



Pounds of Flesh

Boman Modine

Smoke belched from the turret's twin barrels, acrid and cloying with the stink of sulfur. Hard rounds interlaced with refulgent green tracers stitched the ruined towers of a habplex, exploding everything they touched into puffs of disintegrating formacrete. Next, a chain of missiles rained down, their prows unraveling like seed pods and scattering warheads that unleashed sheets of indiscriminate pyrophex, flooding the lower levels in fire that reduced bridges, storefronts, and municipal hubs to white ash.

Drifting lazily above this newborn hellscape, the OTS Vampyre Gunship maneuvered its enormous wingspan, heavy thrusters roaring and shattering windows as it slipped between two burning spires. Its nuusteel hide was carbon black from atmospheric reentry but its flanks still bore the "T" of the Hegemon's Tributary Armada encircled by a constellation of sponsor logos. Gunners, eyes darting between vid feeds, searched for movement below—there were bonuses for confirmed Unionist kills, after all.

"Can't see anything, thermals are shot," one of them grumbled. "Grade three trash."

"Let's get our overtime, boys." The co-pilot flipped a switch, and the gunship's side panels slid open, allowing the two flank gunners to use their own eyes.

In the transport container bolted to the gunship's underbelly, Naab Coelar fought another surge of nausea. He clutched his restraints in the crash seat as the ship lurched sharply to the right. The hatch gunner to his left suddenly opened fire with the belt-fed heavy machine gun.

Outside, a balcony with outdoor furniture exploded under the barrage, pulverizing the structural anchors and sending the side of the building tumbling half a kilometer into the rising conflagration. Coelar glimpsed five or six figures as they fled for cover—only to spasm like marionettes when the rounds stitched them into quivering gobbets.

"Stack it! Stack it! That's right, stack those chips!" The gunner angled his weapon left, and the pilot obliged, giving him a wide field of fire across the entire level. People hiding in the building scattered, scrambling away from the windows. Coelar turned away, breathing in the purified air of his suit and running through details and facts he had carefully memorized during the trip. His breath dulled the nausea from the pilot's antics while disappearing any regard for the massive loss of human life below.

The gunner cackled through a gob of phlegm, turning to give Coelar a thumbs up. "That's how you make a living!"

Coelar loathed this part of the job— placating with the fringes of acceptable human intelligences where madness and chaos served as cover for fragile egos. He'd spent enough time studying the brain, inside and out, and had logged enough simulation hours to apply for a mentanic license. The gunner had more in common with insects than people.

"You're looking a little green, friend. Need a dab?" The gunner tapped his chest pocket, where some kind of low-grade narco clearly resided.

Coelar shook his head. He was getting old, not just in the measure of fiscal cycles, though he'd made enough profit to stave off aging with synolitic treatments for at least one more standard lifetime. He was *tired*: the dust, the smoke, the filth. That small voice that he kept within a cage in his mind whispered to him; maybe it's time to retire.

Suulun, Coelar's assistant for this trip, had had his eyes screwed shut since they'd left the cruiseliner in orbit. He was young, at the dawn of his career, but still soft. Only now he stole a glance at the gunner and yelled over the din, "How can you do that?"

"Do what?" A small-arms round pinged off the hull below. The gunner whipped around, annihilating another floor of the building in a three-second burst of tungsten. Coelar saw the bullets chopping into what looked like a pre-education center. The gunner continued his mantra in between pulses of fire, "Count it! And another! One more, I got you too! Rake it in! Stack those chips!"

Suulun shut his eyes, his lips moving in the hushed supplication of his religio subscription. Coelar didn't comfort him. The boy was from Kypan, a colony in the Jovian system at the heart of ExeCor. He'd need to see far worse than this lunatic if he intended to make journeyman in the Brokerage.

"Don't spend your chits, Suulun. This shift has just begun."

Suulun twisted in his restraints, regarding his patron with one eye and whispering, "I'm sorry, sir."

"Don't apologize, just do better. Reflect on the mission's details and find strength in potential gains. Your religio subscription can't help you as much as my mandate and the Manual can, do you understand?" The reproach helped Coelar focus himself. It was why he'd brought the lad, that, and he couldn't very well go alone and he didn't trust his other more junior Brokers with something of this call's potential. He knew they were hungry but they were also ready to start thinking about forming their own *Corpos* and compete with him. He had to maintain the balance by denying them from time to time.

"I will, sir, *the mind seeks distraction when purpose multiplies.*" Suulun quoted perfectly from the Manual.

"Now, prove your worth," Coelar said, nodding toward the rear hatch, "Where are we?"

Suulun held his breath, inviting stillness to his mind. His patron waited expectantly.

"Ayderan, *Eyeto-emthree* classification, fourth orbit in the Betal star system, States of Hintok, Yuut Supersector. Population estimates three hundred million with an ergoid license of two hundred thousand—"

"While the basic index is impressive to recall, give me something of value, Mister Suulun. Give me actionable details from the file not just reciting data like a logicor."

Suulun swallowed, licked his lips and adjusted himself within his suit. "The Unionist *ojingo* in this supersector reached Ayderan two quats ago, surprising the Directorate and forcing them to divert from reserves. The Tributaries fighting here have been overextended and were supposed to cycle out. Their contracts were extended without negotiating which lead to several units joining the Unionists..." Suulun glanced at the gunner who was shooting again. "They're stressed, sir."

"They're *ripe*, Mister Suulun." The gunship shook as another missile was jettisoned.

"You know!" the gunner yelled over the thrusters. "You should consider me for the job!"

"Why would we consider you?" Coelar shouted back, ignoring the escalating atrocity outside.

"Because I'm so finting good!" The gunship began its final descent, thrusters dialing down. "I've registered one hundred fifty-seven Unionists in this venture alone! All of them certified with the home office!" His tone was defensive, misreading Coelar's blank expression and Suulun's disgust as doubt of his claim.

"How—how do you know the difference?" Suulun yelled.

"Between what?" The gunner released the heavy cannon, which receded into a nook overhead on a pneumatic arm.

Suulun pointed toward the buildings. "The lower levels are where the fighting has been and not even in this part of the city! Those were probably innocent Consumers, hiding?"

