



True to Form

Arthur Cambian

The transport hauler barely slows in its orbit over the prison moon of Ghazar, choosing instead to jettison the semi-hardened delivery containers designed for orbital delivery. A trio of them falls through the wispy atmosphere, barely glowing red upon reentry as they arc across the noonday sky. Their retrothrusters sputter to life on a pre-timed trajectory and the containers slow long enough for Ghazar's custodians to intercept them mid-flight. These gunships, bristling with gunpods, are designed for this maneuver as much as they are paid to kill anything unlicensed that falls into their patrol zone.

The three containers are flown past shattered mountains and sections of the moon's crust that float freely inches or kilometers above the ground. Ghazar's parent world, Muulun, glares like an angry god above its awkward child. Gravity has never settled on the moon and so, unlike the normalcy of other worlds, it shifts and twists in ever changing patterns creating a maze of rock and fissures of exposed mantle. CivicaCor, the rehabilitation Corpo that runs each of the penal colonies have lined the surface with traps and manned gun emplacements anchored to drifting rock outcroppings.

The Warden Prime of Ghazar, and Magnate of CivicaCor, alone knows the patterns of the labyrinth and updates his underlings regularly. Each of the twelve prison's logicors are, in turn, updated and mathematical computations are shared with registered officers. In this way security is kept. In this way the Warden Prime is all powerful on Ghazar and respected above in Muulun's Ada-Ghaz government despite his griesely work.

The Hegemon regards prisons as a necessary evil. Amongst the teeming billions of human beings across Civil Space even the low percentages of criminals still number in the millions. They are given every chance to redeem themselves, to better their lives by the mutual promise of Profit, but there are some who desire too much at the expense of others or are, simply, insane. Save for rare instances, execution for crimes already committed is considered a costly price with debilitating effects on the general populace.

That is why CivicaCor is paid by many system governments to take the very worst and seek some means of rehabilitation so that they might repay their debts. In the

meanwhile they make various products that CivicaCor also benefits from such as ident-plates, clothing, or refine ore that comes up from the moon.

As the gunships clear the maze, a single mining platform with four anchored legs allows for some prisoners to exploit a hafnium deposit. They look up for a moment behind their bulky vacc-suits before correctional officers bark at them to continue from hovering gun emplacements.

The gunships split off, heading into three different directions. This is purposefully random. If one is sent to Ghazar then they are guilty by every measure. Each of the twelve colonies has their methods and their internal economy of betterment for their populations but all prisoners are deemed "equal" for the moon itself is one of Grade 1 maximum security, one of only a handful in Known Space. Some colonies could be considered "worse" than others by a quantifiable degree but their numbers are determined by a consistent rotated delivery of prisoners that is designed to prevent coordinated infiltration not by the severity of a crime or behavior.

One of the gunship's approaches a cleft in the side of a yawning crater, slowing. Within its intercepted container the prisoners are gassed by each gunship. Clouds of neuroagitant intoxicants fill the pod, but if a craft had been given authority to land, its crew would face a similar fate. The effects can vary from memory loss to induced coma, but cause total incapacity. Those not prisoners are then returned to orbit, but, mistakes have been rumored to happen and so the wise avoid the surface. After all, each prisoner on Ghazar provides a hefty fee.

Our story begins as Beylan Nantes is vomiting.

*

"Lu-mayoka-sa-akin!" I do not understand the language being shouted at me but I do understand the elbow and boots that strike me before my eyes can even open.

Bile and acid dribble from my mouth, the inner contents of my guts brought forth. The slime takes on a salty warmth as my tongue feels where my assailant has opened a gash in my lip. I spit and set my teeth, ready for more.

I put my hands up to protect myself but an empowered glove grabs my neck and hauls me off my feet before tossing me against a wall that further opens a cut in the back of my head.

I dare to open my eyes.

A riot of colors and shapes pierce the veil of my vision forcing my awareness through my confusion in a rush so that I arrive at two comprehensions at once. I am both standing in a field over a dying man I do not recognize as I simultaneously bent over on the deck of a landing strip whose walls are made from rough, plasma sculpted, rock. A man in light encasement armor is grabbing men and women and tossing them against the wall I am bleeding on.

"You'll pay for this!" the dying man in the field points at me even as the hole in his belly splits like a terrible grin and his organs begin to flop out onto purple grass.

A blast of water hits me from a Ghazani Corrections officer judging by the purple and gold of his livery. The jet hits me and I feel like my ribs will snap. The femme next to me is hit in the face and I hear her nose break as she becomes a fetal ball on the ground that I quickly mimic.

