



All Notables
Part 1 and 2
by
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His eyes were closed but he could see.

Rain clouds, bristling with lightning, were making landfall upon a beach of volcanic sand. He knew this place. He had been born here, so long ago.

There was movement in his arms, another's body moving against him, getting closer to him even though they were pressed against each other. Warmth, but also memories, rippled like waves into him and he squeezed the person, tightly.

But not tight enough.

*She left him. Like the sand they lay upon, clutched in his fingers. She unravelled, her body scattering into a past that all he could do was remember in purchased dreams like this. He shut his eyes that were already closed and felt rain, hot against his skin. It sizzled and burned divots into his flesh and he knew **they** were coming.*

The nightmares rode the lightning, bringing their onslaught to this haven. They filled the skies on wings of fire, descending out of the clouds, harbingers of the vessel that had carried them across the stars to murder everything he loved.

The name across its hull.

Harvest.

Then the world split, great lines of white blazing through everything that tore this universe apart. He didn't scream. Why should he? Even if this were the end he'd run long enough.

Back to black.

"Butcher Lead?"

Ethio's ears buzzed with transmission static, the dead echo from his helmet reminding him that he wasn't alone within the coffin that sealed him in the dark. Wires and cabling were anchored to the narrow walls that were padded with insulation built to keep him safe in the standing harness.

"Are you ready for this?"

The words were for Ethio, but were spoken to the ten other skiptracers on the same channel, forcing each of them to wonder the same as they hung over the drop chutes. They were all sealed within the same CrashPods^{IB} like a row of seedlings in the exposed bowels of the quickship that had brought them into orbit over the planet below.

He spared a glance down at the rudimentary screen angled up at him between his boots, its heavy glass warping the image transmitted from the pod's nose mounted sensors. The light of low-yield atomika bomb explosions blistered up through the skin of black storm clouds made by decades of continental exchanges that had likely caused a premature ice age.

It told an old story.

The same, old, story.

One that Ethio couldn't be bothered to hear again.

He wasn't here answering a call of nationalism or brand loyalty or whatever excuse humanity needed to force its own extinction on yet another planet. A perverse irony that even here, out in all this black that the species was trying to thrive in, they still killed one another with such abandon.

No.

I am here to bring value to my Self.

I am here for profit.

Mine *own and none other.*

That's why he was strapped in, sweating in a reentry suit beneath a domed helmet fogging with condensation. Why he was sucking down recycled air a thousand light-years away from his villa, getting ready to drop into another version of some subscribed vision of hell.

"We didn't ship all this way for the view. Prepare for launch." He palmed a rubber-coated switch. A hose flooded thick, viciously cold liquid that welled up from his boots to his knees and up his waist—

"Disengage anchors and start the timer in—" The MassTrader captain who owned the vessel decided she wasn't going to wait for him to finish his order.

There was an innocuous 'click.'

Shit.

He didn't feel most of the inertia thanks to the crash fluid still filling up his pod, but that didn't mean his stomach didn't try to climb up his throat to escape through his clenched teeth. No matter how many decades of this, he still couldn't get used to skyfall entry.

He'd become intimate with the vehicles he was trapped inside of. Understanding their design, construction, and failure rates, as if that would make him feel any better about them. All class types of CrashPods^{tB} were simple enough in construction and were a *trustBrand* patented by the MiliCorp Muskov Milisya. They had invented a novel way of getting their operatives from space to the surface of a planet, hostile enemy ship, or an orbital station.

Replace the explosives in a bomb with a person.

Passengers were crammed into an envelope of nusteel with rudimentary fins ,which was then fitted with a cluster of fast-burn jets and several types of countermeasures. It would streak through the thermosphere after being dropped and then guided in by a tightbeam array that communicated with the ship above. Nannied in this way, the pod's logicor worked in conjunction with its fellow pods as well as cross-referencing with friendlies on the ground or in the skies to triangulate their landing path.

A passenger didn't have to do anything except wait in the puddle that sloshed in the interior and wait for the 'chutes to deploy.

Maybe that was it.

Why he hated it so much.

This feeling of helplessness.

To trust in a machine's impartial logic. The uncaring calculation that might determine, at any moment, that maybe it was more effective to let him die for whatever reason it concluded.

To trust some *gasper* orbiter probably sipping spit warm kahvic from a sack as they watched his signal drop. Probably taking bets on his demise. They got paid either way, after all.

To trust anyone other than himself to stay alive, to keep himself fed, to recover the future that had been stolen from him. That's why he hated all of this.