The gunner pulled off his gloves. "These slurbs don't have coverage from Mazon Incorp anymore. That means anyone in them is a vagrant or actively exploiting the landlord. Plus, they opened fire on us first." He grinned, crooked teeth stained yellow from a narco inhaler, "Dangerous work we do for the Hegemon!"

Suulun opened his mouth to protest, but Coelar elbowed him in the ribs. The gunner flipped up his helmet visor. He was young, early twenties. Something wild flickered in his eyes, dangerous and almost unhinged. Coelar recognized it, he'd seen it often among the Tribs. A few more weeks and this man would either die in a random cantina brawl or spend the rest of his contract in an equilex colony like Sypend or Vhost, breaking rocks and drooling as a result of a control harness to keep him docile.

"I'm serious! Look me up!" The gunship's pads touched down and the thrusters finally died completely and the gunship *thumped* to a halt. "I'm the best in the 10th! Thrast those ground pounders! Trust in an Armada man!"

Coelar didn't dignify the man with a response, unstrapping and standing. He helped Suulun up and they headed for the back hatch as it lowered revealing the landing pad. Sandbags and ballistic shields made from plastalloy formed a meter high crown around the building's roof. A few idle Tributaries barely noticed them as they kept sentry, their attention outward at the rapidly deteriorating city below.

"Want me to call ahead for you's?" yelled the gunner, but Coelar ignored him.

The noise and smoke was intensifying just south of their location. Heavy bombardments rippling through the lower octaves. The damage to the city had been incredible, unprecedented, several rotors with media outlet logos hovered over the warzone making visutel media that fed the Thousand Empires. People needed to be angry about this and they'd determine who exactly it was to blame.

"Shit..." Coelar sighed at the tortured horizon. "Wish I could have invested in the reconstruction. Whoever did is going to make a bleeding fortune when this is over."

Suulun's mouth simply hung open, condensation on his facemask. "Profits be, sir, I didn't expect it to be this, um, this was a developed planet in the midworlds, not the Fringe."

"This?" Coelar waved his hand as a building dislodged from its foundations and began to collapse a kilometer away. "Different from info feeds and modules you've purchased, eh? *War?* The ExeCor has mostly forgotten that this is always the risk from straying from the path of stellarization."

"I knew what to expect, I just- the stink and, I'm sorry-" Suulun closed his mouth, shook his head, and hefted their luggage, "That Tributary gunner, would you

actually consider him?”

Coelar glanced at the gunship and chuckled. “No, of course not. Not ever. He’s a narcissist at best, and at worst just a child trying to show us how bloodthirsty he is.”

“At best?” Suulun pressed as they cleared the pad and descended a formcrete stairway. “Aren’t we looking for people willing to inflict indiscriminate harm without remorse? Your own teachings say psychopathy is a vital—”

“He’s comprehensive,” Coelar snapped his gloved fingers. “No one, and I mean no one, should ever want to become a Gek. We’re not looking for someone who wants our adoration or our ‘fear.’ A Broker working for volume might engage him, but they shouldn’t expect much Profit—especially when attempting dealings with the Barakan Elite.”

They entered a dim corridor where flickering light panels revealed clusters of Tributaries tending gear or sucking from self-heating chow tubes. These soldiers glanced up warily at Coelar and Suulun but quickly grimaced or turned away. Suulun carefully threaded through them, lowering his voice. “Do they know who we are?”

“News travels fast. I’m sure the pilot leaked it. The rank and file will always hate you.” Coelar stepped over a sleeping soldier; another spat in front of him. Sidestepping, he continued speaking to Suulun.

“We want someone detached from moral or social constraints by design, not natural psychology. Someone who can tie their actions to an objective rather than personal gratification. But we don’t want anyone from a culture that prizes so called ‘warrior’ traits. That was tried once and to truly disastrous results.”

“Right, the um, ‘Prideful Folly’ of 2/37, I didn’t have clearance—”

“Second century Brokers thought refining the human mind was as simple as traumatizing a handful of juves from any Zero Return backwater tribe to create the ‘perfect’ gek. As the Manual states—” Coelar paused, expectantly.

Suulun recited, “*You can confound the mind and manipulate the Self, but ultimately, you must allow the true human to make their choice.*’ The more they understand it, the more they buy, and the more likely the *conversion.*”

“Exactly.” They stopped at a junction where several hallways met, forming a lounge area now repurposed for storage. A sign on the wall read Biothe City Precinct, identifying it as a local law enforcement sub-orga before the Unionists likely hung every officer.

“A good candidate adheres to directives with focus,” Coelar continued. “They do their job as an integral part of their being, but it’s also a job they *want* to do. I’ve seen some of the best gek actually finish their stints and go home.”

“Isn’t there the risk of rehabilitation?” Suulun asked. “Positive regression?”

“Always. Creature comforts and family, especially their kids, can undo cycles of work. But a good Broker will track them, follow them home, and provide ample chances for the gek to slip so that they end up signing again with the Tribs.”

Suulun thought he’d get smart, “*The Aigun Method*, with narcotics and illicit pharma? Make them dependent then deprive them with a promise of return.”

“You must stop thinking a gek is just some addict,” Coelar said, nodding toward the officers and soldiers working around the chamber. “It’s easy enough to show Cons a visutel loaded with pornography then pacify them with additive-laced food or drink or hook them on xa-kusa. But that yields mundane results and low grade gek. I’m talking about the deeper reason a Consumer returns to the danger of violence even after they’ve made their profit.”

Suulun mulled this over, reflecting briefly on his own experiences, then ventured, “Having an occupation provides purpose to one’s time. The Tributaries offer a high-risk, high-reward environment within a militant environment. Cons grow addicted to the trauma and eventually find civilized society dissatisfying even with the fruits of their employment.”

Coelar nodded, as though he'd anticipated Suulun's response. "Soldiers come to love the pain and discomfort. Offer them too much luxury when they go back to their lives outside of the Directorate and they'll seek out the stick just to feel useful again. By then they'll be putty in your hands. Only when a gek believes they can be nothing other than be the tool that's needed do we trigger a psychological event."

Suulun dipped his head slowly. "They lose their Self and *choose* to replace it with function."

"A narcissist seeks the limelight, rationalizes whatever cruelty they inflict but may hesitate if they don't get the attention they necessitate. What we're doing is encouraging a healthy psyche that retains an empathic origin but who won't agonize over morals or external validation, they simply do the job because it's the job. The structure of military lifestyle is what sustains them. The duties therein are just function, like you or I process deskwork."