"STRIP!" Someone yells as the water stops and we begin to quickly pull off our jumpsuits.

Anti-microbial, anti-fungal and aromatic powders are blasted onto us next. Anyone that tries to run is beaten or prodded with shock sticks. In between violations I count fifty fellow prisoners. The brain my father paid for helps me approach the escalating violence abstractly and itemizes my own wounds so that the pain becomes distant even as they multiply.

I'm not going to die, is my conclusion. And if I'm not going to die, then I need to focus on how I'm going to live.

Live. The word activates a dormant organoid made to look like my earlobe tingles, releasing stored memetic references that begin to remind me who Beylan Nantes is.

A steal glances at the other prisoners in order to piece together what happened that got me here. None of us are crying out or sobbing at the new reality beating us. That means, at least, that we're all cut from the same cloth.

Guilty men don't beg.

An old adage, one that speaks from my mind and calms me in my father's voice. I close my eyes and find comfort in the remembered spiralled tattoos that had covered his face. In them I am strengthened with the conviction that only a Telborn of the Cartels can call upon.

The effects of the neuroatigants clears and I check my wrists, palms, forearms and let the tattoos stitched into them fill in the blank spots in my mind. Serpents and fish, a lidless eye looks to a constellation stencilled with Grade 2 sonaw dust that glitters gold beneath my void pale skin. A blade without a handle bleeds into a gatesphere.

I am Beylan Nantes, second son of Kadot Nantes of the Nyshoku Cartel. I am Telborn, a soldier. I am a thief, I am a friend to travellers, I have walked seven worlds, I have killed, I owe nothing whilst I claim everything. I cannot be fed, I will feed.

I am debtbeat. My profits belong to me alone and my brethren.

"GET UP!" One of the officers roars through his speakers.

Fans blast us as we enter a transit tube. The guards aren't risking anything as emitters hit us with further disorienting strobing light. The tube whisks us deeper into the prison. The guards stay behind us, ready and on edge. I wonder why? Surely new prisoners come multiple times a quat.

I count the seconds and settle that we've travelled two kilometers before the tube delivers us onto a processing floor where we are offered plastic gowns. These officers are gentler, predominantly femmes in masks, who seek out hidden contraband, smuggled items or parasites. Several are found and quickly removed. One woman has a left eye removed that must have held something within, a man is sent to more drastic surgery.

They check me and find nothing. They will not find anything I do not allow them to.

Scanning chambers come next which slightly irradiate us. This is intended to disrupt any of the more exotic augmentations or organoids at least temporarily so that can be hobbled or deemed acceptable for use. A man collapses as his artificial heart slows and he is taken to see doctors who will revitalize him. A femme with an organoid in her left breast made to produce a spindle of slash-wire cuts off the finger of one of the guards as they attempt to subdue her. They break her arm, legs and dislocate her jaw. She is also taken to the doctors along with the guard who screams holding his mutilated hand.

The beatings cease once we clear this. They have set the rules and we will obey or pain will be the result.

Pain, not death.

My sentence was given to me by a wandering Fargoni judge that was given authority over the case. I knew when he saw my tattoos that my sentencing would not be lenient never mind Fargoni obsession with the Lex. The Fargol Acumen, despite being barely a speck in Civil Space, knows the laws of the Hegemon better than anyone and despite my bankroll over a local advocacy corpo, they couldn't do much in my defense against a firebrand like the judge.

Thirty fiscal-cycles at Ghazar for the "murder" of the Baron of a local Corpo that made moldings for Directorate weapons that the judge referred to as a *hero* of the continued safety of the Hegemon. He sentenced my wealth would go to the recovery of the stricken Corpo as they sought new leadership. Nevermind that the Baron had been dealing with the Cartel to feed his addiction to Exogenic luxuries. Nevermind that he had attempted to kill my brethren with cheap mercenaries while challenging me during a banquet in his own palace.

My duel would have been legal on any world in the Fringe but I had, stupidly, chosen to cut him down in the ExeCor. The Lex of the ExeCor was strict, prohibitively so in matters regarding life and the taking of it. But honor still meant something to we Telborn and the timedebt I had earned with the Baron's life would be paid without complaint.

"*Make... you... pay.*" The Baron is pulling at something in his innards. It's disgusting, the pain must be beyond extreme. My memories are filled with dozens of murders I have committed that the Fargoni would have liked to know about but I had never seen a man stir his own intestines in his final act.

Processing takes a further hour until we are released into the general population. The guards give us fresh jumpsuits of undyed canvas and a small box filled with various toiletries, broad spectrum antibiotics, metavins injectables and food bars.