The pod juked suddenly in the wake of a wall of turbulence. Proximity alerts pinged through the globe of Ethio's helmet as something fast sped past him. He hated not being able to see, so he shut his eyes as he was flung against his restraints. He was now completely immersed in the fluid, but could still hear the silt of air combat patter against the hull as fighter craft exchanged fire and ground defenses probed for kills.

Shit.

The logicor ignited the pod's thrusters in response to an unseen threat, accelerating him past terminal velocity. CrashPods^B, especially a higher grade one like this, could easily avoid most enemy fire, moving too fast to be tracked by anything—

High caliber rounds pinged off the hull—

Dormant lights flashed red and a petulant hooting started out of a klaxon made from cheap plas, sounding more like a gurgling whine through the liquid as he was sent into a tailspin.

Shit.

Finger-wide holes punched through, bullets steaming in crash gel, suspended barely inches from his helmet. The lights went out. Darkness.

Something shuddered above him and SNAPPED!

Shit-shit-shit—

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The pod cracked open as explosive bolts blew out the hatchways, unleashing a surge of crash gel, carrying Ethio with it. He emerged, sticky and engulfed by the phlegm-colored liquid. With one hand he wiped off a gob of it from his helmet and with the other he aimed a compact autorevolver, the barrel set at a lower bore axis between his middle and ring finger.

To good effect.

Out of the dust and smoke an indigenous soldier in mustard yellow fatigues stumbled toward him, trying to raise a snub-nosed automat but struggling with disorientation. He'd likely been too close to Ethio's pod when it hit the dirt and was a combo of blind, deaf, and angry.

Ethio put him down, a round between chinstrap and chest plate.

He dropped to a knee just as incoming fire kicked up dust around him and riddled the CrashPod[™] in a barrage of sparks and ricochets. Ethio was calm, finding the muzzle fire in the mist before firing two rounds. The firing stopped.

And waited.

No one else tried to kill him.

"This is Butcher lead, does anyone copy?" He whispered into his comms. The crash gel was drying and would soon crumble away, but he helped it along, clearing his chest harness of gunk and reloading quickly. His eyes never left the billowing clouds of smokescreen his pod had coughed out of its dispensers mounted to its roof next to the parachute deployment system.

Somewhere close by there was the *wump* of another pod landing and the hiss-bang as it deployed countermeasure flashbangs and shock fields.

"This is Butcher four. Off-site by thirty meters. Recovering."

Ethio nodded and moved, steady and silent across the ruined planet surface toward the landing site. There were bodies everywhere, some in the mustard fatigues, many more in the classic body armor of Tributary soldiers.

Rare to see the Directorate beaten by locals.

He considered scanning their sponsor tags, then thought better of it.

Who cares.

Butcher Four appeared, her own pistol momentarily aimed at Ethio before shifting away to sweep the fog. She was careful not to step on any of the dead, barely making a sound.

"We didn't get a brief on who we are or who I'm killing for free. I don't like this." She set up next to him, allowing him to take out the reinforced data-plaque anchored by a threaded steel wire to his suit's webbing.

"Learn to." He chastised, working the plaque with one hand. They were off their landing site, but not by much. They were standing in what had been an active battlefield hardly an hour beforehand.

The good news was that both sides fighting hadn't noticed them. That would change if the locals started checking in and got no answers.

"Easy for you to say, I can barely see in this shit and we didn't train for skyfall deployment into a conventional warzone, eh?"

She turned to regard him. He couldn't see her face behind the mask and the cushioned inner helmet cap, but there was a rush of memory as he met her gaze.

A false memory of this woman.

He knew that there were rings and studs and ritual scars.

Ebon black skin, not an ounce of fat, slightly provolved.

She was a Fringer, grounder born.

A killer, who liked to take teeth as trophies she wore as jewelry.

His brain told him he knew her, that he should recognize her, but that was a lie, he had never truly seen her in his waking life. They had trained in constructed dream programs while in transit forming muscle memory and a sense of familiarity that his ego, his Self, was uncomfortable with now that it was properly awakened.

The comm sparked with activity, "Butcher Lead? It's Three, here, I'm with Nine and Seven. Ran into some indigees, they might have got a warning off before we could sort them." A voice burbled up from his comms.

Ethio looked at the plaque, "I'm dotting the map—move counter on compass—produce at 40_67 by 73_95." He used coded language, just in case.

"Copy, rebounding." Butcher three acknowledged.

The skiptracers gradually regrouped, picking their way through the shattered infrastructure of a produce store, long picked over by scavengers, bombed, turned into a forward operating base and then bombed again. Ethio didn't recognize the brands of any of the foodstuffs which meant that at least they weren't in the ExeCor, probably not the Midworlds either.

Somewhere in the Fringe?

Their employer had kept details like this from them, had forced them into isolation after they were hired and then extensively operated on by mentanics who had altered their memories to respond to visible and audio triggers that would ignite partial memory recalls.

