did in the war, and the rest looking at him with respect borne from a combination of his war efforts and his shrewdness in obviously making himself so wealthy from his endeavours.

The conversation continued around him, but Iago was only half listening. He was scanning the bar for another test subject for the second phase of their experiments. The first was complete, based around creating a number of nano threads of conductive and non reactive metals wound into tiny "nerve bases," or so they had dubbed them. The idea was that these threads could be manipulated through careful coaching and care to produce to allow new nerve fibre to grow on top of them, and once the nerves were rebuilt from a set of missing Celsian wings, then muscle and bone and connective tissue and skin could be fairly easily grown on top of the nerve framework. They had the nerve bases, now they just needed the participants willing to be subject to the kind of experimentation that Iago and his team wanted to conduct.

Iago's careful eye was rewarded just a couple of minutes later when the perfect candidate walking in the door. His wings were gone, but there was still the visible stubs still left protruding from his back. Physically, that was perfect. But Iago also noticed his head position, and the way he shuffled. His leg was injured as well, and his mobility was even more reduced (barely conceivable in most circles). His face was heavily scarred on the same side of his injured leg, and Iago assumed he had been too close when a large explosion went off on his left. And what Iago noticed the most, is how he seemed to shrink even lower than his injuries would require, how he avoided contact with others, and how he wasn't there to meet anyone; he was just there to drink. Iago felt that this Celsian was depressed, ashamed, and thus much more likely to allow whatever was necessary for the experimentation, whether they were part of the official mandate or Iago's secret plan for the research. Iago turned to the pretty young Celsian in the group.

"Uveen, would you please come with me? I think that gentleman there is perfect for our study, and he looks rather in need."

After paying for the veterans first round, and promising to pay for another couple if he came and talked with them, the three of them were sitting around a table, the scientists encouraging the veteran to talk more about himself, about his experiences, and what he wished he could change about his situation.

"Dr. Hart is my name by the way, and this is my colleague," here Iago paused so that the veteran would feel obliged to look at the beautiful Celsian woman he had tried to keep from seeing his deep scarring, "Uveen." She knew her role in this too, as she batted her eyes down the line in succession, which was apparently quite the flirtatious gesture in Celsian culture. The veteran smiled with his eyes slightly, then looked away again. Iago felt that it was almost too easy. "Ezeer."

"Pleased to meet your Ezeer." Iago raised the kelp and wormwood concoction in front of him, and his new table mate did the same, drinking the deliciously toxic concoction in one pull.

"So what do you want doctor? To hear the amazing tale of triumph on the planet of Ver-salies, of the brave Celsians that stormed the metal forest leaping from trunk to trunk before driving the blades of their ancestors into the heart of oppression?" Iago smiled, Ezeer obviously having shared fake stories from the front on more than one occasion to earn his free drinks or try to impress and impress Celsian that didn't mind going home with a cripple.

"I'd rather the truth if that's okay. I think we both know that there were very few Celsians that actually stormed the metal forest in the final battle of the war, but that they were charged with taking a not far off artillery position to assist in the final push. In the mountains it was located, right? The Celsians were given that assignment because of their ability to navigate the rocky outcroppings much easier than their human counterparts. And that makes the most sense anyway, because the Fracharians usually defended those positions with trip laser concussion mines, and it looks like that kind of ordinance is in keeping with your injuries Ezeer. Though you didn't trip the mine, did you, or else you wouldn't be here to talk about the one that did."

The Celsian could hardly speak; never had he met a fellow of his species that had been so able to pinpoint exactly what had happened to him on the planet surface, and certainly he had never met a human that had been able to sum up the nature of his injury so readily. He felt weak as Iago casually lit up a carbon cased inhalant tube, and before he really knew what was happening he felt transported back there as he talked about that final hour of the war.

"We were charged with taking out artillery clusters in the mountains, and there were a lot of them. But it was going remarkably well; the Fracharians just didn't have an answer to a species that could leap right up into their nester position from below them, leave an EMP-shrapnel charge, and be gone again before you could squeeze off a shot. Under the cover of my unit, who would expertly lay down suppressive fire a meter to the left and a meter to the right of where I had to land, I personally leapt in and destroyed three artillery nests. It was ugly, the smell of electric fried flesh as a super heated piece of magnetically charged shrapnel that wasn't taking out the primary target travelled through a Fracharian stomach cavity. A couple green soliders in our squad got sick when pieces of our enemy rained down on us from the recently exploded nest. But what was really terrible was on that third nest, one of those fuckers survived the blast. And it happens, even if you don't want it to. You have to place the charge next to the artillery unit, that's your target, not the personal in the nest, even if they almost always get eliminated by the resulting blast. But this one, I don't know how old they were, I don't even know if they were male or female, but they must have been under some sort of cover. We could hear them up there, too, dying. Dying ugly. Probably covered in bits of his friends, his wounds filled with electrical shrapnel...just dying ugly. You could hear him scream and moan, and I don't speak Fracharian, but it was something about his hands. Just crying out again and again, blathering about his ruined hands, and he wouldn't stop. We couldn't just pop back in there and put him out of his misery, cause we were afraid he's just pop whoever poked their head over their fortifications. And we didn't really have the explosives to spare on a mercy killing - at least so said the commander - so we just had to listen to him. His screams started loud, the horror and shock painting the sounds he made. Then it was the moans, the horrible moans of pain and a little bit, of like he wanted to die to just be free from his suffering. Then finally, the pain became bearable to them, and they just started to whimper. He cried for his ruined body, he cried for his dead and mangled friends, and he just cried. It stays with you, that last one, the whimpering, the most." Ezeer took another drink, closed his eyes, and Iago knew he was hearing that ruined Fracharian whimper in his death as if he were next to him now. "We left him there, just like he was, to die in his pain and loneliness. But that stayed with everyone I think, and my best friend, with me from day one landing on the planet surface and just having to spend a week fending off enemy advances, walked into a laser trip wire, setting off the concussive mine. He was dead in an instant, and what was left of me woke up three months later from a coma back here, my family around me, the pain in their eyes for my condition saying more than I

wished it had.”

Iago nodded at all the appropriate moments with compassion and understanding, listening intently, not missing a syllable. The pretty young Uveen had shifted her breathing to go in and out of the folds in her neck and not her mouth, a trait of Celsian physiology that either denoted strenuous physical activity or the human equivalent of crying. Iago didn't blame her; it was a horrible story, and sadly they had heard many like it as they recruited more and more wounded veterans into their program. Ezeer was staring away and into space at the moment, and Iago whispered instructions to Uveen before getting up from the table and leaving the two of them. Back at the bar, he saw his researcher - and now recruitment liaison apparently - tenderly touch Ezeer's scarred face, speak a few words, and then Ezeer nod. They exchanged information, and she came back over to talk with him at the bar.

“I can't believe you were able to get him to open up like that, or that you would know so much about his service.”

“Lucky guess on where he got injured, but I figured it was in the final battle of the war when he referenced storming the metal forest. Plus, those injuries are consistent with concussion mines, which were primarily deployed around those artillery nests. After dropping those details, it makes him remember, and then he just needs a push.” Here Iago produced the inhalant stick he had lit up at the table, “And that push was this; Fracharian model. The sight of it was enough to put him back in that moment, and where they're back there, then they start talking about it. And when they start talking about it, they very quickly come around to the idea of being like they were, before this accident. They feel like it will make them whole again.”

“It will in a way though, don't you think so Dr. Hart?” Iago smiled sadly for Uveen, trying to hide it from her though. Like many of the subjects they brought into the project, the researchers felt like this was a huge solution to the problem of the battle-scarred veteran of the Ver-salies war. He didn't want to ruin that glowing feeling she had now - that one that told her that everything was going to be all right - by reminding her that Ezeer's physical scars were nothing compared to the ones in his memory.

There were two hours on the metro-ship Iago found himself working on every night where things just seemed to stop. In these hours, the night shift at the helm was winding down, doing routine checks on their systems as they prepared to handoff to the primary day time crew again, their somewhat placeholder tasks almost complete for another night. Many systems in the ship experienced shut downs as tests were conducted to confirm functionality and gauge wear and tear. All the businesses on the ship, large or small, closed. Even the bars were shuttered and their patrons ejected from within them. The upper deck was barricaded from the public as custodial work was done to make the deck levels clean again, the condition of them often a source of community pride for those on the ship. Almost everyone was sleeping, and those that weren't were wishing they were. It was in these two hours that Iago found that he could progress quite a bit on the true nature of his work on the metro-ship. He knew that the nerve bases would bear fruit for the wounded veterans on the ship. He had run the simulations and made the educated guesses, and when Ezeer and his comrades started to regenerate their long lost nerves, his team was ecstatic, and probably a little surprised that this never before seen research had produced such fantastic results. But Iago wasn't. And he wasn't satisfied growing back some nerve cells when he felt that these threads of carefully forged alloys, arranged so perfectly and carefully, could be doing nearly infinitely more. And that's just what he was discussing with Ezeer over a glass of clean tasting, kelp fermented vodka.

“Your leg is looking better.”

“It is better. The hobble is gone.”

“Good. I suppose it was just a nerve issue.” When the Celsians' wing nerves began to grow back, Iago had looked at Ezeer's leg and decided that it was more nerve damage than anything else, and after a surgery to remove the damaged nerves and replace them with nerve bases, it had been a matter of days before full functionality of the leg returned. Ezeer's dark and distant mood did not change any, though.

“I suppose.” Ezeer took a sip from the glass he had in front of them, the two men doing more staring into their drinks than talking with each other, but neither felt rushed to say anything, their privacy likely not to be interrupted for another hour and a half when the official start of the day would commence to full system functionality return and day crews starting their shifts.

Iago made sure to weigh his words carefully as he proceeded.

“You saw and did some bad things on Ver-salies, didn't you Ezeer.”

“Worse than I thought sentient beings were capable of.”

“I understand. My positions on the planet were fairly secure, but sometimes there were more hairy situations than others.” Ezeer simply nodded, and Iago wondered if he suspected he had never served

planet-side. "But I certainly saw the worst of what could happen to a being down there. It makes me wonder if I had the opportunity, if it wouldn't just be best to wipe those memories from my mind, or at the very least gloss them over some."

"Gloss them over?"

"Well, not eliminate the memory completely, but soften it some, so it wasn't so much burned into the forefront of my mind."

"To help you forget the unforgettable, if for only a limited time frame."

"Exactly Ezeer. All those things in my head, in your head I imagine...how does one deal with those all at once?"

"Painfully doctor. So has been my experience."

"And what if it could be less painful, without having to corrupt your system with the like of this," Iago raised his glass, referencing the poison within it, "what if there was just a way you could put aside some things, so you could deal with it all, something that was safe, something that worked?" Ezeer stopped staring into his glass and starred Iago in the eyes, searching them for something more than what he was saying. He felt he knew what was coming, but he didn't dare speak the words aloud lest they give him hope. Hope of a day he didn't see that part of a face that exploded out of one of those artillery nests. Hope that when he closed his eyes, he wouldn't see the shock on the face of the young combatant he had snuck behind before cutting the main vein in his arm and letting him bleed out at his feet. Hope that he could sleep a full nights sleep without being woken by the sight of his best friend being effectively liquefied in front of his eyes when he tripped the concussive mine.

"Are you just talking doctor, or are you talking about something."

"I'm talking about something Ezeer. I'm talking about something illegal, and even more dangerous than what you already signed up for. Something that can't leave this company. But something that can do exactly what I said. Something that can give you a reprieve from your memories, so that you can be yourself again." Ezeer just starred at the doctor, fighting with the idea that the doctor wasn't telling him something, because he wanted so badly for what he spoke about to be real.

"What's the human expression doctor? If it sounds too good to be true, it usually is?"

"Something like that, but it's not like this is a free shot Ezeer. I'm talking about implantation into the very core of your being, your brain. I'm talking about possibly fatal, possibly personality altering, possibly irreversible implantation. And if it was ever discovered, we'd be most likely jailed for years; this kind of experimentation has been frowned on for decades, and explicitly illegal for years. But, it could help you. It could make you how you used to be, or at least closer to that. Back to when you would see your mother every week, giving her a hug on your way out the door." That last comment was too much for Ezeer, and he began breathing heavily through his neck folds, his head buried in his hands, trying to calm himself down some. So distracted with the idea of being able to give his mother a hug again, he didn't even really question how Iago knew about his family visitation schedules before the war, or the fact that he hadn't been able to bring himself to see his mother since he was released from the hospital. How could he put such violent hands on such a sweet woman? Ezeer hesitated for a very long time, finally able to breath through his mouth again.

"Alright doctor, whatever you need to do."

3

"That fucker gave you quite the slip Carter; what have you got to say for yourself?"

"That we're getting closer."

"Ha! Good thing to say, but it's another thing to show me some real results."

Carter reclined away from the holo-interface he was interacting with, Daughtery on the other side and looking as intimidating as he could muster; which was, in fairness, fairly intimidating. He looked every inch the crooked union boss that he was often accused of but never convicted of, even if the assessment was fairly accurate to life.

Daughtery grew up with comfort but no real privilege or wealth. Instead of simply being grateful for his mining father that provided for him, his mother and three older siblings, it wasn't a path he wanted to follow. He didn't want to simply make enough and be content, he wanted to own planets and sell and buy things that the common citizen could scarcely conceive to own. And so when he started in his fathers footsteps, he squirreled away every last penny he ever earned, and added to his saving by no small amount from the winnings he made in poker games with the other men that worked deep beneath the surface of the planet that they mined by day and flew away from at night - those being terms only meaningful hundreds of thousands of kilometres away on his home planet that was actually habitable. When he could, Daughtery attended the institutes of higher education that

was such a little consideration in his household, but so important for his plans. Not because he felt that education was his ticket to a better life, but the connections he could make at that institution would be. Many alumni benefactors of his university had very important tie ins with the mining company at which he worked, and as he became a student in the engineering of mining, with a history in the mines themselves, with a penchant of getting into parties he was never invited to and shouldn't have even been aware of, he shook hands with a great many of the men he hoped to emulate. They shared laughs and drinks at all these parties, and he felt that these blue bloods were seeing him as a kindred spirit, his obvious enthusiasm and charm earning him trust and more and more access into their circle of influence.