Coelar's tone shifted to something almost nostalgic as he scanned the signs for direction. "The best instruments don't question their purpose; they just perform. The Self torments us with questions, it riddles us with doubt. Imagine if you could just give that up, aye? Secretly, everyone wants that, Suulun, you'll see."

Suulun doubted this inherently. It went against the fundamentals of the Manual, no one should ever want to give up who they were. If they did they were broken in some way. But then Coelar was the best. His father, the patriarch of clan Oem-Mish of Lhunarka, had paid for the apprenticeship. No one for a fiscal century had made so many candidate gekes that had become full *Kotar* then Coelar Brokerage. No one had made more profit in what was considered one of, if not the most, dangerous trade in Known Space; dealing with Barakan. His father insisted Coelar was heading toward TrustBrand status and he wanted his son to be a part of it.

Coelar snapped his fingers at a man seated behind a makeshift reception desk of ammunition crates. The Trib had the rank of a Specialist, a cushy desk job. He pulled the receiver away from his mouth, "*Thrust*, you've got some balls."

He said, glaring up at Coelar who didn't bother making eye contact.

"I'm looking for Senior Managing Officer Jhelor." Coelar said, pointing to the deeper office spaces behind the receptionist. "Get him now."

The man's eyes widened when he saw the patch on Coelar's arm and saw the Corpo mark. Suulun liked that, liked that a man with a gun was scared of his patron. This was the proper way of things. For those who *created* to be dominant over those whose job it was to destroy. Too much of Old Humanity's history was dictated that the strong rule while the fruitful serve.

"Yes, Broker Coelar, of course, my apologies." He hung up his receiver. The man touched a small wearable implant on his ear and sub-vocalized a curt message as his eyes took both Broker and journeyman in. Suulun imagined his confusion. Two men, encased in dirty coveralls with fogging plexa domes wearing lightweight auto-harnesses due to the planet's slightly higher than gravity norm. Yet, they both represented a strange, almost illicit, function within the Hegemon.

Brokers took Geks, those few deemed by curious prerequisites, to become candidates for the Barakan Divisions, represented barely a percent of a percent of the available population. The creation of a Gek broke several cardinal mandates of the Lex handed down by the Summit Council which represented The Market which the Thousand Empires relied upon for both peace and guidance.

Peace and guidance that could only be protected by the ultimate weapon that were the Barakan. In order to create their armies they needed Geks, although what they did with them to provolve or augment men and femmes into a full Barakan not even a Grade-S Broker like Coelar would know. Trade secrets.

Onboard the quickship, Suulun had spent every horrible moment in the Outside pouring over Coelar's writings and his unique approach to grooming a Gek to contract. Coelar himself had briefly engaged with him, foregoing his brosnach-sectional chamber to discuss his theories directly with his journeyman, often contradicting writings he'd

penned in the previous decades. It was all insightful, all precious, and Suulun didn't want to let this chance go to shit. Coelar could have picked any of his hundred journeymen, but he'd picked Suulun.

Why, Suulun couldn't say. Even his family's sizable wealth wouldn't impress Coelar that much and he was dubious to consider his own ability so incredible. There was an angle that he would figure out in order to maximize a mutual beneficial outcome.

Collar's voice sliced through his reverie, "The moment ego becomes a factor, you lose reliability. Our candidates must be free of those vulnerabilities, incapable to guilt or doubt, but also free from the vanity that undermines discipline. If our contact has done his job, you will see what I mean today."

A door opened down the hallway behind the reception area, a tall, well built man still covered in dust from the frontline, found Coelar's eyes with his own and walked toward him with haste. Suulun noticed he walked with a slight limp, a cheap prosthetic from the knee down was the culprit.

He needs this deal. Suulun noted for later reference should negotiations call for it.

"Broker Naab Coelar, it's good to meet you in the skin. I trust your journey was safe? You arrived far sooner than I had expected, we're still planning the final assault. My apologies for not meeting you as you arrived." Jhelor appeared to be in his forties but there were signs of cosmetic therapies underneath the soldiery grime.

He thinks he's running out of time . Suulun surmised.

"My firm has an agreement with Divine Nizani, when we received your claim on the beam I spared no expense. She remains in orbit. This is my assistant, Suulun Oem-Mish."

The officer tilted his head and nodded with the limited respect required for someone of Suulun's position. Coelar adjusted his grip on the Tributary who winced slightly but the message was clear. The officer turned to Suulun with a thin smile.

"Assistant Suulun Oem-Mish, it is a pleasure to make your acquaintance. I am Senior Managing Officer Hans Jhelor of the 7-Delta-7 Army Regiment. Forgive my curtness, it's been a very long shift to say the least. Unionist bastards are toughing it out but we've corralled them and now it's just a matter of a days til' we wrap this up."

Suulun added a half-bow in acknowledgement of Jhelor's position but restraining himself as to remind the officer that his own position as an journeyman Broker was equally impressive, "Thank you, and I thank the 7-Delta-7 Army Regiment for its service to the Hegemon."

Only then did Coelar break his grip. Jhelor rubbed his brutalized hand and beckoned them follow, "Please, follow me."

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The command center for the Directorate's leadership and affiliated franchises, had taken up three floors in the precinct and hadn't been precious with the original architecture. The dividing floors had been smashed open for new data conduits that fed power to logicors the size of tanks. Offices and cubicles had been flattened, replaced by planning tables, screen arrays and even a towering ansible relay that hung suspended by throngs of cables between all three floors standing like a black obelisk that barbarian tribes might worship with sacrifices.

It was a testament to the finance Armasyn had made to this branch of the Hegemon's military as it suppressed the growing Unionist issue in the supersector. The "*Doctrinal Cognitovirus*" was to blame stemming from the Hexetica system, corrupting the minds of lower credit Consumers resulting in a rash of labor strikes that too often turned into full born revolutions against local governments and a refutation of stellarization, the Hegemon's prime ethos. All of this was irrelevant to Coelar and his business save for how widespread the conflict was becoming and the opportunities therein.

Suulun stood next to Coelar, tapping notes into a compact logicor. Jhelor worked the controls of a strategic board linked to the ansible which fed it every granule of data in the solar system. It's surface pulsed and flexed, made from hundreds of millions of data-reactive needles, each one the width of a human hair. They shifted, rising and falling, as units in the field changed position in real time.