Ethio looked at the team that had been put together by their employer as they huddled around a heavy-duty ergoid propelled by five legs. It was built into the frame of one of the CrashPods^{tB}, having landed like the rest of them and then scuttling to this position at Ethio's command. It was made up of a series of compartments and lockers that each of the skiptracers loaded up from.

He hadn't worked with this many venture partners in decades, but then, he'd never been offered this much profit for a job. He couldn't remember the details that had been momentarily taken from him, but it had been enough for his Self to agree to the terms.

Now? Now he was 'leader' designate.

I have to figure out why. And why these people.

He'd need all of them if they were going to pull whatever this was off.

Butcher team were only eight now before the mission had even started. Butcher Two was thought to have been hit by air defenses which meant they had lost their vitalist. They could survive a few cuts and scrapes, but any major injury would likely mean a death.

Meanwhile, Butcher Eight's countermeasures hadn't fired due to malfunction. Indigees had rushed the CrashPod^{tB} and shot him to pieces.

Ethio saw the profile picture of Eight beneath the heavy glass of the screen on the ergoid. A young man with a cocksure grin challenged Ethio, the grin catching his memory, like a nail tugging loose a thread .

Ethio was standing in a endless field of tall, purple grass. It was fake, a facsimile of an invented planet. Butcher Eight was working in tandem with the team which drove a raging, multi-limbed exogen directly toward him. Two turned, looked at him with that same smile, and fired his rifle without looking.

The round hit the exogen, the dart punching deep into an eye socket. A moment later it collapsed. "That's how it's done..."

Down a sniper, a good one.

Ethio shook his head and popped his dome's seals, tossing it away but keeping his breath mask on even as the stink of this world bled through his filters.

Sulfur, burning plastek, raw ozone, and the cloying stain that was burning bodies. Incinerated metals, the sickly sweet smell of high explosives.

He'd taken a sequence of anti-rads and immuno-boosters of such a high grade that he would actually exit this venture healthier than when he started.

If I survive of course.

The skiptracers had pulled off their reentry suits and were getting into their own unique gear. Ethio watched with some curiosity, noting dattoos, scars both earned and ritualized as well as the various organoids both internal and external. They had all been presented in a 'neutral' depiction within the simulation, without the real world details they carried.

The five senses didn't work the same way inside a sensation casket. The full-body cogit-sleeve blurred the line between perception and a digitally constructed dream reality. This state kept them within the safety limits for Outside travel while permitting their Selves to interact with one another as they trained. It had felt like weeks inside the pseudo realm, drifting from scenario and training simulations. But to see them now, with his own eyes and not the mind's eye, they were each too short or tall, too broad or slim.

None of them spoke, focused instead on getting into armored caraplate, ballistic gel padding, body gloves, and personal gear.

Each skiptracer was a riot of individuality as they put unique, often custom, items back into place. Those who hunted bounties in the Hegemon weren't soldiers, they were professionals, and they pursued their craft like any other artisan, matching lethality with personal style.

Ethio pulled on his own gear, starting with a near form-fitting empowered body-frame. He hid this underneath a long duster made from exogenic reptile hide that he had skinned himself. This was meshed with a series of ballistic resistant gel slides and sprayed with a sheen of refracting spray that would mask

his vital signatures and disperse light based sensors. He replaced the cheap holdout revolver from his pod with the much heavier ornate pistol from its compartment.

Its weight was perfectly balanced, easily his most valuable possession and older than the Hegemon. It was inlaid with sonaw-platinum, real milled wood, all built around a containment chamber connected to a smooth barrel. He rolled it around his index finger and slid it into his holster.

Next he stepped into a pair of archaic *Thaw'omp* boots designed from artisans on Lhunarka with secrets all their own.

Last he put on his lucky hat. Nothing special there save it had been with him since... ever.

Everything in its right place.

Seven years I've been trying to just survive. This job had all the makings to let me thrive again.

And he needed the capital. It had taken everything he owned to get away from the hunters that had chased him into the Fringe. When they finally caught up with him he'd settled the score but had needed to recover in a grow tank for two quats to make him whole. Now he needed to get back to purpose and profit. He was never going to have his old life back and there was no solace in the bottle he'd crawled into the last few fiscal cycles.

This job is the first stone in that foundation.

But to do that he needed to win with this team.

He finished tightening the last buckle and walked over to one of the digitigrade arms protruding from the ergoid. He redirected its projector to a piece of shattered marble on the ground and switched it 'on.'

The quickship was feeding information to the ergoid's logicor on the beam as they tracked their quarry. The image was a telescopic perspective from above, showing the ruined city they were in and a column of fresh smoke rising from a wasteland of collapsed starscrapers uprooted from their foundations.