Sadly, the youthful notion that people could be inclusive of those that they traditionally look down on was done away with one cold rainy season day after he downloaded the recorded logs from a bug he had deftly planted on a kindly old man that no longer could get around solely on his own, and so was never truly inspected for devices of that nature. He heard his name mentioned but one, but the laughter and the cruel jabs he heard making it clearly evident that these men that were born with money and social status were not about to open the doors to their special little club house for the likes of him. While many may have gone back to the mines of the birthright, the all consuming dreams of their youth dashed in front of their eyes, Daughtery burned with the need for retribution and the need to realize his dreams still; if they needed to be altered in this way and that, so be it, so long as the heart of his quest remained the same.

He dropped out of engineering and enrolled in political sciences. For the next seven years, he studied hard, and shook even more hands than before. This time though, it wasn't in the ballrooms his home planets fanciest banquet halls, but in the work camps of the scorched mining planet. He listened to every old timer that had four seconds to bitch about whatever else that they wanted to. He talked with the wives left at home to maintain the households. He talked with the mistresses that stumbled though the murky waters of adultery and infatuation behind the backs of the family's. He talked with the damned shuttle pilots that kept workers cycling from world to world. And the whole time he studied everything he could get his hands on to do with mining from a non operational point of view. Psychology, sociology, history, and many more kept him busy, as he also read papers of intersystem negotiations and anything else that had to do with people fighting epic battles across the halls of government or through the pages of legal action. At the end of it all, he brought up the one word that brought him - at first - nothing but scorn and sideways looks. Union labour.

It was widely considered in the age of intersystem space travel and corporations that could span though dozens of worlds and billions of beings, that business was simply too big to be dictated to the workers, and that unions would simply be too large to be able to be wielded efficiently. But Daughtery didn't care. He was going to make it work, because he had seen all the sides and he knew what it was going to take. Also, he knew that there was no one out there more committed to pulling himself up from the masses, no one shrewder or smarter or better positioned to make this leap. So he began to coordinate, making sure he had all his ducks in a row before he made that first big leap of announcing to management that there was going to be a union that they had to contend with. At first, there was no response, the threat feeling empty and useless. But when Daughtery was able to organize slow downs on such a well executed and precise level, management paid attention. And when strikes were mentioned, his true position was appreciated and immediately attempted to be usurped.

In a true turning point for Daughtery, three corporate security thugs that broke into his then girlfriends apartment to rough up the place and send a message of intimidation when he was keeping the place under observation for just such an occurrence. Their bodies were never discovered and Daughtery never looked back from his first set of killings, vowing to do what was necessary to get done what was needed.

And get it done he did. To avoid a strike, especially when scab workers to help in event of a strike to keep things running in a minimum capacity were sent immediately out of system when they entered though some creative bribes and threats that Daughtery had set up, the union was officially recognized by management. This was not only because of his efforts to actually solidly unite the workforce, but also his ability to shake hands with the higher ups, the ones that held the money. Soon, the word of a successful union spread, and with it, so did Daughtery's influence. He help to unionize a number of other mining company workforces, as well as a ship construction firm that operated on the edge of the system building deep space freighters. Each time he put his hand to the task of creating a unified workforce, it was done. He truly had a gift for organizing and uniting people, then selling their demands to a group of people that wouldn't dare look those people in the eye if they ever found themselves in the seedy bars they were prone to frequent. Every time this happened, Daughtery had another pool of union dues that he skimmed ever so slightly. But as he

established even more unions, these minor skimmings built him into one of the wealthiest men in the system. Not only that, but by having such a direct line to so many of the systems population, he was also one of the systems most influential and powerful people. He could trade the men that had looked down on him all those years ago like they were sports trader chips. On more than one occasion, he had, and quite often just to prove that he could do others, or for his own gratification. His influence in the Oberon system was truly difficult to measure, and it was certainly enough to fund and send Carter after the one that had wronged him, Dr. Iago. Carter drifted back into the conversation, still leaned back in his quarters and still waiting for Daughtery to say something else. He knew the older man very well, and was not intimidated by the silences he used to lean on those he wanted to make feel uncomfortable.

"You never were prone to get uncomfortable when you fucked up"

"All due respect, Daughtery, but if you think that there's someone else out there better for this, you would have sent them. The fact that I haven't got Iago yet is simply a show of how good is at eluding capture, not how poor I am at hunting down men like him. Now do you want to hear what happened or don't you?"

"Watch that tone Carter; men have died for showing me such little respect."

"For fuck's sake Daughtery, are you going to posture all night or are we going to talk about what's actually important. You know, Iago and all?" Daughtery sat for another moment longer, looking Carter in the eyes. He wanted to be angry with someone, blame someone he could see to feel better about the fact that the man that so damaged his daughter was still very much free and unaccounted for. But Carter was right; there was no one he trusted more with this task, and no one he felt was better for it. He calmed himself down, reminding himself that this wasn't a union contract negotiation, but an update from someone he considered a friend and someone to trust. After all his year making ties for business and power, he had found that he hadn't forged many ties of loyalty, and was glad for the loyalty he felt was shared between him and Carter.

"I'm sorry Carter, of course. Just tell me what happened, and I'll try to be less of an angry miner." Carter couldn't help but smile at the idea of Daughtery once being a miner, considering the rock he had on a ring of his could buy a mines worth of workers for a year, easy.

"After the physical evidence we found in Iago's second raided lab, we were led to a family of Griinters. They ran a large and old freighter for next to no profits, but they were tight lipped, didn't say a thing when we came to question them. Second time we went to try and lean on them, they were gone, making a long run, couple months anyway. Couldn't figure out where they went, and we figured they skipped system on an unregistered relay. So of course, we just had to find that relay. Instead of leaning on the ship's operators, hatch mates them being, we went back for their partners...they each had a fair number of wives that weren't expecting us, since someone had put them into hiding before the ship left, but we were able to pick up on word of where they went. We were able to finally get to them, and after your classic divide them up, tell lies, make empty threats and make promises of sparing them this and that, we were able to get to the illegal relay. From there, we traced them through a couple ports, finally chasing them through one last illegal relay and through some dark space. When we boarded the ship, Iago was already gone, and the crew committed suicide rather than face any form of retribution for their part in the chase. Most the computers were scrubbed, but we were able to glean little bits of information off of the ship, and some lesser known sub drivers; ship that big they couldn't get to all the components. We're following up on some leads, but sadly, best we can guess is that he hopped out at a legal relay on the edge of the Korben system. We're doing our best to track him, but with that much traffic, even in the limited time frame that we're looking, it will take some time. We'll find him though; he's overconfident."

"And how do you figure that Carter."

"I've talked with him sir. He leaves a com link in the labs that we raid, direct line to him. Never stays on the line long enough to get even close to a trace, but it shows that he thinks he's better than us." Carter could see the Daughtery was blazing with hate and confusion.

"What the fuck Carter? Does he leave it to taunt you? Maybe try and figure out something about you?"

"Don't think it's to brag; he only talks about his work as if it were a painting without anyone else to admire it. He doesn't taunt either, but it might be to try and glean some information about me from the encounters. Though even if that's the case, I think I have much more to learn about him than he does to learn about me."

"Fucker." Under different circumstances, Carter would have thought about how this incredibly rich and powerful man, the one that often would entertain or be entertained by the ruler of the system, or many of the bordering ones, was still in some respects just fresh out of a mine shaft, and the oddity of that. Of course, in the current moment, he was mostly just inclined to agree with the

sentiment. The killings aboard the freighter were still fresh in his memory, and as much as he tried not to let it show, it still weighed on him.

"Indeed he is sir, but he'll be a captured fucker when I find him."

"I'd prefer that, to look him in the eyes when they put him down. But don't let that for a second make you hesitate if you have the chance to take him out, clean and fast. More than he deserves, but its so much better than letting him stay out there. I want this man gone from existence, so that people like my daughter can stay in it." Before the emotion of thinking of his daughter could over take the man, Daughtery cut the line dead. Carter, who had raided that first lab, didn't blame him.

Carter stalked the halls of the ship up and down. Huy was overseeing the data work that was being done on everything that they had been able to pull off the accursed freighter, and so he was making the rounds of the crew members that had been on board to see the slaughter of the, gauging their response and their state of mind the best he could. Jordan was still not ready to speak with him, the blame and anger he felt over the order to cut down the docile looking Brarmiums not allowing him to interact fairly with Carter right now. He made sure that the ship's psychologist was going to get in contact with him later; Jordan hadn't seen much combat, and this experience was not an easy one to handle. The Nelt and the Kro-orc had nothing to really say about the confrontation, the one being cold about the situation and the other a bit of an angry glint still left over from the thrill of the confrontation (even if they felt a little uneasy about the unfair nature of the conflict), respectively. That left the Terrien, and that was the door Carter was knocking on now. While the rooms were small and cramped, the fact that each member of his strike team had their own private quarters was a draw when he was recruiting for this run through the systems. The door slid open after a moment, and Carter found the Terrien sitting at a desk, doing what looked like some composing.

Not having a mouth, the Terrien greeted Carter instead with the deep throat clicks that his species communicated among themselves with. The only reason that Carter was able to understand was because a small voice box was attached to the throat of the Terrien took the indecipherable clicks and screeches and transformed them into a robotic English.

"Carter, I'm glad to see you. Our last mission has been weighing on me rather heavily."

"As it has with me Kyle." The Terrien couldn't help but laugh in his own way, which to Carter's human ears sounded more like the chorus of a billion miniscule bees vibrating within the Terrien's throat. Kyle laughed at simply being referred to as 'Kyle,' the ridiculous simplicity of the two syllables to refer to another being borderline offensive to a Terrien, whose title could be dozens of micro syllables long; an advantage to the small clicks and screeches of the Terrien language. But of course, regular vocal folds could never come close to the Terrien's true name, so he accepted the moniker of Kyle with good humour.

"How do you deal with it Carter, the notion that we killed so many innocents."

"They were corrupted Kyle, there was no other options."

"We could have retreated, or risked death for a nobler existence."

"We could have, but Iago has to be stopped, and we would not have been ensuring a halt to his research had we followed though on those options."

"My brain agrees with you Carter, but my soul is still conflicted over it...it was a terrible thing we did."

"It was."

"I was actually just composing a poem to help me deal with the horror of it Carter...I'd offer to let you hear it, but I have yet to finish." Carter fought the urge to laugh out loud, but the notion of Kyle composing poetry something that was so not in keeping with a species that looked more like a demon for a child's nightmare than a poet. Roughly 2.5m tall and covered in hard, brittle scales, the Terrien carried the boarding shield into battle for a reason; Kyle hefted the thing with so much ease that it made his Kro-orc accomplice look like she was struggling. Terriens also had an odd distinction of being one of the most distinct looking species in the galaxy. Five feet instead of two, with four minor ones arranged behind a central and dominate front leg. And incredibly powerful torso, with a single arm sprouting out from the near center of what could be considered its chest; listing ever so slightly to the right. The arm was like the rest of the Terrien; incredibly powerful and horrific looking, seven clawed digits at the end. But running the length of the arm was a covering of amoeba like tentacles, appendages the Terriens used for finer motor functions and nutrient absorption. During the Terrien middle ages, it was quite a common practice of brutal execution to lop off the arm and allow the being to starve to death. It was all controlled by a head that was solid like the rest of the scales, but relatively small considering the entire size of the creature. Three eyes, swept back spines of scales that could almost look

like hair at a distance, and a number of openings that could have formed a mouth if there were any jaw.

"You'll have to send me your composition when its finished." Carter meant what he said. As odd as he found the fact that this beastly looking creature wrote poetry, it was remarkably good, and it gave insight to Carter to his squad member. Years ago, when Carter was hunting someone much more run of the mill than Iago, they raided a ship and an assailant had charged them when it was clear that the blaster wasn't doing anything against the shields. Kyle had, without looking to expend an iota of energy, been forced to smash him against the wall under the shield, killing them instantly. The event had weighed heavily on Kyle, whose expertise was wielding the shield, and not needing to kill in the normal course of operations. He had spend the next week crafting a rather epic poem weaving in and out the course of two lives that collided aboard the ship, ending poorly for the one. Afterwards, he had left a copy on the ships public files for anyone to read. Carter had only to go over it once to feel that it deserved publication, but Kyle refused to do anything of the such. He was a gentle soul who simply wrote for the art of it. "Do you ever send your work back to your family?" Carter nodded to the projection on the cabin wall, showcasing three females and a dozen smaller, softer shelled young ones.

"No. I'm scarred that my partners impressions of me would change, should they know I've taken life. One day though...when I can put the words down in the right order." Carter nodded, looked up to meet Kyle's sad gaze, and saw himself out.

The days had dragged on slowly, and turned into weeks before Carter could really get his head around tracking down Iago. He left notoriously little behind when he moved from one location to another, but Carter felt that they were getting closer. They had honed in finally on the relay that he had hoped off on retracing the freighters trajectory, and after a long and painful brute force computational review of all the security footage, using many permutations of Iago's known facial structure, they finally hit the pay dirt that they needed, and found out that he had made his way to the Wardren system. Carter had ordered the Connery into the outer limits of the system so that they could do a careful sweep of all the outlying space stations and colonies so that they could be eliminated.