"We're advancing here... here, and here, encircling the city center." Jhelor indicated with a data wand which stoked the Tributary Army and Air Core units that glowed like embers in a fire. He sipped from a cup of fresh khavic that Suulun wish he could drink from, exhausted as he was from transit.

"Unionists have snapjacked all the main avenues, going down them will be a meatgrinder—" he flicked his wrist and the image shifted to near orbit, "That's why we're calling in an AMU assault, drop three squads directly on top of them and kill their nerve center and deactivate the traps. It'll be flashy, good for the visutel networks, maybe we make back some of the good press. At least, that's the plan right now." He chuckled.

"How does this pertain to this '*once in a lifetime*' candidate?" Coelar drank from a straw extended from his suit's collar. Even within the command center, Suulun and his patron would be at risk for local pathogens and bacteria as neither of them had had time to take neutralizers to adapt to this ecosystem, so they kept their suits on looking like Exogens next to the Tributaries.

Jhelor grinned, "I've been grooming gekks for twenty fiscal cycles, Mister Coelar. I've shuttled all kinds of candidates to Myller Group, Beqsh Affiliated and so on. My reputation is good and you know it."

Coelar sucked his teeth, "You're reputation is the only reason why we're here, inhaling cancer."

Jhelor chuckled, making a show by breathing in the acrid stink that the continent was steeped in. "When I saw this one I knew it was time to reach out to you. You're the best, Mister Coelar, anyone in the gekk business knows that."

"So, where is it then?"

Jhelor twisted the wand and the needles rapidly rearranged into the life size statue of a femme, presenting in her mid-forties. Her eyes were hard, face set in a permanent grimace with a flattened nose that had been broken several times. Scars and bare gray plastek bionetics bordering with her skin that had been pattern tanned by direct proximity to hardlight weapons fire.

Her visible body had more in common with a sledgehammer, hard, without an ounce of fat and covered in dattoos and scars. Suulun saw that beneath the sleeveless undershirt she was depicted in that she had had one breast removed. Such maiming was common in the Tributaries but to not have replaced it made Suulun instantly intrigued. *She doesn't care?* If that were the case then maybe she wouldn't fit Coelar's requirements.

Her career flowered in sweeping text around the statue which Suulun absorbed but also logged with a simple organoid in his right eye that would allow him to recall later with almost perfect memory. Some were born with eidetic memory, most people bought one.

Regardless, Suulun didn't get much past her name; Boäd Lei-Corr. There was a natural kinship amongst anyone that was from the ExeCor, especially those from the Protean star system *and* was a member of the Clans. He started scanning through her early years born on an apsidina orbital continent over the gas giant Shijjaan.

Whatever Coelar had done to his own brain allowed him to glance at four stints of commendations, joint venture operations, Exogen hunts and Corpo close security work in moments.

"It certainly looks the part. Sell me." Coelar sniffed, eyes sharp with hyperfocus.

"My process began with Lei-Corr two fiscal cycles ago during the Imyra Acquisition." The wand twisted again showcasing a multi-limbed cephalopod looking Exogen. "Local near-humans working with Exogen pirates and a narco cartel."

"I recall the vids and the news campaign, all very '*this is why we fight*'" Coelar said, continuing to skim the file. "Is there a revalency?"

"They were refining toxins, both weaponizing them and for cheap narcotics. Addicted half the population of a Hegemon affiliate while making the local criminal element extremely lethal. It was bad. And difficult to coordinate an assault since Corpos don't like policing ventures. We had to rely on local investment." A tick went off in Jhelor's cheek reflecting his own trauma. "Turns out the locals were setting us up. Lei-Corr was wounded in an ambush during our initial landing. She—"

"*It.*" Coelar said with a harshness that made Jhelor actually cough.

Jhelor cleared his throat, "Right, of course, *it*. Half a fiscal cycle of traction and a series of complicated surgeries allowed me to become integral to its routine. Normally a Tributary would have been taken off the line but due to our isolation and the length of the venture, the entire regiment was off the books for a long time. Probably too long."

Coelar grimaced, glancing around the atrium with a dozen other Tributaries going about their duties, "You're very cavalier about all this. I'm not used to conducting business like this. Normally, at the best of times, there's a back alley or a dead-end transmission with some coordinates and a sack over a Gek's head."

Jhelor smiled and finished his drink. "But you're not like that, Broker Coelar. You're white glove, straight lines. You have your own reputation and you have the chits for something like this. You received my data packet—"

"You kept things fairly cryptic, almost insultingly so."

"Yet it was enough for you to bring another ExeCorian with you." He pointed to Suulun who looked at his patron, confused. "I want this deal to go through, Broker Coelar. I want it to go through and I want to retire off this. You might think me just a ground pounder, but what we're sitting on hasn't ever happened before, at least not from where I'm standing. I know the value of this Gek and it's a *sure thing*. I don't need to negotiate..." He twisted the wand a final time and the data shifted.

Suulun squinted, realizing it in a few, incredible, seconds what they were dealing with.

"She's your superior?" Suulun said, awe filling his voice.



The two closest stars had begun to set casting strange shadows across the twisted, smoking, skyline. A final sortie of gunships strafed the city center but were chased off by the Unionist anti-air assets which were a combination of mass rocket fire and heavy guns. One gunship was slow to divert and was sliced in half by a *matres* beam, exploding a moment later in a brilliant fireball.

The elevator from the precinct plummeted downward, offering a view through melted and cracked plastalloy windows of the massing 7-Delta-7 Regiment. They'd be using heavy tanks, up-armored transports backed by the more agile bipedal walkers.

"It's going to be a massacre." Suulun muttered.

"And what of it?" Coelar scowled, "A single Gek that becomes a Barakan is worth more than every contract in this regiment and then some. For what we're dealing with, we're going to have to invent a new price range for Lei-Corr."

"But... sir, I don't mean to be narrow on this, but we're party to a major crime—"

Coelar's spun on his heel faster than Suulun could have thought possible and grabbed him by his collar, slamming him against the wall.