Payday.

"Well?" Butcher Four sauntered over, clearly more at ease out of the plas and rubber of her reentry suit and now festooned with the toothed trophies, random weapons and a bodyglove that clung to her skinny frame. Her ears had been removed and replaced with sensory plugs, giving her an oddly skeletal look. The muscles in her arms were reinforced with a myoflex mesh that raised her skin in a repeating diamond pattern. She had mismatched eyes, blue and organoid silver.

"You should be wearing your breather." Ethio scolded, sniffing behind his own and tasting the stale spit. "There'll be higher rad counts when the winds shift not to mention local viruses—"

"This world can't kill me, Lead, thanks for the concern." A wink of the blue eye. "So, are you *really* the Old Man?"

He stopped tracking the feed and turned to her... and the other eight skiptracers now looking up from their preparations to look at him.

Well... shit.

He'd try to hide his identity in the simulation.

*He'd used confounding thought trails, mental blocks,
tricks taught to him when the wealth of an entire sector had been his
to command. Was he was slacking?*

She looked proud of herself, catching him like this before he could start off with a nice speech or a briefing, or anything other than airing out his reputation.

"I prefer Dwarr-Ethio to 'old man.'"

"You should, you look great for, how old are you again?" She grinned.

He straightened, knowing that what she perceived was a tall, well built male human in his natural mid-thirties. He knew that his eyes would look older, much older, if you knew how to spot the signs and, with Four's background, he figured that's how she had spotted him and made the deduction.

I move like an old man.

"I don't like getting my feelings hurt." He pulled at the finger-length beard that desperately needed a shave after suspension in the casket. "And it's not polite to ask."

Itchy.

"I think anyone that's over three hundred years old can probably take it." Clearly not backing down. "Last I heard you were past the Fringe, running from—"

"You're Dynn Makaba, aren't you?" Ethio said, brushing off her recognition and throwing the spotlight back to her. "You were the toast of Prime Orbita last RevShare day for hunting down a godmake all by yourself?"

She wasn't having it, "We're all notables here. But not like you. I feel like we should be bowing?"

Which was true.

They aren't like me.

But they are all, indeed, all notables.

Butcher Four, Makaba, was one of the most lethal hunters operating in the Akksüm Drifts. You couldn't hide from her once she got your scent, having been provoked to canid levels. She was covered in tattoos and held an archaic-looking automat while being virtually covered with too many knives, throwing blades, hand-axes, along with queer-looking traps and tools.

Butcher Three, Wazawa-Lia, supposedly the best muutech to come out of Katamyth near Protia. For some reason she'd left it all to become a skiptracer and a skiver, using logicors instead of guns to hunt down criminals. She wore an additional organoid arm connected to her elbow that worked an advanced logicor. Rumor had that she could crash a planetary power grid using only a percent of her enhanced brain.

Butcher Nine and Ten were a combo with the former riding the latter. Ten was a hulking Yahow near-human, a mule, within its own custom autoplate. Nine was a ravaged torso suspended in Hyperian amber inserted like a humpback onto the Yahow like a parasite.. The duo was referred to as the Mordrake, but there were rumors the man within the amber was a former warrior king from one of the nations that was absorbed into the Hegemon after the fall of Catraeth. He'd be much older than Ethio if that were true.

Butcher Five was instantly recognizable with his two arms matched by organoid arms made from living chitin that had earned him the name Kusatokani in the Corebright Supersector. Rumor had it he preferred fighting with the sword strapped to his back and would accept any formal challenge.

Butcher Six, Captain Horne, a tributary veteran of a hundred ventures and once the face for Directorate recruitment ads throughout Known Space. A mane of white hair connected to a substantial beard, probably the only natural thing left on the man who had been stitched together time and again. His visible skin was a patchwork of old and new grafts and organoid augmentations.

Finally, Butcher Seven... Ethio grimaced, looking away as his stomach turned. He knew the living skin of her armor was an extension of her own biology, growing out from her body just below her neck. Her neck which was elongated twice its normal length, slowly stretched from childhood and reinforced by strange looking organoids that pulsed with internal light. Her cranium was also stretched, pulled, to form an almost insectoid bulb. Both her eyes were almost entirely black with permanently contracted pupils. This was Osino, a Mylbruk Hexan occultist.

And they were all looking at him.

Better make this fast.

"I am Dwarr-Ethio. I've been doing this for a long time and intend on doing it twice as long as that. None of you should be confused as to why I was given command status."

"What-challenge-we-face?" Mordrake's Yahow mouth opened but it was a modulated voice through a speaker system in the Yahow's collar.