For this sort of work Carter deferred to his most incognito operative; Caroline Sherra. She had been a beautiful woman by any measure, but a botched military operation years ago had riddled her body with red hot shrapnel threads; a unique signature of a terrorist network that she had been part of a task force for hunting them. Her life had been saved, but barely, and the scarring had been extensive. In addition to the layers of scar tissue that now covered her body, Caroline had also required dozens of cybernetic implants to either reconnect bones, reshape organs, maintain blood vessels, and many other things of that nature to keep her a fully functioning unit. As a result, she always made the faintest whirring sound when she was in motion, the many different bits of machinery that now resided within her in constant motion to keep her alive and functional. The tin man of Oz, she had once bitterly described herself over one too many drinks. Carter still thought she was very attractive, he figure and visage scar, but her beautiful face and toned body still obvious. But her perception of herself stood unshook; she was a hideous amalgamation of scars and gears.

Luckily for Carter, she was also amazing at moving about unseen, be it in the shadows as she attempted to gain access to a restricted area or domicile, or in the midst of a crowd, where she could glide through it without really touching anyone or having anyone look at her twice. An impressive feat when there was a significant scar through her cheek. The way she moved though, it was like she was a ghost drifting through fog. And the way she spoke, it made you want to tell her anything she asked. A couple days scanning though the outposts of the Wardren system, and Caroline had been able to determine that Iago would not be found there.

Carter didn't really think that Iago would be staying somewhere he might stand out, but he wanted to eliminate those options before he moved in and set up a observational perimeter around the real likely area he had settled; Quarnis.

It really was a perfect place to hide...each ship essentially acted like its own city state, and there was often little communication between them, especially if it wasn't necessary. Tracking a single traveller would take interfacing with thousands and thousands of government agents, and the process would attract attention. While Carter was surveying as much off planet travel as he could, there was still the very real possibility that Iago could slink off if he were alerted, so they had to play in very cautiously.

That's where he found himself now, floating in orbit above Quarnis and sitting down around a table with Huy and Caroline, trying to coordinate some sort of search.

"Could we look for recently opened labs maybe?" Huy was tossing around the ideas and hoping one

would stick to the wall. Most were getting shot down by Caroline, who best knew the ins and outs of how business worked in the Wardren system after having spent continuous hours looking through its outposts and colonies.

"That sort of thing really doesn't have a data base. We could look at all the individual ships that specialize in research or lab work, but there are dozens that do or could do that sort of thing, and going to each one individually would raise suspicion."

"What about the shuttle that took him to the planet from the relay?"

"Hundreds come back and forth every day, and the logs are never really that well put together, and we can't even be sure on what day to look. It's the same old problem. We'd spend too much time going through the data, Iago gets tipped off, and he disappears before we can hone in on him." They all sat in dejected silence for a moment, thinking of how to find a single person among the crowds of ships and Celsians. As luck would have it, their dilemma was solved for them as Delphine came through the door.

"Sir, I'm sorry to interrupt, but you said that you wanted to be alerted if I noticed any anomaly's while monitoring ship to ship communication." She stood there somewhat uncomfortable looking, Caroline's battle hardened demeanor and appearance not something she was used to, even after the time spent on the ship and with Carter's strike team.

"Delphine, out with it, what is it?"

"Of course, sorry sir. Like I said, an anomaly. One ship, the...the Queverte, it's been hailed a number of times in the last week, but no one is answering. Usually that means there's a problem on board. But there's been no distress either, no real sign that the ship is in trouble; no fires, no listing, no sinking. It's somewhat staying the same course, but it's not quite right. Most of the time other metro-ships don't involve themselves, but there are a number of shipments that are now backed up and waiting to get on board, but no one's on the other end listening it would seem."

Carter dared to hope as he asked,

"What kind of work does this metro-ship do?"

"Primarily education and research." Carter couldn't help but get excited about the idea that Iago was still on this ship.

"Time to take a look into this ship I think."

The shuttle buckled slightly as Carter and his strike team descended to the Queverte, and Carter checked the window again, and again he saw nothing but a massive floating city just sitting there in there in ocean. There was an eerie stillness to it as it sat there in the ocean, and Carter had to remind himself that the massive structure always looked like that, that it wasn't some sign that Iago had tainted it. For all he knew, Iago was no where near this ship, but Carter felt that the circumstances warranted a closer look to make sure that this radio silence from the ship wasn't actually the mad doctor that seemed to be right under their noses yet so far away.

He then looked back at the small strike team he had put together for this landing party. He felt that Kyle wouldn't work well inside the confines of the ship as well as the drop downs that he was made aware were central to Celsian construction. But he still wanted the nano shield leading the way, so the Kro-orc was sitting licking her lips lightly in anticipation. Caroline was also on the craft, her recent experience in the Wardren system making her an easy choice. And if they experienced any resistance, he also wanted someone that could keep up with the Celsians in terms of speed and agility. Rounding the team, because Carter wanted someone technically proficient but more battle trained than Delphine, so he had brought along the team member that was spending a fair bit of his free time working under her, Tral. Earth born and trained in the inner system police service, he had wandered from that vocation when word reached him that Carter was looking for proficient strike team members. Wishing for more than simply ushering the worst offenders he saw through a system that seemed more convoluted than anything could be and still support himself, he sought out Carter to become one of the silver starred bounty hunters of the Oberon system, dealing out justice a fair bit faster and more directly on many runs. He had been very happy being on the ship since he had begun, and his mood had only improved when Delphine had started getting onto him at night as well. But he pushed thoughts of he out of his head as they prepared to land on the aft of the ship to begin their sweep.

They were basing a basic plan of attack off of a blue print they had been able to acquire from an identically designed metro-ship, with a path planned through with the minimum number of drop offs along their path, towards what they hoped would be the most logical place to set up a lab that would have to be two stories tall. Of course, they were approaching a ship that was as big as some small towns on any terrestrially inhabited planet, so they also had the location of the most central command area mapped out, as well as several other possible lab locations if there proved to be nothing of use at the central ship command.

"Tell me again why we're not going straight for the bridge on this thing? If we get there, we can find out where Iago is faster than just hoping he's going to be where we think he's going to be." Tral had voiced his objections for the course of action in the briefing, but Caroline was really calling the course of action, and she had dismissed it briefly. As they approached the ship, he wanted more clarification why this was the plan.

"You're making a couple of poor assumptions; one, this works like a normal ship with the captain on the bridge knowing the workings of his ship. This is a city, and if you were looking for a drug lab in any small town, would you go to city council and ask where it might be, or take the information you had about the town and make the best guess you could? Plus, you're assuming that there's going to be anyone to help us, and if there are that they'll actually be inclined to help us. Or you're assuming that no one will be there and you're assuming you can just access the data bases without an issue; but of course that's assuming that the location of Iago's lab is even in the databases. Or had you already thought about all that too?" Caroline didn't wither under Tral's gaze, just starred back, the advantage of a robotocized eye on her side. Tral held her gaze for a moment before looking away, not liking being talked down to by the cold Caroline, but he didn't want to prolong the stare down. She was right about the ship anyway; their best course of action was heading towards the mapped out district first. Damned if he'd tell her that though.

"Whatever."

The rest of the trip down to the deck was rode in silence, weapons checked and rechecked, ammo blocks packed and rechecked, armour adjusted and calibrated for the worst of it. After a few short minutes, the shuttle touched down; in that it hovered just above the deck and the small team dismounted before immediately taking off to safe distance, ready to swing back and grab them in a moments notice. The Kro-orc led the way, sheild lowered and jaw set in a small snarl, the rest of them sweeping all angles as they followed in close succession behind her. Nothing greeted them, but soon there was a hint as to why no one was responding to hailing frequencies; spattered blood was immediately inside the first door frame they passed through to go from the uncovered deck and into the interior of the metro-ship.

"That's no small amount of blood." It was the first thing the Kro-orc had said from the outset of the mission, and it seemed like it was all she was going to say. But she was right; the spatter started thick and went to thin, the dark blue of Celsian blood streaking a good meter and then some. Considering the amount of blood in the average Celsian, whoever suffered this injury had dies quickly, if not neatly. The only thing was, where was the body then? The streak of blood ended in a small pool, but there was no body to go with it, just the blood. Things were very quickly going bad.

"Scan all door ways, and make sure we're watching our six. Tral, that's you." The professional nodded his understanding, taking up the rear while they continued down the hallway, Caroline on the right and Carter on the left. Moving through the hall, they noticed a couple more splashes of blood, but still, no bodies, though by the amount of spilt fluid, Carter had to guess they were dealing with seven dead Celsians at this point. As they approached a small public park area, complete with artificial light providing life to real trees and shrubs, the red foliage rustling slightly at the breeze that accompanied the opening of the doors into the park, Carter and his team finally got a sense of what they were up against.

Not ten steps into the park, four Celsians sprang up from behind a small rise on their left. They didn't immediately attack, but they stared for a moment, slightly emptily, moving in a bizarre perfect unison as they stood to their full height and allowed themselves to be seen. None were armed, but all the same, Carter made two small hand gestures and soon, Caroline and him were training their compact, high repeater fire arms at the new arrivals, while Tral continued to cover the way they came in and the Kro-orc kept her eye open for threats from any other direction. Always looking for an excuse to not pull the trigger, Carter spoke out to the Celsians, who continued to stare, but were now circling slightly, then back again, still in the perfect unison with each other.

"Patrick Carter, and I come from the Oberon system on official consulate business. We come for no other reason than for a man named Dr. Iago. If he is—"

Carter didn't have a chance to finish, the mention of Iago immediately shifting the demeanour of the Celsians to suspicious to violently angry. They hunkered down, snarled (again though, in unison) and attacked like a perfectly polished fighting unit. Two ducked left, while one cut right and the fourth jumped straight up, preparing to come down straight on the units head. All four immediately produced small crude knives, but they looked sharp enough that they could pose a serious threat. Most people coming in the door would have immediately been put down by the well orchestrated strike, but Carter had picked these people around him for a reason.

With hardly a look up, Carter immediately sighted and fired on the one Celsian that had taken the

tell tale leap up, two shots piercing the skull and one the central chest cavity. Without a second look, he prepared to sight the one on the right, but seeing that Tral had already dropped it with a quick dozen shots, turned his attention to the last two before they reached their position. But they already had, and they already probably wished that they hadn't. In a blur of motion that easily matched her assailants, Caroline kicked out and planted her boot in the face of the Celsian that she hadn't dropped with her own gunfire, knocking it backwards and prone for a brilliantly fast double tap to its face. The exchange lasted not even four seconds. Afterwards, the four squad mates made a quick visual sweep of the area, taking a half moment to search their assailants and exchange a profanity or two.

"Fast bastards. But they don't got much on them except for their clothes and the knives." Tral tossed one to Caroline. "Since you're the expert, maybe you could tell us why they came as us with what look like prison shivs and not proper guns at least."

"Ships research based, probably not many weapons on board. Have to make do with what they can. And did you notice the blank stares of those four, the hollow but perfectly executed assault pattern? Looks like they were just the opening salvo really, the testers, the throwaways. Looked a little like the brainwashed Brarmiums from the freighter...might be the same sort of thing here Carter." Carter examined the knife, and had agree it looked like a crude prison shiv. Of course, in the right area, it might get through the armour with enough force. He didn't want to test the possibility.

"In either case, good chance is that this is where Iago was, so lets keep moving," Carter paused, hearing a scuttling somewhere from behind them, "and get out of here with either that bastard in tow or something that will lead us to them." Not another word was spoken, and they moved forward again, quickly leaving the park and returning to a hallway. Their progress was impeded, though, as a pair of Celsians soon greeted them in the hallway. They approached aggressively, and before Carter could really warn them to go the other way, they got too close to the Kro-orc, and as they tried to go around the shield on either side, she slammed the one against the hallway wall with the shield, then struck the second with speed it wasn't expecting across the jaw with her massive fist. Both Celsians died instantly. Carter was reminded of the Brarmiums again, but these Celsians weren't simply walked towards their death, they were attacking, best they could. He pushed his team forward, but only a half minute passed before Tral was calling contact from behind them, halting their progress again. Carter spun to see six Celsians charing down the hall at them at high velocity, and not even bothering to begin starting a warning, raised his blaster to should length and let fly a stream of projectiles, slamming into two immediately. Tral had already started firing, dropping three, but the sixth and last one threw its dagger with surprising efficiency before being hit in the eye by Caroline. The knife whirled through the air, and Tral was forced to fall backwards just to avoid the point hitting him in the upper chest. Though he was able to pick himself back up again fairly quickly, it was disconcerting that a small unarmed group had produced even that; a stall in the heat of a fire fight could allow his unit to be overwhelmed. "Stay low in conflict; give those shifty things a harder target to hit with those knives. Now lets hurry."

Carter felt that things were beginning to escalate very quickly, and wanted to get to those labs as soon as possible; chances were, at the very least, that it would provide a defensible position. Their biggest problem to making it there though just fifty steps in front of them, their first drop off. Whoever climbed up first would be essentially open to attack; if they climbed though. With a wave of his hand they moved to the drop off, staying on high alert and making it there without incident.

In one swift motion, he pushed the Kro-orc down slightly, then climbed up onto her knee, then planted a foot on her shoulder, readying himself. Silently, he looked her in the eyes and counted softly.

"One, two," and in a breathless three, pushed off as she stood to add more boost, and Carter landed on the top of the dropoff - somewhat awkwardly - in front of ten Celsians, obviously all waiting in ambush but none expecting Carter like that. They reacted quickly though, moving to swam this new intruder, though they didn't act as quickly as Carter did. Switching onto fully automatic fire even in the midst of his landing, he began firing almost immediately, the tiny projectiles finding soft targets immediately as he held the trigger down.