"And you'll not speak of it afterward. *The ends justify the means*, Suulun, it's on the first page of the Manual." Suulun had never fallen beneath the full attention of his patron. He felt himself shrink before Coelar despite being a head taller. "Be a professional, this is going to take both of us to pull off but I'll tear you apart and leave your family insolvent if you're to blame for our failure." He pushed off Suulun and went back to his logicor.

Suulun, mouth dry and the bladder strapped to his leg for piss now full, turned his attention to his own logicor.

Jhelor had not just been thorough in the grooming of Lei-Corr, he'd convinced the entire upper echelons of the 7-Delta-7's to work with him. Her recovery from being poisoned by Exogenic toxins along with the survivor's guilt had lead to her identification as a possible Gek. It had been, truly, a stroke of genius on behalf of Jhelor to take a chance and begin to process.

Reading the report as fast as he could, he could see that Jhelor had taken over frontline duties for the regiment but had visited Jhelor after every shift, reading after action reports to her and making a show of relying on her decisions for tactical operations. Slowly, he'd alter her orders, deliberately leading to high casualties amongst the Tributaries. Lei-Corr, in response, began a psychological spiral, believing that she was responsible for the missteps.

Jhelor advocated, and even helped pay, for her recovery. Elevating select Junior Officers to replace those lost in the initial attack he was able to create an environment to consistently monitor Lei-Corr and orchestrate scenarios to further pressure her for quats. As the venture ran its course, Lei-Corr became increasingly hostile to the locals that had sided with the Exogen and mistrustful of the upper Directorate command.

At the conclusion of the operation with the arrival of the Armada, Jhelor allowed her to discover a staged massacre of a squad on the outskirts of an indigie village that had harbored cartle mercenaries. In a rage she ordered the village to be torched along with everyone in it. Jhelor helped cover it up and actively prevented the Commission from uncovering the crime not that anyone really looked.

The next quats were difficult by all accounts. Lei-Corr was high functioning, influential and from an influential family. She was loved by her Tributaries, admired by her superiors and had been sponsored by Armasyn directly for this venture on Ayderan.

Yet, time and again, Jhelor had done the impossible. Orchestrating higher and higher stress levels working through the necessary and convoluted process of prepping

his own commanding officer for a Broker's final push.

That was the problem, at least from Suulun's perspective. Jhelor was, indeed, planning to retire along with his friends. To do so, to provide a big enough of a psychological event, Jhelor's plan was to order the premature launch of the operation and deliberately delay the launch of the AMU attack who's goal it would be to nullify the snapjacked avenues.

7-Delta-7 would be torn to pieces by tripwires, mines, sniper fire and boobytraps. It would look like a colossal failure on behalf of Lei-Corr. The Tributaries that survived that had believed in her so much would turn on her and just at that moment, Coelar and Suulun would make their move.

That's, at least, was Jhelor's plan. Suulun could barely believe that members of the Tributary would betray their own like this— *thrask*, had been betraying the rest of their regiment for fiscal cycles. All for this.

The scale was astounding. If any individual of the network that Jhelor had made had doubted this treason and reported the material loss they were inflicting on the Directorate they would have all been rounded up and instantly commuted to Indentured status, their collective families assigned the debt.

"I can't do it." Coelar said conclusively, like he had been having a conversation with himself. as the elevator slowed and the doors opened. "You'll have to take lead."

"Your pardon, sir?" Suulun said, scrambling after Coelar as he marched out. "That's *insane!* I'm

"Switch your patches to these," Coelar handed back three different Armasyn patches interwoven with ident verifiers the Jhelor had given them. "We're observers for Armasyn, don't expect it to not identify us but it might help." Suulun's tripped over his own boots and almost went sprawling but Coelar caught him, dragging him close.

"I am in charge of everything you do for another fiscal cycle of your life. You do not interrupt me, you stand there and attempt to learn something in what is the highest form of transaction the universe has ever conceived; *the purchase of an idea!*" Now he pushed Suulun, not hard but it shocked the younger man so that he jumped in surprise. "An idea wrapped in the body of evolution's finest creation." Coelar continued, his voice becoming a hiss, "This flesh your *Self* is wearing is as relevant to your existence as the clothes on your backside! We are incredible things, wondrous constructs that have broken the yoke of evolution and harnessed the *stars* to our will!"

Suulun's mouth opened but he retained enough self control to say nothing. His patron was excited, a smile stretching across a face that rarely wore such frivolity. They crossed a cordoned off area where wounded low credit Tributaries were being operated on by Wellness specialists without the use of higher grade sedatives or painkillers. Coelar waited until they passed the screams before continuing.

"This is not ideal. I had thought your shared background would be a minor benefit and now it will be our keystone. Not planned for, and certainly not what I would prefer, and yet this is what we have been given and by The Market we will get this done."

A trio of TX-80 mobile bunkers parked in a line made up the forward operating base that swarmed with Tributaries rushing to get their jobs done before the assault only a few more hours away once night fell.

An ergoid, built with its cranial unit sunken into its chest and three arms sauntered toward them. Its carapace was covered in graffiti, stickers and food stains from around a trash can that had been welded to its back. Suulun fought the urge to gag.

"Greetings, this is a security checkpoint!" It said in a dual toned, genderless, static ridden voice.

It scanned the patches on their arms and then wandered away, "Thank you Armasyn associates!"

"Jhelor's a crafty one." Coelar said with a frugal serving of respect. "No mercenaries, no auxiliaries, not even indentured doing scan duty but an ergoid? He's trying to keep morale as low as possible. Can you imagine the complaints and micro-tension setting those loyal to Lei-Corr off? Jhelor's lived up to his reputation, I'll give him that." Suulun's patron pointed at the hatch. "This is it."

Suulun was sweating. He didn't even notice the squadron of single-pilot rotar gunnery platforms until their downwash kicked up dust around them. His helmet was so fogged he was having trouble seeing. He bit his lip, "Broker Coelar, I don't even know how to make the push happen."

"That's because I haven't taught you how. You're still limited to my education modules and the higher grade ones but, I'll tell you, one's education never finishes. I'm still being revealed older texts, some even handwritten by the First. It never ends, that's the trick of it, but it has to start somewhere."