"He won't know," Wazawa-Lia piped up, "We've all had extensive mentanic mental surgeries. He just knows the first cue."

"What I do know is that whatever we're bagging is something I've gone up against. The scenarios we trained on in transit were based off of my assumptions of what we would need before they put a damper on my memory."

"That's how I figured him out, his projection in the dream, he felt like a constant *deja vu*, only a *rewind* gives you that feeling when you're linked up." Makaba cracked her knuckles.

Damn. Didn't see that coming.

Ethio watched everyone have their own private reactions. In a literal sense his body was worth more than the entire troupe, the ship that had brought them, and the keyheads used to traverse the Outside that had brought them to this mission.

"He's a retrogenic." The rolling guttural echo of multiple vocal chords came from Osino whose bifurcated tongue lashed out and tasted the air in Ethio's direction. "Almost ancient."

"I prefer the term 'post mortal', but it all means the same thing."

"Shit, I've heard of you, all right," Captain Horne said, shoving a flavor packet between his lip and mouth. "You used to be a big deal, some kind of Corpo big wig—"

No more questions.

"If you feel like bowing I won't protest, but we're all here for the same thing... to get paid." Tapping in the inlaid keyboard of the ergoid, the projector's image shifted to the compass sigil of the Hegemon which began to spin. "Why don't we find out what the job is?"

As part of their hiring, each skiptracer had been conditioned with a memetic dossier written into their hippocampus by a mentanic . Simply looking at the sigil as it spun and flexed it unlocked those memories, that the briefing spoken directly into their minds.

"Seems easy enough." Makaba said as their memories unspooled.

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The indigens didn't have the tech to fight the Directorate, but they had the numbers. Their entire population had been conscripted and marched into a meat grinder that had condemned the planet to a radiological wasteland, but,, they had reduced the Corpo influence to their largest city. In this city, there were a dozen cargo depots owned by the Consortium of Free Trade which the Directorate was trying to protect.

The world had been a transit hub, heavily invested in about seventy fiscal cycles ago to serve as a jumping off point between two resource-heavy star systems. The society on the planet had initially benefited. Three orbital hoists had been built to rapidly ferry goods to and from the surface, but had been built so poorly that runoff had poisoned local drinking water and kicked off ecological disasters. The local governments attempted to renegotiate the terms of the arrangement. The Corpos were unrelenting and brought litigation against the combined governments, bankrupting them and mercilessly pursuing financial compensation.

In a surprise to the Corpus, the citizenry themselves took up arms instead of agreeing to lucrative terms after their governments were replaced. Quick to blame a Unionist conspiracy, the madness Ethio and the skiptracers were picking their way through was the result.

Two of the planet's three hoists were destroyed in terrorist attacks with the indigens taking thousands of mythqals' worth of resources and products hostage, attempting to force negotiations.

But then Wanvath Underwriting MacroCorp made a startling suggestion.

The goods trapped were indeed an interplanetary fortune, but it was also technically still 'in transit,' in terms of The Market, and could still be counted for the purposes of intersolar trade even if they couldn't be accessed. The value of the products everywhere else in the supersector had climbed exponentially as the inaccessibility was reinterpreted as demand.

Wanvath provided the math and the Corpus financed the Directorate, sending regiments to guard this inaccessible wealth for as long as there were tributaries to defend it, the longer the better. A grueling meatgrinder of a war lasted almost twenty fiscal cycles, until radicalized hordes of indigens finally surrounded this final location. Most of the Tributaries were now stuck on the planet as last-minute withdrawals had been prioritized to remove the most valuable cargo.

Ethio peered down from high above a ruined building as thousands of indigens surged forward through a blasted plaza towards a tributary bunker. Heavy automat barrels glowed red-hot, cutting down swaths of men and women, before they began to melt from overuse. Moments later the Tributary positions were swamped with bodies who cut into them with improvised weapons.

"There goes their lynchpin," Captain Horne said, pointing at the other Army positions. "Probably was the main communications hub, without that the rank and file will be blind." He made an odd zipping sound with his tongue and teeth. "Won't be long before this scum drives them out... Poor bastards."

"Have you figured out why we're here yet?" The knife Makaba was sharpening on her shoulder pauldron was already razor sharp, but she was clearly bored. "We're hunting someone, I can feel that, but who? I've never had this much mental binding, every time I try thinking about it I just get a wall and," she winced, "a headache."

"Stop thinking about it, there's enough to navigate until we get there."

"We don't even know who the patron is." Wazawa-Lia said off-handedly, gazing into the screens on her wrist and additional arm. "That's a first for me."