Carter didn't worry about running out of rounds on account of the most significant recent advancement in personal small arms; micro rounds. Instead of a traditional slug from a traditional fire arm, micro rounds worked on the principle that velocity was many time more important to the deadliness of a fired projectile than its mass. If you could shrink the mass to a fraction, it wouldn't matter as long as you could increase the velocity by the same margin, hopefully more. The pay off was that a single magazine could hold tens of thousands of shots in it, while never being

any larger than the operators hand. This was because the magazines were simply blocks, with miniscule grooves and channels cut through the solid metal block (consisting of whatever ammunition type you wanted), which the gun would break off these pieces in succession to fire. Firearms became many times more expensive and complicated on account on the internal processors that had to very accurately and quickly break off pieces of metal from a block and fire them – usually through a combination of small gravitational producers and magnetic rail systems – in rapid succession. But that didn't matter; single soldiers could carry enough ammunition for a month, and soon battlefields reflected the limited need to conserve ammunition. Armour was specifically designed to stop microrounds, taking the tiny mass and dispersing to the point that it dealt much more of a slap than a piercing blow; also a reason that many modern body armour types had reduced efficiency when facing down things like knives or clubs. The armour just wasn't designed specifically to deal with anything that had any significant mass behind it. They specialized in stopping objects with high velocity's, not masses.

Carter didn't think of anything of this as he held the trigger down, instead concentrating on hitting as many targets as he possibly could, lest he be overwhelmed or forced backwards over the ledge. The only thing that kept him on his feet was the element of surprise, allowing him to cut though half the assailants before they could react, the rest falling at his feet, mere centimeters from tackling and stabbing him. They still carried the roughhewn knives and lacked body armour like their counterparts, but still they had attacked with no hesitation for self-preservation or fear. Scanning for even more attackers, he saw none, though he did have to wipe a small splash of blood away from his face mask to get an uninterrupted view of his surroundings.

After clearing the upper level, Carter was a little curious about why no one was asking about his status. Looking over the edge, he understood why. About two dozen bodies lay at the feet of his squad, the last of them looking like they had been struck dead, the range obviously closed to nothing if his troop was dispatching the last couple hand to hand.

"What happened?"

"Bastards rushed us right as we finished lifting you up. Sounded like you had contact up there too." Tral's brief synopsis of the situation was distracted as he continued to monitor the hall for more assailants coming down on top of them.

"Yeah, they were waiting. These Celsians know what they're doing, and they're remarkably coordinated, so lets get the rest of you up here as fast as possible." Carter briefly wondered how these Celsians, looking like they had nothing but the clothing on their back and crude knives as weapons, could coordinate so efficiently having no obvious means on communication between them. He shook it off though, the need to make it to the labs, somewhere more defensible, taking the utmost priority in his mind for now.

They worked quickly to vault the rest of the party onto the next level, constantly covering and scanning for the next attack, but nothing sprang forth from the walls this time. So they began to advance down the halls, with the Kro-orc slinging the shield on her back for the benefit of having her firearm drawn and ready for action. It didn't look like they were getting very shot at this mission. They continued to scan and progress cautiously, but still nothing else greeted them. For five minutes they walked, and while Carter felt that they should be arriving at their destination soon, his logic told him that this boat was just a boat, but it was a small town, really. They still probably had another five minutes of distance to cover, especially at this rate. So they stayed on course, and they stayed vigilant, not wanting to be caught off guard for even a moment; Carter felt a lapse in concentration would result in catastrophe. Finally, the squad made their way to the second dropoff along the way to the assumed lab space, and Carter knew that they were close now.

That's when a slight rumbling started. Nothing very obvious, more like the slight rumble of a inner atmosphere cruiser idling in port. But they had confirmed and double confirmed that there was no heavy machinery this high on the decks. Carter called for a halt, and his team assumed defensive positions; they heard it too, and their grips tightened on their weapons. There were still no more attackers to fire at, but something was happening. Listening as hard as he could, Carter realized that it wasn't the rumble of machinery that he heard, but footsteps. Thousands and thousands of sets of feet running at full sprint down the halls, and as he listened, he knew that they were getting closer; on all sides.

"Brace for contact!" It was the only thing that Carter was able to say before they saw the first of them...the first of many of them. Pouring around the corner from the direction that they had just come, came hundreds of Celsians, all charging at full speed. Tral opened fire first, cutting down assailants at knee level, hoping to slow the advance of the whole tidal wave of attackers lest they trample their own allies. They were trampled without a second consideration, while more of them started running along the wall above eye level for him as they continued to advance unabated. The

rest of Carter's squad fired into the mass of Celsians charging their position, dropping dozens, but they were coming fast and thick, not even slightly fazed by their comrades dropping like flies around them. But Carter knew this play, had seen these Celsians enact perfect feats of coordinated attacks. They weren't just coming down the hall, but...

Carter spun and looked to the ledge of the drop off just as a pair descended. Carter dropped both with carefully placed bursts of fire, then urged his troops forward, away from the shadow of drop off, where Celsians could come down right on their head. Tral didn't like that.

"There's too many forward, we can't cut our distance down anymore!" His shouts barely made it over the sound of the Kro-orc killing four Celsians who were running along the wall next to the ceiling, who were quickly replaced with another six.

"There will be too many coming from behind to contend with here!" Carter's shouts pressed the group forward, even as he dispatched three more Celsians that came over the side of the drop off. But Tral did have a point; there were just too damn many of them, and they would be overwhelmed in less than a minute, even getting away from a position that they could literally drop on top of their heads. But like any city, there were intersections, and there were alternate routes. Carter saw their just a couple strides ahead was a hallway to the right, which oddly had no attackers spilling from it. Not having a clue where it would lead them but knowing their options had run out, he made his desperate play to keep them all alive a couple moments more.

"Tral, in there, then offer cover, now!" Not hesitating a moment, but sure as hell hoping there wasn't another ambush waiting down that hallway, Tral dove to the cover of the corner, barely breaking up his rapid fire bursts of micro rounds into the ever closing tide of Celsians. Carter ushered Caroline into the hall next, having her cover the drop off that they now had no hope of scaling, and then him and the Kro-orc slipped down the hallway.

"Keep an eye on that corner, follow me!" Carter and the Kro-orc faced forward, having Tral and Caroline cover the way they came, but it hardly seemed necessary. As if realizing that they now had the entirety of their opponents coming from the one direction, the Celsians didn't follow them around the corner, but everyone could still hear them milling about in the massive crowd they had suddenly arrived in. Carter wasn't sure if they had actually improved their situation or made it worse, but they weren't dead right now, and that's better than what they would have had if they hadn't made it into this small secondary hallway. Now they just needed to find out where it had stuck them.

The answer didn't take too long to find. The hallway ended after a mere five meters with a door that looked more glass than anything else, and after smashing through that they realized why no one had been attacking them through this passage. The door opened into another small courtyard, this one with a view out onto the ocean. The problem being, that the view was open, and the air was flowing through the space. No window meant no safety from anyone below or above this deck, and thanks to Celsian's leaping ability, that there wouldn't just be a hallway full of assailants to deal with, but an entire viewing balcony worth. At five times the width, and five times the attackers, Carter knew they wouldn't last long at all. Already, he could imagine the forces that were amassing against them getting ready to finally over take the small team that was foolish enough to try and board their metro-ship. Caroline was the first to speak the obvious.

"They funnelled us in here, and now they just have to regroup before they come in here and finish us off. I feel like we just got checkmated here."

"I get that sense too, but lets keep our head and catch our breath. We'll get through them."

Carter's words seemed like hopeless optimism, the deluded speech of from the one man in the Alamo that didn't realize the situation was beyond redemption.

"Nice try. I expect that every last Celsian on this boat is either dead or acting security for Iago. That's nearly 20,000 soldiers that we are not going to be able to get through. Honestly sir, I say we take a dive into the ocean and take our chances."

"Then a couple of them jump in after us and try and stab us to death before we drown. I think we just try and fortify in the corner and take as many as we can with us before we get overwhelmed." Caroline delivered the line with an incredibly monotone voice, the idea of death not seeming to bother, or even surprise her, all that much. Carter could see the Kro-orc nod some agreement, already putting a fresh ammo block into her blaster, while at the same time discarding the shield. Carter would have been inclined to agree to some extent with all his squad mates, and may have suggested trying to hold out as long as possible for going for some hail mary play that saw them get back aboard the shuttle. But that would have only been the case if he hadn't been holding an ace in the hole.

"I appreciate all your ideas, but I think these might give us the edge we need to avoid swimming or some heroic last stand." In that same line, he handed to each member of the squad an ammo block of specialty ammo, tinted a sickly green. There was a moment of stunned silence. Caroline,

surprisingly, broke it first.

"Is this what I think it is? Sir, can we really use this? And how the hell did you get your hands on this shit?" Carter understood the silence and shock; he had just handed them all a block of what was known as "Rtoxic" rounds. They were a specialty type of ammo, infused with a specific property like any other time, much like electromagnetic rounds were infused each with an electromagnetic charge, so that they were many times more efficient against robotic security bots, each round causing a small EMP blast in any target that it hit, that felt like an odd static shock to a biological, and permanently disabled security bots. But the Rtoxic rounds were specifically designed to be highly efficient in a battle situation where the users had access to top of the line battle armour and your targets had very basic types. The block was highly irradiated, and not only did it deliver a significant radioactive dose to the targets that it hit, but to any that were in vicinity, as well as a not insignificant radioactive trail that could prove to be fairly fatal as well. The block was also infused with a highly dispersible chlorine gas analogue, making the rounds all the more toxic in situations where people didn't have access to breathing apparatus. They were horrifically designed to ruthlessly and efficiently eliminate as many biological targets in an area as possible, and this truth was advertised five years earlier when they were used by a small commando squad of zealot-like xenophobic humans that committed a genocide program on a number of Fracharian colonies. They were largely unarmed, and tens of thousands died in the clouds of irradiated toxins that rained down on them. After the atrocity that the ammo was blamed for being a part of, its manufacture and distribution was made illegal by 30 of the galaxy's 32 solar systems. It was next to impossible to find, and the connotations that came with it made it so that few sought it out.

"It is what you think it is Caroline, and I'm sorry that this is what it's going to come down to. But the simple fact is that I don't think we have many other options."

"I don't know about that sir. There's a very good reason that these were made illegal. If there are any innocent civilians left on this ship, they won't be able to survive if they're within a hundred metres of fight fire with these things being used. And if we have to kill as many Celsians as I think we're going to have to get where we're going, I'm gonna guess that this entire metro-ship will never be able to be inhabited again. Can we really do this in good conscience?" Before any more debate or conversation could be brought up about the subject, Juels-Irsiris, the Kro-orc, spoke for the first time during the entire excursion, at the same time clipping the Rtoxic ammo block into her weapon.

"I don't want to die, and I want to see Iago answer for all this. You said it yourself; the Celsians on this ship have either been killed or turned. Time to do what we need to." Caroline starred for what seemed like a very long time into Juels-Irsiris' eyes, then wordlessly loaded the ammo block into her own weapon. That seemed to settle the issue, in a sort of unsatisfying way. Both men loaded the ammo blocks into their own weapons, and that's when the assault began anew. From around the corner, the Celsians began to pour forth again, while at the same time a veritable wall of Celsians leapt onto the observation decks part area from other levels. The women fired down the hallway, while the men fired out into the ocean, with results almost as horrific as they had seen in Iago labs. The green tracers, barely visible, filled the air and for a moment almost looked beautiful. But they didn't last, and every target struck dropped immediately and with a small green cloud puffing out from the wound. They fired with triggers held down, eliminating the Celsians that charged them with all the brutal efficiency of a military unit that they were. But even more brutal was the ever thickening cloud of poison that the back rows of attackers had to jump through. The effect was truly difficult to watch, but there were still enough attackers coming that Carter couldn't turn away, and shot into others as he watched the ones he didn't shoot act as if they had waded into shockingly cold water. The poison and radiation worked fast, and even as they slowed Carter could see their muscles lose strength and their feathers start to wilt and fall off. Some collapsed in coughing fits, others just slowed and then lay down like they were being run on batteries that very suddenly died away, while others still simply fell over in shock and died. It was incredibly ugly, but it was incredibly efficient. What before was an ever-closing tide of Celsians was now a receding one. All their numbers now didn't count for enough when their targets were still shooting dozens down with amazing precision, and the rest of them were quickly succumbing to poison and irradiation. Somewhere, the order to back off was given, and Carter and his team once again found themselves unharassed. But not before another couple hundred Celsians lost their lives. Carter looked at how some had died, and thanked his maker several times over that his armour was good enough that it was currently filtering his air. He figured that the amount of radiation it was absorbing was enough that it would warrant getting a new set after they had finished on this boat, that Caroline was probably right about; it would never again support life. Carter and his squad members continued to move towards the labs, continued to find the splashes of

blood that had marked their first warning as they strode into this dead city. Along the way, they were periodically attacked by small groups of Celsians that would do their best to ambush from behind corners or through door or even from an air vent. But Carter had been chosen to hunt Iago because he was the best at what he did, and he had chosen those around him because they were also in a class of their own, and not once were they closed in on again, and each time an assault would begin, it would end almost as quickly in a hail of micro rounds and a cloud of irradiated toxic gas. The bodies that Carter left behind made him feel uneasy about what kinds of boundaries he was willing to cross in his pursuit, but it also made him feel stronger in his resolve to get to the end of it all; that end being Iago's apprehension or execution by his own hand.

"Through that door and then left, then just one more set of doors," Caroline reminded them as they approached what just might be the final stand of the mad doctor, "I'm guessing there's another nasty surprise in store."

The words would have seemed mildly prophetic had it not been for the fact that Iago was known for his elaborate security set ups around his lab, as well as the contents of the experience within. As they made that left turn, ten Celsians appeared, but different than the rest. Wearing full scale police style armour and supporting police issue sidearms, they were the last deterrents to the presumed laboratory entrance. Juels-Irsiris was as fast as ever unslinging the shield, and all but the first round that was fired ricocheted harmlessly off the exterior of the nano-weave (the first shot going wide). Tral and Caroline immediately ejected the Rtoxic ammo blocks because of their decreased efficiency against armour, and swapped in piercing rounds for just such a purpose, and started to return fire from the other side of the shield. The final guards dropped slowly, one at a time; despite their incredibly coordination, they were still out classed and very outgunned. But Carter didn't follow suit with his squad members. There was someone pulling strings, and they wouldn't have sent those ten out uselessly to their deaths without back up. Spinning to face the direction they came from, Carter's intuition paid off.