The triple layered doors to Ryken Stakk Complex slide apart on well greased mechanisms letting us add our numbers to those within. The guards do not advance beyond the threshold and only turn away as the door immediately rolls shut.

Ryken Complex is a *hellscrapers*, two hundred storeys drilled into the rock straight down. The upper area, where I am, is almost civilized but I know what lies beneath. A stakk style prison is run with minimal enforcement for maximum profit. The guards drop off food and water and the materials the convicted need to produce products and the upper levels govern the lower. If the upper floors can't produce fast enough; the food and water stop. Simple.

The top floor is built around a simple ringed platform, which we newcomers now stand on. The platform will lower down to the next level and so on until it reaches the bottom and whatever living hell that exists therein. The walls are hexagonal cells with curtains for doors. There are about a hundred of them stacked in three storeys that seem to be domiciles or storage rooms that look down on a kind of processing floor the convicts use to organize modules filled with whatever Ryken makes.

The hundred or so prisoners of the first level approach, now, all of them male and covered in tattoos. Many of the crowd I'm within flinch back, those who know what the ink and scars mean realizing the danger that approaches them.

I take a step forward. The others behind me are simple criminals, mobsters on a city or planetary level, maybe some war criminals or habitual killers. Each of them must have thought they were the best, or worst, of their kind. They are little more than paupers. They move back like a school of fish avoiding predators. They should. For we *are* predators.

We are Telborn.

I remove the top of my overalls, tying off the sleeves around my waist and reveal my true self to this world. The upside down column on my chest shows that I have already spent time in a hellscrapers, specifically the penal facility on Inidia 9, for three years. The inked scars on my forearms say that my body is my weapon and an opponent will receive no mercy. The single spiral beneath my eye is my Nyshoku lineage. Inked gunshot wounds, burn scars, knife slashes and stabs, all of them reveal the pride I have taken in my life of violence.

The line of first floor prisoners stop and read my skin before they appraise the rest.

Several younger men, scrawny but muscled, rush forward and begin to pilfer the crowd taking choice items from boxes, shoes, one woman even has her braid cut for some reason. They ignore me and I look for the authority of this place. I find them quickly.

Sitting around a few fold-out tables are men, pure humans all. I can read some of their ink and marks and despite variations and differing styles, the core of each is as clear as reading a billboard. I know them and they will know me.

I step forward as the platform begins to descend leaving the none Telborn to the lower levels.

Unspoken and uninvited, I walk toward the tables. None stop me save myself, seven steps before the man with the tattoo of a long necked, ivory, *Kamuy* bird across his face and neck. The crane's eye is his own, a blood filled orb with a silver polished iris. His other eye is an empty socket.

"Greetings." The man says, his voice a rasp through damaged vocal cords. "I am Zhael. The Crane of Fortune. Son of Utto. Telborn of Cepa."

"I am Beylan." I turn so that he and the rest can see my own exploits. "The Steelfist. Son of—"

"So I see." Zhael interrupts and I feel the sting of embarrassment. I know this is a test. Zhael is king here and can treat me however he wants. I do not rise to the bait.

"I have good and bad news for you, Beylan of Nyshoku." He stands. He is not an imposing man and most of his body has turned to fat yet suddenly I feel as if gravity has increased and I am at risk of falling toward him.

"The good news is that the Telborn command the five levels of Ryken Complex. We here at the top are all blooded, vetted, and we have access to the Immersion Units," he points to three hexagonal chambers where three inmates are strapped into. They wear cogit hoods, flinching and shaking in constraints. "They can knock off your timedebt, cut a sentence down fast."

"I've been inside one." My finger points to the tattooed eye. I'd rather do the time.

Zhael smiles revealing teeth bordered in refined sonaw, "Then the bad news... we're all filled up. I see your rank, I see your victories, I have even heard of your father." He clears his throat and points behind me. "But there is no room here and you'll have to make some if you want to stay on the upper five floors—"

I drop to my knees just as the wild haymaker almost takes my head off.

I roll backward, springing back up to my knees in a fighting stance.

The man in front of me turns. He's massive. Augmented to be a staggering seven feet his already muscled frame is made all the more so by organoid thews that are grey against his sun browned skin. A quick read of his own tattoos tell me he is Shaaskit, the Lawbreaker. They are primarily smugglers who operate near Ketamyre. By whatever rules Zhael imposes on them, Lawbreaker is the man I must kill if I want to survive.

The Telborn cheer, forming a wide ring to watch us.

Lawbreaker roars beats his chest. I know this is both showboating but also releasing small blisters filled with noradrenaline directly into his heart and bloodstream. He's about to be a major threat.

But then, so am I.