Suulun activated his collar straw and sucked moisture down, ignoring the chemically sterile bitterness. He wished it were stronger, and he didn't drink ethyl as a agreement with his religio subscription to Katik. He touched the datoo over his heart and under his suit and used one of his three daily prayers, despite Coelar's earlier reprimand;

*"Giver, offer me surety.
Let the ebb and flow of profit not inspire my fear,
Quiet the roar of speculation.
Amidst volatility, anchor my thoughts in purpose,
For in calm awareness lies prosperity,
And through balance, my Self remains at ease."*

He felt better, his mind strengthened by memetically indoctrinated chemical reactions in his brain that his faith subscription bought him. He felt a hand on his shoulder and saw his patron smiling at him, strangely and suddenly softer, almost parental. The change made Suulun's head spin as he said, "I'm not Kantik, but I believe the word is *amen*." He winked, "We can only do our best, son, but we have to try."

"You have advantages. You're from the ExeCor, you share a cultural communality, you are untested and Lei-Corr has thrived molding human beings into tools. In many ways, *it* is comparable to us. When she was fully human she would have many of the same psychological conditioning and management skills that a Broker has. Now that it is a Gek, we have a chance to take those skills and allow it to be evolved into something that the Barakan will be able to make into one of their own leaders..."

"An Overseer, sir?"

"Maybe, or something even greater. And they'll pay. Let's get it done."

He nudged Suulun a little and Suulun turned and went up the stairs into the central TX-80.

"We'll use *Stature Four/One*, you'll come at it from a hapless position, you're the boss's kid and I'm the butler. Good?"

This he understood, "Absolutely. I'm ready."

The sound proofing within such a vehicle was excellent, the outside cacophony completely suppressed by the hull. A walkway lead to a raised planning table, this one made from cheap *plasta* with wedges that could be moved around manually. Specialists with enlarged head gear manned console stations, many of them with organoid augmented hands that split into twice as many fingers that chattered against keyboards. They didn't look up from their work as Suulun and Coelar passed.

At the center of it all was the femme they'd seen. She... *it*...was tall, commanding, and Suulun instantly felt the aura of charisma that manifested in one in a million. Suulun realized why Jhelor had risked so much and why his patron was almost manic with the possibility of what this Gek could become. It could be worth

Lei-Corr's record was what the visutel dramas wanted people to think every Tributary commander was. From a higher credit family in the ExeCor, Lei-Corr had felt the call to service, to protect the Hegemon from all and any enemies to commerce and the common pursuit of profit. It had worked its way up through the ranks by merit and deeds.

It had clearly made her... *it*... a lot of enemies. Jhelor and his compatriots had to hate Lei-Corr on a personal level to have done this. Lying every shift for fiscal cycles, pretending to be allies, orchestrating intensifying failures and sacrificing hundreds of fellow Tributaries. It was personal as much as it was the most profitable Gek trade in a lifetime.

It looked up at them with an eye as prudent as Coelar's, "Armasyn suddenly wants an inspection just before the end, do they?" Its voice was calm, bedrock confident. Suulun glanced at his patron who bowed, deeply, toward Lei-Corr. Suulun realized his mistake and did the same, falling into the canto of his adaptive training and Coelar's selected scenario.

"You have my apologies, General Manager. I'm hoping to assess from a frontline position rather than the observatory in orbit."

"Wanted to get your hands dirty? Well, then, by all means, join me. Not much left to do but hit the go." He smiled and joined the Gek on the slightly raised grating of her dais while Coelar stayed by the entrance. "I'd offer you something to drink, but, it won't do you good wrapped in that prophylactic."

He chuckled, breathing earnestly into his response, "People Operations didn't want to spend the chits to have me inoculated for the visit. I'm Processor Suulun Oem-Mish."

A twitch of recognition, "Oem-Mish? You're a long way from Lhunarka. I believe, yes, Oem-Mish are agriculture and husbandry? I think my father owned a kilt made by your clan."

"Yes, if you're a traditionalist, but the loom wasn't for me. That and I wanted to see the sky which you can't underneath the Dome. I've been with Armasyn for fifteen quats, so, the office is effectively my home." He pointed up. Most miliCorps like Armasyn, which supplied one in five Directorate ventures, had permanent lodgings aboard Armada ships so as to better follow Directorate movements from venture to venture.

"You're too young to talk like that." She extended a hand. He noticed her trigger finger had been replaced by an organoid but he didn't linger and shook it. "I haven't seen home since I joined up. It's always good to see someone that grew up near your own orbit... Does he want to join us?"

Suulun didn't bother looking at Coelar, implicating a lower status even as he felt sweat trickle from his temple.

"He's just 'oversight.' My father's brother, another wayward clansman like ourselves, has a position in upper management on Kantaur. He thinks highly of me but keeps me on a leash, doesn't he Yabbor?" Coelar bowed again. "Little more than an ergoid that one." He clapped his hands, "Now! I understand that you're about to use an extensive amount of our products? What have you in store for these terrorists?"

Lei-Corr nodded but her expression fell to a neutral state as they looked back down at the table. "We've had trouble with these ones. More organized, motivated, the mentanics claim they're all being influenced by a 'mindvirus' but to me it looks like just survival."

Suulun cleared his throat, making a puff of fog appear on his dome. Lei-Corr had just said something that could be construed as seditious, "What do you mean, General Manager?"

"I mean..." she looked around the room at the other Tributaries who were too distracted with their duties, "I mean there'll be no holding back if we want to take this peninsula and reinstate the legal government that put its own people into death camps." There was a distance in their eyes, perhaps numbness. To the casual they'd write it off as depression but Suulun had trained to recognize extremes in emotion, especially when it was being buried. Back at the brokerage's main office on *Prime Orbita*, Suulun had spent most of his time reading and watching previous cases or practicing mental games with his fellow associates. He needed to pry open this composure and incur a response.

"Good, I say and then on to the next one. It's not our job to run the worlds, right?"

Suulun changed the subject, trying to find the handle to start pulling, "As I understand it from your colleague, I believe his name was Jhelor?" Something in those eyes moved, the thing that lived behind them was... *angry*? He continued pushing, "A good officer, showed me quite the setup after I landed. Truth be told, I had thought you would be there with him?"

"Well... the Senior Manager is busy, to be sure. He's taken more of a logistical role since my return to the frontline in this venture."