The horde of Celsians came around the corner, obviously hoping to capitalize on the more formidable attackers distraction and finally swarm Carter's small team like they had been trying to do for so long now. But once again, the Rtoxic rounds proved to be too much. Dozen fell to direct shots, and dozen more from the poisoning that very quickly started to choke the hallway. But he was just one shooter, and he could feel the massed pressing closer and closer. He was firing as quickly as his gun would allow, but the Celsians just had the sheer numbers on their side. Carter targeted one coming along the wall, three shots flying through the torso, shifted to three running low and sweeping death through them at eye level, before returning his focus to runners on the wall, but it was all coming at him too fast. Some of them were going to come through.

"Into the lab, now!" Carter could tell, without looking, that the elite guard was still present, but there was no time now. They pressed forward at an awkward shuffling run, exposing their feet more than before, but they needed to put their backs to a wall. The Celsians guarding the entrance took advantage of their increased movement, shooting ricochets off the floor and striking Juels-Irsiris' legs several times. In one moment of sheer panic, she almost tumbled straight over, exposing the rest of them to micro round fire and probably causing others to stumble, allowing the back ranks to swell over them at the same time. But before she could fall onto her face, Caroline steadied her, then gave her a push forward to keep them ahead of being overwhelmed. Carter fired into the masses, while Tral and Caroline tried to pick off the last four armed Celsians that blocked entry to what Carter was now very confident were in fact the labs. The back ranks were so close that Carter could begin to see what looked like surgical cuts into their skulls and the individual feathers on their heads as they charged with wild abandon through the thick cloud of toxic radiation and thousands of micro rounds that cut down Celsian after Celsian. Ahead, Juels-Irsiris had just crushed one of the few remained Celsian gunmen into the wall while Caroline deftly executed one Celsian with a point blank shot through the eye and another with a skull crushing kick. Tral blew the lab doors off the hinges and they piled in.

The radiation and chlorine gas was too thick in the hallway now for any assailants to make it through, so it was only a secondary caution as they swept the space, which was indeed quite the expensive and extensive laboratory set up. Lab tables, work benches, terminals, robotics and of course, fully stocked with every type of necessary drug and tool to do the sick work that Iago continued to excel in. But there was one thing that Carter noticed, one thing you'd have to be blind and stupid to not notice, really, that made it very unlike Iago's other labs; it was a mess. It was the first time that Carter had seen that in Iago's work spaces, and it gave him hope that he had had to leave in a hurry and may not have been able to wipe his computers as thoroughly as before. But the mess was horrific, and not because of the surgical tools laying in disarray, or the fact that things were not laid out in perfect right angles. The mess was horrible because it was all blood. And not the splashes that they had seen coming through the halls, but much, much worse.

Some form of splashed or sprayed or smeared blood covered every square centimeter of the room, from the mist on the ceiling to the hand smear in the far corner that stretched like someone had tried to jump away from their assailant, then simply slid against the wall back to the ground and their death. There were even pools of semi-congealed blood on much of the lab floor, and Carter could imagine this is where much of the ships population had succumb to Iago's experimentation. But beside the mess, there wasn't much to see, so it was time to kick in the door to the office. Carter positioned himself, Juels-Irsiris close by to move in first, the rest of his strike team providing necessary cover. Scans that the body armour was able to conduct said that there were no traps hiding around those corners, but he still felt nervousness bouncing in his gut as he lined up his kick. With a breathless three count to himself, Carter flexed every muscle in his knee, and with his power armours assistance, kicked the door off the hinges, storming into Iago's little sanctuary a moment later.

On the other side stood a single Celsian, and immediately Carter could tell he was different than the rest. He was unarmed, but standing straight, with an intelligence in his eyes; though to be fair his eyes also looked like they hadn't seen sleep in weeks. He supported some fairly extensive scarring on the left side of his face, and his wings were covered with odd, thick skinned looking bags, but he seemed no worse for either of these facts. He greeted them without fear, but defiantly; still as he could manage but with a hint of a tremor really.

"I didn't expect you to make it here, so many facing so few, killing so many to make it to me. But then again, to be fair, your beloved doctor once told me a tale of a hairy man that slew a thousand of his enemies with nothing but part of an animal carcass...just a piece of dead bone or something. I thought it to be crap human posturing, but here you are, in this lab and with me at your mercy...me having nothing left to protect myself from any more of his mental tortures. Iago must truly want me dead." Carter paused, confused. He sent Juels-Irsiris and Tral to guard the lab entrance from any attempted breeches.

"I don't know what you heard, but we're no friends to Iago. We're here to either take him away or kill him. Do you know where he is?"

"If I knew that I'd be pursuing him to hell. Pursuing him from hell. Fucking Iago. I don't believe you." With that the Celsian began to pace, and Carter found himself wondering if his eyes looked like they hadn't seen rest in weeks because they really hadn't.

"Believe what you will, but we're still here to look for Iago, not to hurt you. If that was our goal, you know as well as we do that you'd be dead already." Logic didn't seem to be working for Carter as the Celsian continued.

"No, Iago doesn't want to kill. That's too easy, too easy, far too easy. Not when he can take who you are, or give you who someone else was. But I can show you something that might make you think twice about trusting your beloved doctor." With that, he leapt onto the desk and kicked the terminal. Immediately a view screen popped up on the side wall; it was somewhat grainy security footage of this room, and sure enough, there was Iago, who seemed to be arguing with a pretty young Celsian. Carter motioned for Caroline to keep her eye on their host as he moved closer to watch the scene unfold.

"Uveen, I need your help, I need you to be clearing these memory caches." Iago was moving about the lab, downloading things into his surgically implanted processor unit, while at the same time putting a scant few personal items into a briefcase, that lay open on the desk. The Celsian with him, Uveen, was near panic, a small smattering of blood on her left wing.

"Doctor, stop! We have to help those people out there. Who cares about what's stored in memory, the city is being torn apart around our ears!" It sounded like that on the recording too; there were sounds of panic and death in the background. Screams, explosions, and alarms. It didn't sound like things were under control.

"No Uveen, the city is already dead. What you hear aren't cries for help, they're the scavengers picking apart her body. Now I need you to help me with this." Carter had never seen Iago like this... he looked disshelved, as if he weren't in total control of his surroundings and all the people within it. Obviously, something had gone wrong even for him.

"I just can't accept that doctor, I just can't, its, just...too much!"

"Uveen! I need your help here, please."

"But why? I don't understand! I don't understand how Ezeer could do this! And he told me things, just a couple days ago before this all started, just a couple days before he disappeared. He told me that you weren't who you said you were, that you weren't here to help our veterans. He said you were just here to exploit us. Why would he say things like that?"

"I don't know. What I do know is what I need from you, and that you're not helping me. Now, please, if you could--"

"No, no doctor, I won't. I'm not doing a damn thing until you tell me what's happening around here,

I'm not helping until you tell me why you want to destroy everything we've worked so hard on, and I want you to tell me who you really are." Carter began to feel dread in the pit of his stomach as he saw Iago's disposition change on the monitor. It was a shift he had seen many times before; when someone stopped viewing someone next to them as an ally and started viewing them as an enemy. Adding to Carter's revulsion was the fact that he could see that Iago had a sidearm in his briefcase. He didn't like where he imagined this going.

"Uveen, I'm not who I said I was, I'm not here to do what I told you I was, and right now, if you don't abandon your home, you'll die at the hands of a monster I created." The words were curt, but they cut like a mining laser through Uveen's heart.

"What?! How could you! Do you have any idea what my parents said about me when they heard we were involved? Do you have any idea what we did hear means to people on this boat, or to all Celsians? How could you exploit that. How...could you?" she sputtered on those last words and the blood looked like it had been completely drained from her face. Carter felt the pain in her voice, even through the recording.

"Because my work is worth completing at any cost, and that's all you need to know. Now, I'm trying to help you. Get off this boat, leave and you might have a chance, even if you have to swim."

"I can't just abandon my home! I have to do something! You have you help."

"That's not going to happen. I'm leaving."

"Fuck you! You're staying to help us-" Those were the last words that Uveen ever spoke, as Iago drew the sidearm and shot her through the heart before she could respond. The pain on her face was not borne of the fact she had a hole in her chest, but of the shock and betrayal that she had been subject to. It looked like she was practically in love with the twisted doctor Iago a week ago, and now she fell backwards, slain by the hands that she thought she knew. After it was over, Iago closed the briefcase, walked towards the door, but in half a moment, paused over Uveen's body and bowed his head in the only sign Iago ever gave that he had any respect for life. Carter made sure to note there was at least some small piece of evidence that the doctor wasn't sociopath, as well as the fact that the doctor was an incredibly fast draw; Uveen didn't have time to do one half blink before she had been shot. The video ended with him quickly striding out the door.

"Fuckin' killed her like he was stepping on a bug. A bug is all she was to him...just a bug. But to her, he was everything. Brilliant, kind, rich, and the ultimate prize when they became involved in a more physical nature. Fuckin' monster...only a monster could make me see what I had seen. Fuckin' monster...monster." Carter turned from the video, back to the Celsian, who was still pacing slightly. Carter turned to him, locked eyes with him, and approached until he was invading his personal space.

"What's your name?"

"Ezeer."

"What happened on this boat Ezeer?"

"Terrible, terrible things."

"Did Iago do these terrible things, Ezeer? Tell me everything you know happened here." Carter assumed Ezeer had been a soldier, and was hoping to tap into some boot camp subconscious cues to get information.

"Iago didn't do these terrible things. I did. I killed this city, I turned the citizens into what they are," here Ezeer stared into Carter's eyes with fire and hatred, "but Iago was the one that made me what I am." Carter backed away from Ezeer, half of his reasoning it being hard to be that close with a mass murderer, half because he was hoping to put him at a measure of comfort so that he'd talk about what happened.

"I want you to start from the beginning Ezeer; tell me how you met Iago, and tell me how all this happened." So Ezeer told Carter about meeting him in the bar, right down to Uveen flirting with him to join the program. He told Carter about the success, his wings coming back. And he told Carter about the late night conversation between the two of them that started everything off.

"He told me that he could help me with my memories, that I could be able to sequester them, that he could store some away, that he could cordon of some...I mean, sorry. He offered me something that I needed, a reprieve from the memories of the things that I had done. He told me it was illegal, but I didn't care, I didn't dare go on like I had been. So I agreed, that night, in that office, to let him put things...into my brain." Ezeer gingerly touched the back of his skull, and turning around, Carter could see the spidering scar on the back of his head, deep and purple and jagged looking.

"He told me that there would be risks, but he lied. He didn't want to manage my memories, he just wanted me to consent to going under for a while so he could get what he really wanted into my head...recievers. See, he had been offering the same thing to a couple others, but he made sure I was first. He made sure that I was all there, that I came out on the other end still myself. I asked him when we'd start the actual memory manipulation, but he kept stalling. And that's when he did

implants on others, others like me, desperate veterans that would consent to their skulls being tapped. Soon I knew what he was doing...he was linking us, making us share our thoughts, our very essences. Just like a fucking network signal that floats through the air, that was their memories, their brains, their sense of self. But he designed it as a one way thing. He wasn't looking to make a bunch of lined equals; he was looking to create one on top and then the rest underneath. Just one on top, one giving orders, one having to take all of it...all the pain and the hurt and the evil. The evil...it was too much." Ezeer pulled back from Carter, slouched against the wall, and started to sob in a small sign of desperation. Carter knelt down next to him.

"You're saying that Iago created wireless neural linkages?" Ezeer nodded. "And you're telling me he used it to create...one receiver of information, and a number of senders?"

"That's just the way memories flowed...all into me. Orders went the other way. I'd think it, and the man across the room would do it. Just like that. Of course, for that to really work, they weren't really who they were anymore. He...he fucking removed themselves from themselves. There was nothing left inside anymore but their blood, and now they were in my head. I had to carry what they had done and seen, but they were just some...husk. Fucking...just a shell at that point, like moving puppets. But you could look them in the eye still, and it would blink. They'd still need to eat, but they could respond to that...they'd starve if I didn't make them eat. They couldn't eat. They were that empty that they needed to be told to eat. Iago, he did that, he took them out of themselves...it was worse than killing them...it was a living death he gave these people...and they just wanted to be happy again. He preyed on us, all of us, took our sadness and used it to kill used. He took them out of themselves, leaving nothing but a walking carcass! All the rest of them went into here..." Ezeer pressed a finger into his skull, hard, leaving a painful looking indent. "I can't tell you how many people I saw killed, how many body parts being blown off I was subjected to. Even other memories, they were almost too much...people beating their partners, being beaten by their partners. And you just don't see it, you feel it too; the things they feel. Their hate, their panic, their fear." Ezeer looked into space for a moment, then he flashed back to reality. "It was sick, what he did, but by the time I figured it out, there were already several dozen people in here...too many memories, too many bad memories. Even the good ones, they felt, wrong. You were watching something that wasn't meant for you, and I felt sick invading into these peoples lives. They didn't deserve to have that stolen from them, their privacy, their lives...they, they just didn't." Carter could scarcely believe what he was hearing. Scientifically, he was astounded that biological brains could be shared, linked like that. Morally, he was repulsed by the deception. Emotionally, he broke inside for the man responsible for bearing a million bad memories.

"What happened next Ezeer? What happened to all these Celsians? It's like they're all these 'puppets' you talked about; hollow people that used to be."