I flex my fingers and punch fists into each other. Pockets of liquid nuusteel crack within my knucklebones and harden. I rise and shadow box, one-two, activating the filaments in my arms that will, for a time, make my strength equal to the pneumatic power of an empowered suit.

Lawbreaker charges, another massive swing aimed toward me face.

I don't bother dodging. He's much faster and with his reach will be able to grab me.

So I punch back.

My fist pulps his own. My knuckles driving into and *through* his right hand. Bone splinters out from his skin in an explosion of gore. His hand is pulped down to the wrist.

He roars in annoyance rather than pain, his left moving even faster than his right and catches me, open palmed, across the right of my face.

I go spinning, head over heels, skidding across the floor and to the edge of the platform.

My brain acknowledges the drop down... down down. Briefly I track the eyes of hundreds as they look up at me. They are hungry, desperate, eager in a way that has made them less than human. I won't go down there. I know that in the lowest levels what a person must do to survive. It will break my mind.

I turn over and get back up just as Lawbreaker grabs me by the ankle and hurls me, over his head, back into the deck. He would have had me if he'd just kicked me over the edge but he's too drunk on the chemical cocktail rushing through his body. The mistake is going to kill him.

My left arm is dislocated on the impact but I twist out of his grip when I punch a gouge into the deck so that I'm standing upright in a single beat of my heart.

Lawbreaker is startled, his body overextended forward. His face slams into the floor and I hear the delicate clatter of teeth scattering. He's disoriented now, the shock to his skull, but this will only last a few seconds. I'm sure he has additional reservoirs in his body to balance out pain, panic and response.

I let him get up as I reset my arm back into its socket. His face is bleeding and he's breathing through a mouth missing half his teeth. His frame now wreathed in steam and slick with sweat.

I shadow box again, reloading the final charges in my arms. My muscles burn with electricity. I beckon him forward with a flex of my alloy infused fingers.

Lawbreaker leaps forward, arms wide, he'll try and use his enormous strength and mass to overpower me. It would work if I wasn't scared of such street war antics. I wait until he's just within striking range before stepping forward.

My first punch caves his nasal cavity and forces both his eyes to pop out of their sockets in either direction. My second opens at the last possible millisecond into a claw that pierces the skin just below his ribcage and grips the bone underneath, yanking it as I drop into a kneel.

Lawbreaker's own momentum helps as I lift him over my head and hurl him behind me.

Down.

Down the platform shaftway and down, now screaming, falling for eight seconds to the very bottom.

The Telborn are quiet. No cheering the loss of a brother. They do help me, getting me back on my feet as the withdrawal of my organoids hits me. I won't be able to move my arms for a week. They'll need to take care of me, and I know they will, because we are all the same.

Zhael is one of those to help me, lifting me up and leading to a chair for me to sit in. A thermos of hot tea is guided to my lips and I drink it. Soft bread is given to me and my brothers feed me. Zhael stays close the whole time as I lose control of my body entirely.

They bring me to one of the cells. I'm sure it's Lawbreaker's. It will be mine now. The others go back to work, checking containers and placing them for pickup on tracked sleds. I still don't know what they make here. Zhael stays with me.

Time passes when Zhael finally says, "Qedek was loved. You treated him fairly and his friends will remember that. You did right, letting him get back up, we all saw that. You're proper Telborn, Beylan Nantes of Nyshoku Cartel." He gets closer, whispering in my ear. "We've got Ghazar under our control. The Prime Warden's under our pay. The Cartels use this place as a way to communicate throughout Known Space with each other."

I cough and he guides water to my mouth.

"Your father would be proud... Rest, now, my brother." He kisses my forehead and leaves.

I close my eyes and see my father's face and the swirling patterns. They bring comfort... but... they are spinning now. A fever grips me. Flesh and ink twisting and reforming until I am before the Baron, fishing through his own entrails. He finds what he's looking for and wrenches it out with a squelch of steaming viscera.

"*You will-*" And the memory changes. No longer in a field of purple grass. No longer my father's face. All of it a spinning miasma of color and sound. "*Remember.*"

An organoid hidden deep between the folds of my graymatter vibrates. With each reverberation my mind shakes off Beylan Nantes. I am falling through an amnesiac hurricane of broken memories until-

A voice... the voice of my father? No, the voice of my master.

"971-Δ, Agent of the Commission, you have achieved the third phase of Operation Doorstop. Out of twenty two operatives you have achieved the necessary pattern combination to renew your secondary personality in order to fully infiltrate the Telborn network on Ghazar. Heal now, prepare yourself, this organoid will memetically inform you of the plans to come."