"Isn't that unusual? For the General Manager to be here in this," he sniffed disdainfully, "Bunker. You're at risk out here, and by proxy, our investment." He mused now, "You should be up in logistics, the unsung hero of the visutel dramas, am I right? Without logistics we wouldn't have a Hegemon, we'd be back in the madness of the Regenum. The glory goes to the ground pounders but without logistics we couldn't coordinate a war!"

"Someone would still be needed to fight that war, no?" Lei-Corr's eyes locked with his and, suddenly, he felt very naked. There was something happening he and Coelar might not have seen.

"I may be young," Suulun said with a rising tone of criticism, "but what I've seen of the frontline, you could probably do most of this from orbit and then just send *ergoids* in to take out the trash. It would certainly be cheaper! And let's not forget safer, for you and all your friends to then do whatever it is that needs to be done."

Lei-Corr smiled and surveyed the table, "It is that 'whatever' where a professional like 7-Delta-7 thrives. Yes, you could saturate bomb the Unionists from orbit, or, drop the *Barakan* onto them wherever they lift their heads. I just doubt anyone would be want to be a part of the Hegemon in the end. Hearts and *minds* and all that, Processor Oem-Mish?" Her- *ITS*, tone was cutting through his thoughts, making it hard to do anything but listen and respond like they was actually having a conversation. "I didn't realize I'd be philosophising with an arms salesman though, not when I'm about to flatten a city."

Suulun suddenly felt like the positions had been switched. He was now on the defensive.

Her line of questioning, simple enough, was hitting points in his psyche and causing him to trip up. He couldn't stop thinking about his next step instead of just taking it. Had she figured them out? He needed to regain the initiative.

"AMU's are expensive, General Manager, that's why I'm here. From our perspective we just want their use to be worthwhile and not because you're afraid to send soldiers to do their jobs!"

"Worthwhile?" Lei-Corr's tone made the word sound like a pistol's safety getting switched off.

"Exactly! Worthwhile! You've got heavy vehicles, artillery, specialist vehicles, a few thousand ground pounders should be enough to clear our a few—"

"Ground pounders... why not just call them chaff?"

Suulun shrugged, "I don't mean to be rude—"

"Then you're not doing a very good job. We're two hours before operation start and now Armasyn has an opinion on my stratagem? This is a first, Oem-Mish. Typically, our sponsors give us a wide berth to do our jobs. Only an amateur would try and change the plan this late. Those AMU's were already assigned from the 10th Armada—"

"Well, that was before I had a look at your latest numbers." It was Suulun's turn to add some steel to his voice. He had seen the numbers, manipulated as they were by Jehlor. "This entire venture has had misstep after catastrophe and it's costing my MacroCorp mithqals in overspending, Boäd." He used her first name, dropping all measure of respect.

It did not have the response he'd been trained for.

The General Manager sighed and kicked a crate underneath themselves to sit.

"Too much, young man, too much." Lei-Corr nodded to Coelar, "Let's dialogue, Broker."

Coelar approached the table and grabbed a box so that he could sit across from the Gek. He passed Suulun, "It's alright, that was exemplary." He turned to Lei-Corr, "What was it that gave him away?"

"Started strong but ultimately used too many destabilizing tactics before creating a proper narrative. Armasyn employees refer to themselves as Armasyn during reviews, you couldn't have known that. That and don't care about casualties. Corpos never do." She chuckled, a hollow and hopeless sound, "But trying to insult me by using my first name? No. No one that actually understands our sponsorship would risk that. You want to build a rapport, not imperialize the symbiosis between Directorate and MacroCorp." Collar placed a palm sized injector in front of Lei-Corr. It looked like the barrel of a pistol with five injector modules.

It nodded and pulled back slightly from the injector. Suulun had seen animals like this in the education modules. Anything with sentience that had been running long enough would have this resignation. Not necessarily acceptance but acknowledgement that the chances of survival were dwindling and the exhaustion was getting too much. New Mankind would never acquiesce like this, that's what made the citizens of any credit score sophontic; truly intelligent. You always kept fighting, always kept angling the odds looking for a win. That's why the Brokers took the time they needed to find a man or femme that was on the border, just getting ready to tip over and relinquish their Self.

Only then could they be molded into a Barakan.

"Aren't you supposed to push me? Some kind of final psychological event? I've seen a few Geks in my time."

"I will," Coelar said with a sad smile. He reached up and unsealed his helmet, pulling the dome back over his head. He breathed in the air, taking a moment. Suulun was confused and reached for his own helmet but Coelar put up a hand. "It's okay, this Gek and I should breath the same air, it deserves to be considered an equal."

"Is that what I am. A *thing* already, mister Naab Coelar?"

Coelar's eyebrow rose a full two centimeters in surprise, "You know me?"

"I've known you were coming since Jhelor sent that ansible transmission to your office and I've known about his many betrayals before that." Lei-Corr chuckled, "I didn't know I was a Gek until a quarter-quat ago."

"How did you self identify the conditioning and not revert?"

"I identified that my subordinate was killing the men and femmes under my command." Lei-Corr pointed at the table, "I started noticing how my orders were late, or wrong, always resulting in sloppy engagements, always an uphill battle. The 7-Delta-7 Regiment is tested, experienced, but Jehlor's eagerness to push me to a breaking point revealed the deception."

Coelar rubbed his face, sweeping sweat away, "If you knew, why didn't you stop him?"

"All of them? My entire leadership core? We'd have Auditors smashing everything to pieces and sending us all to the stakks or a penal colony." She took a flask from a pouch and placed it in front of Coelar who took it and sipped. "Besides, I hit my breaking point long ago, I just didn't notice. Even without his grooming and attempts at memetic orchestration, I know what I've become."

He took another sip, wincing at the ethyl's burn. "I've never met a Gek with this degree of self awareness and... comprehension." He locked eyes with Lei-Corr. "You are the crowning achievement of my career."

"I'm not yours yet, Broker." There was a rumble as the TX-80's engine roared to life, a quake rumbled through the superheavy vehicle. Neither Broker nor Gek broke each others gaze. "At my level of psychological conditioning and access to education modules, I have built up enough of an operational psyche that my loss of Self hasn't destabilized me to the degree your more typical subject would be able to maintain. I don't know why this is, it's like I'm only reacting, all instinct. Even without Jholer

I'm deteriorating." She raised her arm showing patches of synthskin from self inflicted wounds. "Guilt, shame, rage, doubt, hope, Jehlor was thorough preparing me for you but he only accelerated my desire for disassociation. One of my Sergeants protested my order the other day and I assaulted him. I have no memory of this but I have accessed visutels and watched what I did..." A single tear tumbled from her eye. "He was a friend."