"I made them...I needed to. I saw what Iago was doing, and I needed to get away. I sprang away with those that he converted with me, and we hid, hid below deck, and then we moved against him. But he had...he had the police. They were with him. And they were strong, stronger than those that I ran away with. So we needed more...I needed to stop Iago, I needed to defend myself from Iago. So we stole the supplies the we needed, and I started to make more puppets. But Iago did it first! I just did what I needed to! It...it was just easy after the first couple. We had what we needed, and once you knew where you needed to insert the nodes, it was fine. You just had to heat it up for it to go through the skull. I took more people, put them into my head...that was my punishment for doing what I did...but I needed to do it. I needed to. Soon, I could control the ones that were good enough that I could make more of them through them...I could even program them, just like a cleaning bot, so rove, find others, and make them like they were. It...it didn't feel wrong, just necessary. I needed to do it. Soon, there were enough of us, and we were growing, and I needed to move at Iago, move against his police. So many died, there was so much pain, and I saw every moment of it...all of it...all of it...all of it...through their eyes. I could see them when they killed another, or when they were killed. I killed hundreds and died a hundred times after that...I died. But he got away...we shut down the shuttles, killed the power in so many ways, but he was gone...maybe a boat. So many dead, to get him, but I didn't get him. I'll never see an afterlife..." In a move that even surprised Carter, he put his hand on his back in a sign of comfort, and that's when he realized just how horribly potent the Rtoxic rounds were; a clump of feathers came off, and he could tell that Ezeer was already dying from radiation poisoning. He saw it too, and Ezeer looked at Carter with pleading in his eyes.

"When I die, all those left on the ship, they'll be nothing more than empty vessels. They won't even have some part of them, which I hold now, moving through them. You can't let them stay like that...make sure this boat dies...kill it for good...purge the evil...please." Carter stood, and before he had a chance to second guess himself, he fired once, a round through the skull. The puff of green had a metallic glitter to it when it came off of him, and he turned to Caroline.

"Iago had to ditch out of here in a hurry. Take as much out of these memory banks as we can." She went immediately to her task, and Carter went behind the desk and looked in the drawer, not really expecting to find anything, but sure enough, there it was. That same piece of paper with contact information for Iago. He could hardly believe, but he memorized the sequence of numbers as best he could before taking it with him.

"Juels-Irsiris! Tral! Get ready to pack up and roll out! Kill anything that moves on the way out, and make sure whatever happens, we pump out enough Rtoxic rounds to make sure nothing survives on this tub ever again."

The ship was as quiet as a morgue, and Carter understood. The people that served with him on this mission had seen some horrible things, but the scale of what happened aboard the metro-ship shocked them all to their core. It wasn't enough that Carter had manipulated the very fabric of a person's being, traumatizing one and essentially lobotomizing several dozen others. It wasn't enough that he deceived so many people and destroyed their lives, or even that in his escape he murdered in cold blood a being that loved and respected and trusted him. Now, he had taken things to a whole new scale, and a city lay dead because of it. Of course blame rested with Ezeer too, but by the time he started converting citizens of the metro-ship to his cause, he was much more a monster made than a monster by choice.

There was also some unease about the fact that Rtoxic rounds had been utilized during the mission, though no one could argue with the fact that it had been necessary to get through the crowds. But the fact that they had been used at all was horrible in its own right, and the idea that no one would live on that ship again made the mission feel all the more grotesque. Sure, the place could feasibly be scrubbed clean and made liveable again, but the cost of such a project would have been more than actually building another metro-ship. Carter had made sure that nothing would live there again, emptying the entire ammo block aboard the ship and ordering his crew to do likewise. Scans of the ship as they were leaving orbit already indicated that the radiation had reached the lower levels, and the entire floating city would be uninhabitable in the span of 48 hours.

Carter thought about the sheer scale of Iago's crimes, and couldn't help but hold some small silver lining in all of this. That was, while the galaxy was an enormous expanse, there were very few places where you couldn't hear about everything that was going on everywhere else in it.

Communication from one end of the galaxy to the other took days, not years, and everyone would hear about the evil doctor that killed an entire city on the planet of Quarnis. It would be harder for him to hide, especially now that this incident put Carter and his crew so close behind him; at least, they hoped it put them closely behind him. They had had their optimism dashed before. Perhaps this time Iago would reveal something more useful to them when they spoke. As before, Carter paced the bridge as Delphine worked to open the communication line, complete with trace. He remembered her warnings as he handed her the coordinates.

"This is significantly less encrypted than the ones from last several missions sir. Still brilliantly complex, but an open line would get a trace in just under half an hour. As such, I wouldn't expect him to pick up, or talk for longer than a couple minutes...he knows what he's doing with these and he just doesn't have the same security as before."

He had been slightly surprised to hear that Iago had still left the coordinates behind when he found out that they were relatively insecure, but wasn't about to pass up the opportunity to look the bastard doctor in the eyes and ask why all this suffering was worth what he was doing.

The bridge was not as full as last time, as Carter had only permitted members of his strike team to stand and bear witness to the conversation. He didn't want the crew here for this; those that weren't used to seeing death in the field of battle, didn't want them to lose their composure and attack Iago with words. He didn't want them touched by his evil either, and he didn't want to give the doctor more of an audience.

Juels-Irsiris was standing far back from the rest, and while it seemed like she was acting as distant as she always did, Carter knew better. He knew that she was a listener, a fan of being close to the others she went out with, trained with, and lived with. Her silence was her way of being close to those she risked her life with, but now she was standing too far back to be part of any of the conversations, whether Kyle was running prose ideas by Marcus, or Jordan and Tral were discussing who had better chances with Caroline. Carter approached her.

"How'd the chem and radiation cleanse go?" Even though their suits didn't receive and punctures and were rated to reflect as much radiation as a warhead would give off, it was still protocol to take the cleanse while back aboard. It was an easier proposition for some than others, and Juels-Irsiris' fur made it more of a hassle.

"Fine."

"Your firearm?" They also had to be completely scrubbed before reuse, and half the time after using

Rtoxic rounds, it was simply ruined for good.

"Fine."

"And you?"

"Fine."

"You're lying."

"No, I'm fine. We did what we needed to do, and we needed to kill 20,000 husks of former people with some of the most horrible weaponry developed inside the last twenty years."

"That doesn't bother you?"

"Does it you?" Carter exhaled slowly before he answered, trying to balance how much of the untouchable leader image he should present and how much of a real person he should be.

"Yes, it's a tragic thing that occurred, and what we were forced to do while facing it. But it still needed to be done."

"And that's what I feel...I just never had a situation that was so bad that I couldn't just remind myself it was what needed to be done to feel better about it. Still leaves a bad taste. I don't like it Carter." Juels-Irsiris was a direct person; if she ever said anything that resembled opening up it was honest and revealing. But Carter knew that's all she'd say, as far as she'd go on the subject.

"We'll get him, then we'll put this behind us; we'll take some time off." Carter smiled sadly, in the motion admitting the absurdity of just being able to vacation everything out of their system, and turned to go.

"Carter. Would you be able to live if you had to take the horrible things that you had seen, the horrible things that you lived with, and multiply them by twenty?" He paused, thought of everything he had seen in simply the last number of months, let alone his career in this.

"I have serious doubts."

"As long as I'm not the only one." Without another word, they walked towards the rest of the squad, just as Delphine was finishing up.

"Whenever you're ready sir." Carter nodded, fired up the linkage, and waited. To his surprise, the connection only took a couple seconds before Iago appeared. In a sign that there might be some soul under his visage, the doctor looked about five years older since they last spoke.

"Carter."

"Doctor. You've looked better."

"You as well. Of course, I can imagine what was waiting for you aboard the ship."

"If there was true justice, those husks would have dragged you in front of Ezeer. How did you escape a city turned against you?"

"By taking advantage of assumptions. Of course Ezeer was watching the life rafts, that's why no one escaped on those, but he only watched them for as long as he assumed that I was still on the boat. I hid in a storage unit of a custodial closet by some of the boats. After two days, and after he already figured I was gone, I snuck out and onto the ocean. There are enough ships in that ocean that it wasn't long before I was picked up, and not long after that before a shuttle was able to take me to the system's relay. You'll have to pardon me, but I didn't think I would be very welcome in the Wardren system after what happened on Quarnis made the news."

"You have to know that your days are numbered now Iago. This is too big to be ignored...people will come after you, people will be hunting you, and you won't find safe haven anywhere." Carter could scarcely suppress his feelings of elation at the idea of Iago running scared for cover, finding none. But the doctor seemed unfazed.

"Maybe. But thanks to appropriate blur though the line and easily swappable facial augments, I won't be that easy to identify. Besides, you're supposed to be the best at what you do, and you haven't gotten to me yet."

"Your time is running out doctor. We'll be on top of you soon enough, and then whatever it is that you're doing will die along with you." Carter had already started to make some guesses as to Iago's final goal, and he didn't like the ideas he had come up with, chiefly among them the idea that Iago could almost amass himself an army. Seeing what he had done on Quarnis, and what he had done to that Kro-orc in the jungle, Carter could imagine squads of husks controlled by commanding officers, that could push the empty vessels they controlled even after the primary brain was destroyed. It was a scary thought, but to what end did it really serve to create an army? In either case, Carter was hoping that acting clueless about Iago's end goals or even intermediate ones would offend him enough he might actually say something about it.

"You seem to think that my vanity will force me to spill forth countless vital information about my work and my person and my location, don't you Carter. I know you must have some idea as to what I'm doing; you're a man who knows military action. Are you telling me you can't see the promise in soldiers that do exactly what their commanding officer tells them? Or that there is no advantage to

a warrior being able to continue to fight after being hit with a kill shot? At the very least, you must see the incredible feat of brain mapping and manipulation I was able to conduct on the young Ms. Daughtery.”

“Referencing Allison is low, even for you doctor.” Carter did his best to control his own emotions as he felt Iago try to manipulate them. But it had been a horrible thing watching the recording of what had happened to Allison in that first lab that Carter had raided. He stared at Iago with hate, but didn’t say anything more.

“Maybe. But my work is unique, and amazing, and it will continue, even if half the galaxy hunts me with their rabid breath. You’ll see just how important it is soon enough.” And without another word, the screen died and Carter was left feeling more shaken than he’d like. He turned to Delphine.

“Anything that resembles good news?”

“Actually, yes, yes there is. I was able to find a back route tracer that Iago hadn’t thought of for his encryption. It was still far too quick to get anything very pinpoint, but it looks like he’s going home to the Oberon system.” It might have been the reference to Allison during their conversation, or just a paranoia that Carter had, but he spoke hurriedly.

“Open a channel with Daughtery right now. And set a course for Oberon. I want to be in the system as soon as possible.”

4

Iago woke from a restless sleep on the most run of the mill, generic hotel room mattress that he could find upon arriving in the Oberon system. His sleep had been much this way for some time now, ever since leaving the Wardren system. But it wasn’t what had transpired there that kept him from a fully restful nights sleep. It was the present, and specifically, the fact that as of right now, his research wasn’t moving forward. He had all the data from his experiments just sitting there, begging to be used and expanded on. It was quite literally keeping him up at night, but he had committed to this course of action right here, right now.

He looked out the window and down onto a sleepy frontier like town that he had settled on after the cross system relay jump. It was the kind of place that had really popped out the ground quickly when a new deposit on a nearby asteroid made this location the best to launch shuttles for workers. The town quickly built up around the small but highly functional shuttle port, and took on the feel of a mining community. Large ground crawling vehicles were the choice of those that lived here, and the number of small bars and fried food dispensaries heavily outweighed the small number of libraries that the town cared to support. But it was a good town, low in crime that seemed to plague towns similar to this one. The company was a union shop, Daughtery’s hand and influence in it, a good balance of employee protection and profit maximization keeping everyone in an uneasy balancing act. But people were grateful of the opportunity for union work, of having a safe place to raise children, even if many of the children who grew up here wanted to take off from the small, out of the way settlement when they reached legal maturity. Some did want to stay and just continue with the mining family, but most had to leave into the greater galactic community before they concluded that they’d actually be happiest staying right where they were.

Iago could scarcely conceive of a worse hell. The drudgery of the town seemed to weigh on him, and the unambitious nature of its inhabitants made him want to slap them, to scream at them to not simply be content with what was around them, but to fight to make what they wanted true. He admitted the problem with that is that so many of them simply wanted what they already had; a way to whittle away more than half their waking hours, then spend the rest in some traditional means of being happy that he felt held no real joy in the first place. However, it was the perfect place to conduct the operation he came here for. He already had researched in some small measure or another almost half the eight thousand people that called this place home, and he had been able to hone in on a half dozen men that were close friends as the subjects for what he had in mind. In other circumstances he might have looked into vetting a number of other candidates for this mission, but he knew that his computer banks had been left on the metro-ship he left behind, and that Carter would be closing the distance between them in the coming days. He had to work quickly if he wanted to do this. So he headed out to where he headed to do some of his most important work, the bar.

It was called the Crater’s Lip, and it was so close to being a dive bar, but avoided the titling at the last minute. Old and cheap furniture filled the place, but it was cleaned well at the end of every night. The food was incredibly standard fare, but prepared well and at a fair price. There wasn’t much in terms of selection for alcohol or powders - if one happened to be into that sort of thing - but they always provided beer that wasn’t skunked. It got its name from being able to draw

in both old school miners, those that had been doing it for generations and often moved between towns like this, going where there were rocks to be dug into, and their children who as often as not, had no care for mining or the lifestyle or anything else to do with digging into rocks. People stayed respectful of everyone else, and it worked out, though on some tense nights the situation would devolve into two camps shouting across the bar at each other before the small police force rolled through and moved people along. Tonight it was almost at capacity, the weekend here and the majority of the workforce looking forward to a little bit more time on a habitable planet with their families...after just one night of drinking with the boys. In the back of the bar, occupying a booth were six friends since elementary, all early 20's, all working the mines like it was their part time job, even though if they were honest with themselves they'd have to admit that they were lifers now. None were married, but four of them did have girlfriends. They were all lucky enough to work regular hours, so every Friday they got together here and drank as much as the mood of the night would dictate.