"Just another Corpo," Makaba said, waving her blade dismissively and spinning it back into its sheath on her belt in a single smooth motion, "Who else could afford all of us in the same place? They're paying my premiums and I didn't even have to negotiate."

"Who did they use for you, an agency?" Horne looked away from the massacre, the metal of his artificial eyes gleaming.

"Normally I get a call from Riegan-Marg Ventures." Makaba confirmed, "But for this I was engaged independently, they paid for me to take the meeting all by itself."

"I-as-well." Came the tactic rumbling from Mordrake.

"Agent-came-to-cave-and-paid-blood-price." The other skiptracers shared a look, unsure exactly what a blood price could be, and clearly, none of them were interested in asking.

"There would be more brand awareness if it was Corpo," Horne said, "We'd have picked up on something by now but everything's been custom from the that quickship to the CrashPods^{IB}. None of it had any licensing or sponsors. When was the last time you did a job without adverts?"

Ethio had not noticed that. That *was* odd.

Not even he knew who the patron really was.

"Question not from where the coin drops." Kusatokani growled through the grille of his war mask, an ornate combination of rebreather and narco dispenser made to look like some kind of animal Ethio couldn't place. This was the first time Kusatokani had spoken in or out of simulation. His voice was heavily accented and impossible for Ethio to place.

Maybe he's from the Web Stars?

"Question nothing and be killed by ignorance." Osino purred. Kusatokani shrugged, possibly annoyed his own adage had been countered so smoothly.

Ethio cleared his throat, "Enough. The memetics will reveal as we hit more triggers."

"You know, don't you?" Makaba challenged. "I've never done a job that I didn't know what I was hunting. It's insane, how can we prepare—"

"Then you're not as good as you think." Ethio bit back, but Makaba only chuckled. He pointed toward the next shattered building. "Let's move out."

Other than the commentary from Horne about what he would do if he was commanding the Tributaries being slaughtered below, the skiptracers travelled in silence, covering one another as they progressed through the interlinked city buildings. This was mostly unnecessary, as with Wazawa-Lia constantly scanning a five kilometer radius around them for movement while being tapped into both Directorate and indigen channels, they had little to worry about.

Night fell, the dull haze of the local star that barely penetrated the polluted cloud cover disappearing and unleashing a cloying freeze that choked the ruins. Ash and soot filled the air, the wind picking up and carrying with it the stink of a burning arcology that dominated the distant skyline. Hoarfrost crawled across the surfaces of the shattered buildings, so the skiptracers activated various heat sinks and packs to stay warm, everyone except Makaba who of course seemed to make it a point of pride to ignore physical discomfort. Ethio moved by Osino once and was shocked at the amount of heat she radiated. She caught him staring and winked.

No. Thank you.

Hexan occultists, especially their female witches, didn't want to wait for natural evolution and didn't believe in synthetic modification. They spent years rather than generations modifying their bodies with ancient provolving methods that might as well be called magic.

They didn't correct you when you called it that either.

Of all the various offshoots that humanity had engendered since they left the rock they started on, for Ethio, the Hexans were the most bizarre. They barely looked human, with stretched features and various growths, it was a wonder why the Audit hadn't made their culture illegal during the Progenic Wars.

"There." Wazawa-Lia said as they stepped out onto a skybridge. Three storeys below was the entrance to one of the freight yards. A high curtain wall

surrounded a five kilometer patch of formacrete where swarms of shuttles rose and fell. The lookout towers had been riddled with holes, the only lights now were those the Tributaries had mounted along their picket lines as they searched for threats in the surrounding buildings. High above, just beyond the anti-air fire from the indigens, waited a trio of sky carriers that received the shuttles which rotated and flew the gauntlet back down to the surface.

"There's the front door." Ethio said, referencing his map and feeling the shudder of unwinding memories.

This was Terminal 7, the third largest on the planet. When its orbital hoist was operating this place could transition thousands of tonnes of cargo a day. Inside of it was an operations hub that the Corpus were using to coordinate the withdrawal. Whatever they were looking for was there.

What the memories didn't tell him was how they were going to get there. The freightyard's eight lane entrance was wide and empty, save for burning vehicles and corpses. The Tributaries could kill anything that got close, having clogged the gateway with walls made from ballistic gel filled bags. Every few feet was a heavy automat gun emplacement manned by both soldiers in caraplate armor and larger assault harnesses of pocketsteel.

"Think they'll just let us in? I still have my ident." Horne pointed to his neck, a faded datatoo with the "T" of the Tributaries.

"They'll have orders to waste anything and anyone. Too much loot to lose if they pick the wrong guests." Ethio concluded turning to Wazawa-Lia, "Any ideas?"

"I can see a service tunnel in the blueprints." She read off a logicor screen.