"Our understanding of the human Self and its relation to the mind and body are ever expanding. But, if I were to understand what you're implying, Lei-Corr, you have actually *embraced* your status. You are a Gek while your training has... inoculated you from losing your Self entirely."

"I will go with you." She picked up the distributor and placed it against its neck. "Like this?"

"Yes. The sedative will take instant effect and will prevent mentation that could lead to a violent outcome."

"By choice?" Suulun said before he could catch himself. Coelar didn't reprimand him though.

"Choice is all I have left." It said. "But I have terms."



Suulun stepped aboard the gunship following Coelar and Lei-Corr who stumbled as if drunk. The aircraft picked up almost immediately, thrusters firing to get out of the way as the 7-Delta-7 marched into the city. The gunship rose, turning lazily despite the wind and the concussive shockwaves from nearby artillery.

They strapped in, Suulun helping Lei-Corr who couldn't manage them itself.

Suulun sat back and looked at Coelar who had returned the dome over his head. He'd need to take anti-rads, antibiotics and a blood transfusion and even then he might have contracted something from the planet they were leaving behind. Yet, when he made eye contact with Suulun he smiled.

"We did it, son. We did it. And on your first go around!" He sighed. "Don't expect it to be that incredible next time."

Suulun shrugged into the restraints, "I'll just follow Jhelor, he still has time left in his stint, there's not reason why he won't want to make some more chits on top of the moon he'll be wanting to buy." He joked but Coelar didn't laugh. Suulun realized the same gunner was sitting deeper in the hold with two other Tributaries. They were sucking on narco sticks, not joking or talking or making eye contact. Very different from the ride down.

"It will be picked up by Barakan, they're likely already in orbit, hence the general sense of dread you're likely noticing." Coelar said, tilting his head to the gunner and shouting, "Perhaps you'd like a chance to meet your potential employer, aye?"

The gunner turned away.

"How– how is that possible? It took us four dives through the Outside to get here?"

"I find it better not to ask. Jhelor let me send word to the 0-1 Division with their ansible." Suulun caught his breath. The 0-1 were the Barakan stationed near Protea, defenders of The Market itself."

"Sir, that's Coreward, three thousand light years–"

"And they arrived before we had left the building. I know. *Impossible*. Perhaps they knew, perhaps they followed us. Even the Brokers know little to nothing about how the Barakan operate."

Suulun nodded, his skin crawling. He looked at Lei-Corr, "Then what happens to it?"

"It goes through some kind of screening once we deliver. I doubt it's necessarily physical. There was a Gek I offered the Pale Tempest, once, who I had little confidence in. It was small, old, half mad from being addicted to opexio, not even a Tributary. I took him, mostly because of inexperience. Yet, the Barakan took it and a quat later I received enough profit to start my own brokerage." He cleared his throat, taking out his logicor. "If it graduates and can survive the provolving it will become a Kotar, at least that's what all of my Geks turned into. Her?" Suulun was surprised by his patron's acknowledgement of personhood, "Maybe they'll see how special she is with her training, self awareness, the extremes of possibility."

Suulun nodded but there was bile poisoning this accomplishment. He looked at his patron who was typing something into his logicor; *I need to say it*.

"Sir, is what we're doing really worth all this?"

"All what?" Coelar didn't look up.

"Thousands are about to be maimed, wounded or worse. Material will be lost against the Unionists who will look at every casualty they cause as a reason to keep fighting. And Jholer, he'll probably end his stint as General Manager now that the Gek is ours. Is the profit we're all making worth it if it costs this much to create?"

Suulun expected a reprimand. A chastisement of the greater good and the value of the Barakan or the inconsequence of the Army's ground pounders. Instead, Suulun finished typing into his logicor and looked at the Gek and its glazed over eyes. They travelled in silence until the gunship suddenly banked, inertia pressing against them. Over the rasp of the speakers they could hear the pilot.

"Uh, looks like we're catching some flak, might get choppy. Hold onto something."

A shudder through the gunship. Suulun gripped his restraints but Coelar only stared at the Gek. He leaned a little closer to Suulun and whispered.

"When you make a deal you look at all parties not just those in front of you offering you what you want."

The pilot, voice tense, came back on, "Taking evasive action! Brace-brace-brace!" Suulun screamed in terror as the gunship dropped but all the while Coelar breathed easy, the Gek barely registering.

There was a rattle as heavy weight left the gunship.

The gunship leveled out, "Target eliminated, making our way back into orbit." The pilot said, his voice filled with a strange mirth.

"Open that panel, Tributary." Coelar yelled at the gunner who instantly obeyed letting Coelar and Suulun both see that, down below, the precinct had lost its entire roof and upper floors. Suulun realized what had been done now, the mock evasion, the dropped payload.

Lei-Corr started screaming. An exuberant full body howl out the gunship as fresh explosions rippled from the precinct. She whooped and roared and raised her fists in inarticulate screams. She tore at her chest, stamped her boots and laughed hysterically with abandon. The gunner looked at her, eyes wide with terror, he almost lost his footing and went out the side of the gunship.

"That's what it looks like, Suulun, see that? The loss of Self, the end of our kind. Look at it, look as it relinquishes Self and embraces its new purpose."

Suulun did, it was like watching a pet simian in a menagerie. She was hooting and barking wordless victory at the pyre below. He understood, now, what it took. In his faith, he believed that the Giver offered the Self to a waiting human being from the moment of conception in exchange for a fruitful, profit filled life. The Giver wanted human beings to make Profit, multiply throughout the cosmos and enrich the universe with ownership.

To give up the Self was to sever ties with the purpose of existence but, like Coelar's teachings, this could only be done willingly. Torture, realized coercion, and the Self would return over time like a part of the body that heals. A human being had to make the choice to sacrifice itself.

"These were her terms." Coelar said simply. "Her last act was vengeance on those who had betrayed so much for so long. The 7-Delta-7 will advance with the proper support from the 10th Armada and their AMU's and they'll receive Jholer's percentage. Justice can walk hand in hand with profit for the benefit of all."

Suulun nodded, "What's more human than that?"