Tonight the mood was light drinking, though the company that they found themselves keeping was seeming to encourage a couple more beers than they had initially thought. The man looked fifty, most likely was fifty, and looked like he hadn't been sleeping well lately. He had accidentally knocked a beer out of one of their hands at the bar, and after some profuse apologies, bought all six of them a round. They thought it only fair to invite him to the table and share a drink with them.

"What's your name?"

"Iago, good to meet you gentlemen..." Here Iago paused and let them introduce themselves, which seemed to fall to the one that had prompted his name, and was also the one that had lost the initial beer.

"My names Gabe, and these here are my brothers...some more literally than others, Mike, Han, Jeremy, Joseph, and Razel." Iago nodded and made a show of trying to remember their names, though after the research he had been doing in the past several days, he could have picked all six men out of a crowd of hundreds without a moments hesitation.

"Pleased to meet you." Iago shook each of their hands, locking eyes with each one along the way. They all seemed like strong individuals, and he imagined that muscles were just things that the job produced.

"What brings you to town Iago? Pardon me for saying so, but you don't strike me as a miner."

"I'd be surprised if you thought I was after shaking my callous free hand. No, I'm somewhat of a doctor. I've made a fairly good living moving from outpost to outpost, or small frontier town to frontier town acting as a temporary general practitioner. There are a lot of places in the galaxy that have popped up real quickly, and people like doctors aren't always there when the set up is complete. So I move through these communities doing what's needed until demand starts to drop off or I get restless and want to move on again." Iago did his best to focus on Razel as he spoke next. "I'm sure you know how that feels, just the need to move on and find something different." Razel shifted somewhat uneasily, but he nodded before draining the last of his beer.

"Must be nice." Carter turned to the speaker, the youngest, Han.

"It is. It's nice to have the freedom to do what you want in that respect, but I'm also lucky that I was provided that opportunity as I was growing up." Iago noticed that the beers were being finished around the table, and he felt that his words were hitting their marks. He made the motion for the waitress, and ordered the table another round of beers.

"Thanks Iago. Generous guy."

"I'm just glad I have someone to drink with Gabe. Some towns, you don't get treated with a lot of hospitality. And, as it happens, doing what I do, I don't incur many costs and make myself a fair bit of money. The freedom from debts and the freedom of a small sum of money is quite the thing to hold onto." Again, he saw several around the table stare into their beers, drinking what was left and even nodding silently to themselves.

If one had been watching from a corner and reading the thoughts around the table, you'd almost start to believe that Iago was one of those Jedi's from pulp fiction novels and movies of eras gone by. The way he was able to deliver the lines he delivered, and to who and with what inflection, they were thinking exactly what he wanted them to think. They started to consider his life, and how it would be viable for them, considering that maybe they really didn't want the miner lifestyle, that they would go for something that was more in keeping with what Iago described to them. Freedom from the same town, from the mortgages that they had found themselves adopting because it had been impressed upon them as the right idea, lest they waste money on rent in a town that was so easy to toss a dwelling together in. Soon, Iago wasn't just making them think the things he was implying they should think of, but he was making them feel exactly what he wanted them to. The bought rounds of beer helped sway them to think the way he wanted them to, but really, it was all about the

research that he had done and the flawless execution of the conversation. The implications paving a smooth road that the friends were only so happy to stride down. After a number of hours of trading stories, sharing drinks, and getting thoroughly inebriated together, Iago felt that it was time to push the next button.

“So I always have to ask, what’s the impression people have about Daughtery around here.”

“Good, pretty much like any other union miner bar. Dude gets us a fair wage, but keeps our bosses in business so they can keep giving us money.” Gave laughed a little bit at this for a reason no one but him really understood, but a couple of the friends around the table raised a glass and drank to his laughter at the very least.

“Oh. Okay. Makes sense.” But the words were delivered with anything but a resolved sound, and of course the others implored the doctor to go on.

“I’m just saying that the man, for essentially being a miner, sure doesn’t live like a miner.” Iago paused to take a drink there, letting that idea sink in. Let sink in the idea that Daughtery wasn’t one of them.

“Well, maybe not, but the point is that a lot of people make a good living because of him.” Carter turned to Gabe as he spoke next.

“No offence, but a lot of people make a workable living because he’s found a way to sell a deal that makes him as much money as possible.” Iago was greeted by silence around the table as they thought about a comeback to that one, but after he had just spent the last several hours very subtly cutting down a mining lifestyle and building up a fictitious lifestyle he apparently led, there wasn’t much of a response.

“There are a lot of worse ways to make it through life Iago.”

“Absolutely Razel, but there’s also a lot of better ways. Sometimes you just have to be willing to reach for it.”

“What do you mean?”

“Well, that’s a conversation for another day. I’ve rented a small garage on the edge of town for the month, but not for the doctoring. You gentlemen feel like this drunken conversation has some more serious undertones, you come and find me there tomorrow just past noon.” Carter dropped down a disposable data pad with the information about where to find him, smiled while tipping his hat, and strode out the door...albeit with a slight stumble.

There was silence in the garage, and this was the point that Iago was most unsure about for this plan. He had just finished telling them the big reveal, and was just waiting for the response. Behind him hung six brand new, top of the line, energized nano smart armour sets, tailor sized for each of the six men in front of him. Beside them was an open gun cabinet with a long barrel assault weapon and a side arm, complete with half dozen ammo blocks for each weapon set. The six friends periodically starred at those items to make sure that what they had just been told seemed to be the truth. They repeated to themselves what Iago had just finished telling them.

“Daughtery is going to be a mere thousand kilometers away visiting a mining city for a series of union negotiations that are in danger of going sour. He’s keeping the trip secret so that no one outside the company gets wind of how close to striking these miners are, so his security is going to be minimal. But we’re going to know where he is, and if we can get to him, we can get from him bank account numbers.” At this point Mike, usually very quiet, had spoken up, asking about what if Daughtery didn’t give up any of that information, how they were supposed to make him talk.

“Daughtery’s daughter’s name is Allison. A number of years ago she was abducted and assaulted, and she hasn’t been quite all right since. As such, she always goes with him, and he’s never more than ten minutes from her side. He might not talk for his own safety, but he’ll talk for her safety.”

Mike then wanted to know how they were going to move that money without anyone finding out it.

“I have some inroads in the Terminx system’s banks. We get it transferred into some of these accounts, and they’ll never trace it, never dare to.” Mike then put forward the question that Iago knew he’d have to handle the most deftly; asking why it was they were supposed to trust this man they just met the night before. He put it all out there...they needed to trust him enough to stand shoulder to shoulder with them as they stormed the inner security circle of probably the most powerful man in the Oberon system, they needed to trust him not to shot them in the back or take off with all their money after it was over, and they had to trust him not to sell them out later down the line.

“On the day, we’re going to be shoulder to shoulder, and if its going to make you feel safer, I’ll be going in first. But this is only going to work if we’re all holding a certain amount of trust for one another, so here you go.” Iago had tossed a loaded weapon to Mike in that moment, “You now have the means to hold me hostage and proof that I was planning to kidnap Daughtery. He will pay you one pretty penny for stopping me before I was able to get close to his daughter. That’s my show

of trust to you, but you have to know, what we stand to earn from this man is several orders of magnitude more than what he'll give as a reward. But I think you should all think long and hard about what we stand to gain here."

And that's where they all sat now, Iago standing before the other six of them, Mike holding the weapon, and all of them very heavily considering the notion of taking for themselves more wealth than the six of them would have made put together in ten life times. Iago waited, doing his best to hide his confidence, because these men, told what he had told them and prepped like he had, would not turn down that much money; not even if they had to kill to get it. Gabe spoke first.

"I don't know about the rest of you, but I'd rather not wait eleven and a half months so I can take half a month for myself. I'm in, but I'll tell you this right now Iago; any sign of deception, I'll choke you to death and watch the life drain from your eyes."

"More than fair, more than fair. But for now, lets focus on preparation, because there's lots to do and there's not much time to do it in."

The Connery shot through the relay tunnel from the Wardren system and into the Oberon system, and Carter felt odd that his hunt had brought them back here, though he was glad to be home, the memories of the place flooding back to him.

The Oberon system was one of the more unique systems in the mapped galaxy. The massive blue star in the center had 17 bodies orbiting it, and four them proved to be habitable by humans. In the early days of human colonization, the system was an obvious choice because of the additional habitable planets, as well as the numerous rich mining opportunity in the system. On top of the 17 planets in the system, many of them had a number of large moons orbiting them, as well as a thick asteroid belt that was sometimes considered dangerously close to some of the habited planets in the system. It was here that Carter grew up, on the small planet of Cadan. It wasn't particularly rich in mineral deposits, but because of its smaller mining operations, it was chosen as the planet the intersystem relay would be orbited around. And with that the planet became a military and trade hub, and the population exploded, causing much of the planet to be covered with dense super cities, with sky scrappers stretching hundreds of stories into the air. Carter grew up in a military household of sorts, in so much that Carter's father didn't officially work for the government and the military, but he had black operations training and was now working for them hunting down enemies to the government. Not quite a secret police; Carter's father had official government backing and conducted himself professionally, but his guidelines were slim at best. He was an independent agent that answered to very few people, and as a single child, Carter watched his father operate with reverence, and as he grew older, seemed only to want to follow in his father's footsteps.

And follow he did. On his mother's condition that his grades always excelled - not an easy feat as Carter's father's connections opened the doors to Carter to study at some of the most prestigious schools, where grades were not handed about very freely - he was allowed to do training with his father. He seemed to know everything there was to know about military operations, SWAT operations, and everything and anything in between. One day he'd be showing Carter full map breakdowns of some of the more important recent military operations, and the next he was instructing him on small arms target practice, and then the next they'd be talking about military theory and psychology. Only once did Carter ask his dad how he knew so much about being a soldier, but he saw a look in his eyes that had scared him, and he had been told that that was something he wasn't going to talk about.

As he matured, Carter was introduced to some of the people that his father worked for, powerful people like the emperor himself, and some of the biggest influencers in the system, including Daughtery. Daughtery and Carter seemed to get along exceedingly well, and before long Carter was doing work like his father, except out of system. He was tracking down the heinous enemies of the system that had made it away from the true grasp of it. One the best missions, Carter felt like he was protecting the system from further attacks and aggression, while sending a message to other enemies that would seek to do harm to the citizens that he felt kinship with. On the worst missions, Carter felt more like a thug for the rich and the powerful of the Oberon system. But over the years, he had gained a reputation through his successes, and that reputation allowed him to hire the best for his crew, and to own and operate his own ship. Now he did everything high profile in his business. Before they were hunting Iago, Carter and his crew had spent a rather relaxing number of months helping enforce a demilitarized zone while also training the forces that would maintain the zone after they were gone. Dossiers for war criminals and the worst drug traffickers passed over Carter's desk, but he always gave priority to the man that had given him his start, Daughtery. Entering the system, Carter made sure Delphine opened a line directly to him.

"Carter, I hope this is important. I've got some very important contract negotiations very soon."

"Daughtery, how good is your security?"

"What? Fine I suppose. A little light at the moment because I'm trying to keep my presence here under wraps. Press get a hold of this and that's a whole other can of fucking worms I don't want to have to deal with. Why?"

"Because we have reason to believe that Iago is in the system, and until we figure out what he wants in this place, I think it would be a good idea to be extra vigilant." Carter could see the pain in Daughtery's face, could practically read his thoughts about the anger that was still there over Allison. Carter didn't blame him.

"How could he get in? Every relay and cop in this system knows that face, knows to look for it and just how much money is available for the person that captures the bastard." Carter was about to talk about the removable and shapeable facial prosthetics that they believed Iago was using, and how that threw off facial recognition software, but in that moment the line went dead. Carter immediately felt a sense of dread, and turned to Delphine quickly.

"What happened?"

"The line, just went dead. Hard shut down it seems to, maybe a malfunction on his end...I can't really be sure. Wait, let me pull up that area in terms of signal and power." Tapped into the government computers like they were anytime Carter worked in the Oberon system, information came to them much easier and faster than in systems with less infrastructure and less access to what did exist. "It's odd sir, it looks like there have been some wide sweeping shut downs of power and communications in that area...but a very local one, so it wouldn't just be a malfunction."

"Are you telling me someone set off an EMP bomb or something?"

"Probably not sir...these systems are often shielded for attacks of that nature. Whoever did this probably had access and fried something on the inside, but there was certainly some tampering going on." Before she could even finish, Carter was picking up the pilot interface and giving orders fast.

"Fast as you can, hone in on the coordinates from the most recently open comm line." Carter turned to Huy, who was good at being where you needed him when you needed him. "Assemble a team; Caroline, Marcus, Tral, and the Nelt. When we get to our destination, we're going to be moving fast and expecting to hit something hard. Make sure everyone has armour piercers for their ammo blocks." Huy simply nodded and moved to fulfill the orders, Carter had to briefly brace himself as he felt the ship make a sudden correction. Usually the internal dampers worked with the gravitational force generators so that the crew didn't really feel the shifts, but this manoeuvre was too sudden that that. He knew, having grown up in the system and knowing the ship and what it was capable of, that they were a good thirty minutes from making it planet side, and probably another seven after that to debark. He just willed the ship forward.

"Delphine, you've been working with our tech boys to glean what we can off those computer files from Iago's lab right? I want you to go through the contacts we were working with and find someone in the Oberon system that might have access to the systems that Daughtery would be using today. I'm going to get combat ready, but I'm hoping you have something for me when I come back." Carter left without another word, wondering what was happening now.