Horne shook his head, "Protocol would be to collapse it or snapjack it to the gills, we'd be stuck or torn to shreds."

"They'll have eyes on the walls, we'd have to eliminate them first if we were going to scale it." Makaba pointed at the curtain wall where sniper nests didn't bother hiding. While Osino nodded and Mordrake flexed its empowered gauntlets, Horne and Wazawa-Lia scowled disdainfully.

Kill tribbs? Tricky business, there were lines you didn't want to cross, nevermind the fines in killing Hegemon soldiers.

Makaba saw Horne's face and shrugged, "What?" Makaba, feigned innocence, "None of them are going to make it off this grave world anyway. I bet you some Corpo's done the math already that paying their widows is way cheaper than a single container."

"I think I have a solution. Incoming." Wazawa-Lia cautioned, dropping back into the building. The rest reacted instinctively, momentarily confused, but then they saw it.

A massive TX-200, a rolling cinderblock of a fortress on superheavy tracks, was rolling up the avenue, taking up the middle two lanes all by itself, flattening old autos and wrecks like drink cans.

The tribbs saw it next. Ethio could almost feel their panic as every gun, automat emplacement, and close support artillery shifted to try and stop the approaching armored transport. The night exploded in a storm of ballistics, rockets, and anti-tank sabots.

"Won't work..." Condemned Horne.

Eighty centimeters of layered nusteel would have taken a matritic pulse laser at close range to do any damage. The fact that the TX-200 was also coated with a layer of *nexlock* made it virtually unbreachable. The armor coating reacted to incoming kinetic energy instantly, re-stabilizing armor plating back to their original structure with electrical charges. If you didn't cause enough damage fast enough, *nexlock* made anything it was programmed onto indestructible.

The TX-200 cleared the line of adjacent buildings, its brow alight with sparks and ricochets and puffs of impotent rocket fire. Angry green and white tracer lines stitched the night, hurting the eyes and splashing against the hull as Tributaries with repeater cannons angled down from turrets on the walls. The TX-200's hull were showered with impacts, wreathing in delicate blue electricity displaced as the *nexlock* reconfigured atomic structures back together.

Just like my nightmares—

The behemoth roared forward, picking up in inexorable momentum as its twin velanite powered generators kicked in so loud that it shattered nearby windows. The Tributaries tried hard, they really did, but they weren't prepared to face one of the most stubborn vehicles in the Hegemon. The defensive snapjacks and anti-vehicular mines were set off early or outright flattened by the patented wavemaker^{TB} resonators on the TX-200's front, the shrapnel adding to the hale storm battering against it.

One glorious trib in pocketsteel, either inspired by the bonus or by a subscribed god, stepped out from cover right in the way of the transport and opened fire with a triple barrelled trench gun on full auto at the glass of the driver's compartment rather than just fire indiscriminately.

Smart.

The armor piercing shots cracked and penetrated the windows, deforming the frames and pulping whoever was inside. The transport began to list, the body of the driver slumped over the controls, but it didn't slow down.

The TX-200 careened into the side of the yard's gateway, grinding into the formacrete in a shower of debris, and a shockwave shook the ground all the way up to where Ethio was watching. The tribes began to cheer with exultation of men and women who had just avoided annihilation. The soldier who had done it raised his gauntlet in salute towards his kill, hand outstretched then fist over heart.

Except the indigens had stopped caring about surviving this conflict long ago.

Only death was left.

The indigens couldn't have figured out how to rupture the generators. Such secrets had too many patented restrictions and safeguards to prevent such tampering. So, they had crammed every explosive, stolen warhead, and artillery shell they could into the cavernous hold of the TX-200 with a simple dead man's switch connected to the driver ready to martyr himself against the Hegemon.

Whose heart finally stopped.

There was a flash.

The explosion made a crater fifty meters wide, vaporizing everything inside and obliterating the gateway along with every trib who were liquified before being incinerated.

A shuttle trying to take off was hit with debris, adding its own hull to the firestorm, raining death on the tributary units on the wall.

That's an opening all right.

The indigens cheered, rushing forward from their positions and toward the breach. It still wouldn't be easy, already reinforcements were moving toward the shattered entrance, and Ethio could make out a bipedal tank stalking out of the smoke, its guns chattering into the rushing horde.

It was exactly the distraction they needed.

They cleared the wall using cables, or by hanging onto the five-legged ergoid which used climbing spikes to vertically ascend. It was quick work and none saw them from either side. Below them were hundreds of thousands of stacked cargo containers that had been stack in a vast grid of avenues, their shipping brands marked in glowing paint onto their sides. A city made from cargo.