It only took fifteen minutes, and Carter was back on the bridge, weapons strapped to his person and nano armour gripping tightly to his body, though the face mask and helmet portions were retracted for the time being.

"Got something for you sir. Apparently there's a senior tech that works in this area's power and comm hubs, but it wasn't him that Iago was interested in. He had a P.I. do some work on a group of miners, six of them, and one of them is son to this tech. The connection is a touch tenuous, but I think that's what we're looking at in terms of someone with the means and the access to put these systems down like this." Carter nodded, all the more certain that something was happening where Daughtery was, he just couldn't see it. Only ten minutes out now though...roughly. His team was assembled and ready to go, and the bridge no longer needed him.

"Huy, keep an eye on her, and get us nice and close to do a rough drop in. Time is really what's important here." With that Carter left the bridge, and went to joint the rest of the soldiers that finally, just might be able to take Iago off the face of the earth.

Carter slammed into the ground after the eight meter drop, the armour taking as much impact as his roll couldn't minimize. Behind him, the squad was landing likewise, pulling themselves up into ready position as fast as they could. The ships shuttle retreated, like it always did, to a safe distance that was still close. Carter looked around the take in the surroundings.

It was a mining city, there was no doubt about that, with all the ground crawler vehicles around, the bars, and the feel of the place; it just seemed like a city a little rough around the edges. But it wasn't without its charm and its class, and as if to prove that point, Carter and his squad,

while on the outskirts of the city where there was more red desert than there were street, stood in front of one of the more glamorous hotels in the system. There were a lot of mining interests on this planet, and when those with stake in that interest had to travel to the actual job sites, they preferred to have some place that suited their tastes. The building only stood fifty stories high, but the fact that it didn't have a fine layer of red dust on it meant that someone spent a lot of time and money and effort to make sure the place stayed looking spotless. Carter had never been a fan of over spending for the sake of appearances, but he could see how this gleaming metallic tower attracted those with money and influence; after all, this is where Daughtery was staying, and this is where the contract negotiations were going to take place.

Now though, the place was swarming with police, all trying to cordone off the area. Such was the chaos that hardly anyone noticed that an elite commando unit had just dropped three stories from a shuttle in full combat gear. Carter sought out the SWAT command center and moved in that direction. It looked pretty disorganized when he arrived.

"Agent of the consulate," was Carter's opening line, which he found worked incredibly well and incredibly frequently, "what's the situation?" The SWAT officer scanned Carter's ID, and satisfied, directed him to what they knew, displayed on a hastily set up view screen. "Seven perps, all wielding state of the art weapons and armour stormed the place about twenty minutes ago, taking full advantage of a partial power failure and a total comm systems failure in the area. They stormed the front, but instead of trying to disrupt the contract talks, they immediately made their way to the top floor and promptly overwhelmed Daughtery's security detail. They demanding no one come up or else they start shooting into the civilians, so we've got the negotiator talking with them now. I'll be honest, this looks like its going to turn into a gab fest...all that perp on the other end is doing is talking his face off. If the consulate is concerned for the safety of Daughtery, I can assure them that we have it under control."

"Quite all right Sergeant. Keep doing what you're doing here, but me and my squad are going in. Try to keep them from figuring that out too fast." Carter turned to leave, the shouts of the concerned SWAT officer behind him.

"But they said they'd kill the hostages!"

"Then we'll have free reign to kill them. Remember, keep them talking and distracted, and keep your officers back." Carter was then leading his squad right into the lions den. He just hoped that the lion was actually in it this time.

Iago was striding back and forth, attending to several matters at the same time. It felt like his labs all over again, except for the dead body guard at his feet. That really hadn't been part of the plan, but he had gone for his weapon despite the flash bang putting him at a severe disadvantage. So Iago dropped him with three close grouped shots to the neck, and there was no other resistance in the suite that was occupying the entirety of the forty fourth floor. Daughtery was theirs, on his knees in the center of the room with two of the six friends standing watch over each shoulder.

"Look you assholes, I realize that you don't know this, but you can't make me give up any funds. As a deterrent for this kind of bullshit, my banks are not to release funds in the event of my coercion. That means, no money." One of the brothers, Iago thought it might have been Gabe though it was damn near impossible to tell with the energized nano armour covering their faces, looked up at Carter with a slight lean to his head, no doubt wondering if that was true.

"Nice try, but that's usually just for corporate funds, not personal ones. We're not so stupid because we realize that people like you have very public policies of that nature to dissuade would be kidnappers. I'm willing to bet that if we threatened you life...or the life of your daughter...you'd come up with a number pretty quick." Iago could see Daughtery seethe at the mention of his daughter, but he was a man that recognized the way his team moved in, the way they neutralized his body guards, and the way they secured the floor; they were professional, here to take the money and leave, nothing more.

"Then name a number so I can comfort my daughter and call the newly widow you just created." Daughtery was referencing the body that had been pushed aside.

"You really shouldn't try and make us feel bad, especially with lies. We all know that man was divorced; maybe his failed marriage is why he thought he could survive firing on seven coordinated gunmen with a third his hearing and a tenth his eye sight. As for a number, I'd say seven billion ought to be fair. Something for a hard days work and something that will leave you with plenty of money to buy another planet or so. My associate there has a terminal open with all the relevant information for you to punch in." Iago had showed Razel exactly what would need to be done, to help the friends feel more in charge and to give him time to conduct his true business. As he turned and started walking towards Daughtery's daughters room, where they had left the girl after they secured

the floor, he could feel a glare burn into the back of his head.

"And where the fuck are you doing while I'm coughing up seven billion?"

"I'm just going to check on your dear daughter is all." Iago kept walking, but he could hear a sharp inhalation behind him.

"What the fuck did you just say?" Iago ignored him, continued to walk.

"Hey! What the fuck did you say? What did you call my Allison! Show me your fucking face you coward, is that fucking you?" Iago could hear Daughtery stir behind him, start to get up, but Gabe had picked up the finer points of hostage control quickly, kicking out Daughtery's ankles as he stood. It shook some air out of the man, but none of his rage.

"There was someone that used to call Allison that, "dear daughter," and just like that too. He was a callous fuck that kidnapped her one day, held her where I couldn't find her, and fucking cut into he skull, into her FUCKING BRAIN, with his automated spider bots. He fucking made these things tunnel themselves through her fucking head! And when you fled, you left her behind broken, left her a shell of her brilliant self, left her not even able to fucking feed herself! I want to know if you're that fuck that did that to my Allison." Iago turned sadly, then instructed Gabe to make sure he had a handle on the prisoner. He punched the buttons that exposed his face, and Iago was afraid that Daughtery was going to stroke out as he screamed. Screamed for all the pain he had caused him those nights as he wondered what had happened to his daughter, two long months of her missing. Screamed for the rage that he felt for the man that had taken the bright young woman who was working through her PhD and made her into more of a plant than a person. Screamed for the blank look that Iago had now; no remorse, no pain, just blank. After a minute, Daughtery had to catch his breath, and Iago took the opportunity to speak.

"If I'm the monster I truly am, then you better wire over the money quickly. I'll just be catching up with Allison until you do." With that Iago walked into the bedroom, while Daughtery shook with anger and fear, tears streaking his cheeks even though he didn't carry any in his eyes.

"Let's do this fast; I don't want that sicko near my daughter any longer than he has to be." Gabe felt like the situation was much more complex than what he had expected, but he saw that he was going to get paid, so he swallowed his discomfort and helped Daughtery up, led him to the terminal. Halfway through punching in the information, though, the entire plan unravelled in an instant.

"Movement tripped at station 17!" The panic in Joseph's voice, who had been monitoring their motion trackers, was there for an obvious reason; station 17 was just one floor down.

"How'd they'd make it past the other 16?" Iago heard the question, wasn't sure who it was from, but had a pretty good idea who was coming up now, good enough to disarm the motion alarms he had set up.

"I'd say you shouldn't worry about that, since they'll be here in about 12 seconds!" shouted Iago, "Remember the formation for repelling frontal entry!" Like they had rehearsed more than a hundred times, the six of them set up to create a small bottle neck firing lane; two on the left, three on the right, and one dead ahead staring at the entry point. They did their best to prepare for the entry.

They weren't even slightly prepared. Even though the armour, the concussive force was vibrating. Carter had upped the charge at the last moment, enough to shake everyone in the vicinity, probably blow out the eardrums of the hostages, but still short of organ rupturing force. It did the job. In the opening salvo, the Nelt got twelve of his first thirteen shots into the neck of the point set up watching the door head on. The armour was able to deflect the first nine projectiles, but cracked after that. The assailant dropped and quickly bled out on the ground. Carter, Caroline, and Tral moved in left, overwhelming the two targets on that side by alternating which of them moved to keep them shifting targets, concentrating as many rounds as they could on one disoriented target then the next, the two fell quickly in a rain of tungsten coated micro rounds designed to pierce the layers of nano armour. Both targets fell with at least fifteen rounds in each of them. Marcus, on the other hand, had simply peaked in the door on the right, and fired at the waiting assailants feet from there. Iago had had time to prep them on shots to the chest, but not to the lower extremities like that. All three sprawled, one losing their primary weapon, which gave Marcus just enough time to grab Daughtery and usher the hostages into a separate room. With the scene cleared, Carter flung out a phosphorus flash bomb, and when the three remaining friends on the ill fated mission finally started to return fire, their targets were all hidden and the flash of phosphorus momentarily scalded the top layer of their armour. The nature of it would allow a fresh layer to replace it, and it was more than good enough to prevent any burns, but the precious second and a half of time they three stood blinded was all that Carter and his team needed to fire enough times to pierce their armour and drop them. Carter had his team call out clear before he went to where he knew Daughtery was putting up his daughter. Her father always gave her the most lavish room and bed wherever they went, and Carter had a good feeling that this is where they'd find Iago. Finally. He

kicked open the door with an armour assisted kick and brought up his weapon.

"Carter! Good to finally meet you, face to face...sort of." Carter surveyed the scene as fast as he could. Walls and en suite were clear of enemies, furniture was against the walls, even the bed. On the fall wall, there was only glass, offering an amazing view of the red sand desert. Iago stood in the room, and in front of him sat Allison in a plain chair, her normal, comfortable sleep wear torn open at the back in a straight line down from the neck to the mid back. Iago had his pistol in one hand now, but Carter could see a set of tools with fresh spots of blood on them laying at his feet. He tightened his grip, squarely aiming at Iago, right below the right eye.

"Give it up doctor, backs against the wall now. Only way you walk out is in surrender."

"Technically, my back's against a window. And if you would, I'd appreciate you lowering your weapon. You saw the quality of the armour on my boys out there...you're not dropping me with enough shots before Daughtery's dear daughter here would take one. So put it down, and lets be civil."

Carter didn't like the idea, but as long as Allison was between them, Iago would call pull some strings. He lowered his weapon, but kept the safety off.

"What have you done to Allison? Haven't you hurt her enough? Just let her get up, walk over to me, and maybe I won't choke you to death right here and now."

"Would love to, but she's got a little bit of the M in her blood stream. Poor thing gets agitated rather quickly, and for what I needed to do, she needed to be sitting still."

"Why Iago? You've already destroyed her life, and now you're here to what? Torment her family some more?"

"You never really wanted to understand it Carter, but I think you will one day. I'm not here to hurt anyone; I'm here to save them." Carter started to get uncomfortable with the situation. Iago wasn't afraid, wasn't fazed. Was he going to dive out the window? He had to know that police copters would chase him down in moments if he even did have a means of surviving the fall.

"Funny, it looks like the only thing Allison needs saving from is from you."

"Well Carter, if you forgive me for the cliché, I'd say that she needs saving from herself...like everyone really. Take the childhood friends in there. Good kids, really. But all it took was the slightest tweak of their greed, and they became killers, ready to follow me to hell for the money I told them was there."

"Figured you just put a little something into their brains to make them hop the way you wanted them to, killing who they were in the process."

"If you don't believe me, feel free to autopsy the bodies. But those ones were the natural ones. Flawed, weak, bad; half a foot still in the festering jungles on earth. On the other hand, there is her." Iago motioned to Allison, breaking a capsule under her nose in the same motion, and she woke up, if a bit grogily still. Carter swore, holstering his weapon on his back, but still not daring to drop his face shielding on account of Iago's draw speed. But he tried to coax Allison over to him all the same.

"Allison, come on, over here, its me, Uncle Carter." Then he saw something that hadn't existed in her eyes for quite some time; he saw a true flicker of recognition. Iago knew he did, and with a tilt of his head, shot out the window and dove out.

Daughtery barely knew what he was witnessing. Marcus had him held down and mostly out of sight, forced to watch the exchange between Carter and Iago from a distance while not being able to hear a damn thing on account of the charges set on Carter's entry. The whole time he couldn't help but stare as his daughter, noticing the tear in the back of her shirt and the blood stained surgical tools at Iago's feet. He looked at all this and couldn't help imagine the worst.

But soon things started happening again. In one moment, Allison stood, and in the next, Carter was unarmed and trying to get his daughter away from that madman. And in one more moment, Iago was gone out the window. Seeing the threat leave the situation, Marcus let Daughtery up, who immediately went to his daughter, she was huddled against the bed, hunkered there after the noise of the breaking window and the gunshots had her instinctively going for some form of cover. He ran to her side and tried to comfort her, knowing how frightened she became around loud noises.

"Dad, damnit, not so tight. What the fuck was that anyway?" Allison looked up into his eyes with full lucidity and saw tears flowing freely down his face. She couldn't hide her bewilderment, "What the hell dad, are you okay?" But words were too much for him; far too much at this point. So he squeezed her even tighter and sobbed openly in joy, his daughter having come back to him. Allison hugged her dad back hard, confused still, but safe and happy. That's how they were as a brilliant flash of a dozen EMP bombs going off at the same time whited out the entire room a moment later.