The memetic echoes in their minds helped them navigate the yard based on blueprints their patron was somehow privy to. They made their way through the labyrinth toward their final destination, the processing station at the base of the macro hoist that towered above everything and disappeared into the smog-choked night sky.

Twice they had to step back into the shadows as more tribbs and porters dressed in bright coveralls and construction helmets fled from the indigen onslaught. The sounds of automat gunfire and the hiss-boom of rockets were getting closer as they advanced.

It wouldn't be long. Ethio knew that tribbs weren't known for their conviction once the price of victory became too steep.

Then they ran right into a crowd of indigens.

Casual is what Ethio would have used to describe the response from the eight skiptracers. Each one was a killer for coin and had made individual fortunes doing it. Risking discovery was never in the cards and offering quarter didn't occur to any of them.

The indigens had been looting the dead and hadn't seen their approach.

Captain Horne unsnapped his weapon from its holster, a heavy revolver, and didn't bother waiting to be told to or not to stop. He simply aimed at the closest indigen, a woman with multicolored braids sprouting from her stolen trib helmet, and cut her in half with an explosive weighted round.

The indigens reacted instantly, each one the product of a lifetime of war which might have been impressive if some of the most deadly hands in Known Space weren't set against them. They never had a chance.

Kuatokani was already rushing through them, each slash of his blade sending limbs and heads flying. His crablike organoid limbs tossed an enemy up above his head which he severed in half in a spray of arterial blood, blinding another two indigens. They tried to wipe their breath masks clear as he dispatched them.

Wazawa-Lia stepped back, focused on her screens and jamming any signals that might get out as Makaba lunged like a felid, bounding up the side of a freight stack and landing amongst several indigens in a blur of slashes and stabs from her panoply of blades.

An indigen with a scattergun blasted Mordrake as it lumbered out of the shadows at point blank range. The Yahow in autoplate casually picked him up, the heavy armored petals of its facemask opening, revealing an overdeveloped jaw with articulating teeth that blossomed open as it bit the freedom fighter's head off in a crunch of pulverized bone. The glow of the parasitic human in amber on its back glowed brighter, the speakers on the near-human's armor filing with gleeful mumbling as Mordrake reached for another indigen who tried and failed to run away as he was turned into a human club.

It was interesting for Ethio to watch the team move together, no longer in simulation. Because of their training they reacted to one another's presence perfectly, risking no overlap and giving enough room to excel at their specialties.

The surviving indigens finally broke but didn't get far. Osino was waiting for them as they fled, an evil smile across her distorted features. Ethio thought it was unnecessarily theatrical watching the Hexan witch seemingly invite the indigens to open fire on her.

They tried.

She simply moved leisurely back and forth, avoiding every spray of bullets as if this whole affair was pre-choreographed. Whenever she touched an indigen, they started screaming, their flesh putrifying and blackening only to sprout bulbous tumors and quivering fleshy masses. They bled out from every orifice, choking on their own unravelling physiology until they were puddles that Osino avoided stepping into.

Things fell quiet.

"Balancesheet..." Horne cursed, seeing the witch's handiwork. "Kill a man, stab him, set him on fire, but what in the tumble-fuck did you do to them?"

Osino regarded the veteran and smiled with blackened teeth, "Care to find out? It would take time for me to find what is left of you that still is human."

Horne raised his other hand, a sleeker dueling pistol materializing in his palm, "Stay away from me—"

"Cut it!" Ethio spat.

Wazawa-Lia tapped Ethio's shoulder, "There's activity on the comms, looks like the Corps are pulling out."

Ethio nodded, "We need to hurry."

]

At the end of the grid of freight cargo they finally reached the base of the orbital hoist. It had been heavily damaged, each one of its four massive elevators crippled, while its primary shaft seemed to list on its moorings. If it came down it would flatten thousands of kilometers beneath its mass which meant that, at least for now, the indigens had to stop using their heavier artillery.

Teams of porters worked in tandem with giant construction ergoids whose three arms effortlessly handled cargo containers. These they passed to smaller labor-harnessed workers who loaded waiting shuttles. The last squads of Tributaries rushed towards the sounds of intensifying fire to the west. All that left a group of Corpus directing the evacuation in the center of all the activity.

The skiptracers crept out from the maze and hid within the twisted remains of containers that had taken the brunt of ordinance. They watched the movements of the dock workers, their minds finally allowed to remember what the mission was.

While the containers had dozens of different brands and MacroCorp sigils painted onto their sides, the Corpus at the center of the madness were resplendent in emerald green vesturplate, mercantile styled three-piece suits made from protective armor and empowered. Ethio quickly sighted the gold sigil of *Wanvath Underwriting*, likely ensuring their highest paying customers were getting their property out as this world ended.

They would have been the mission. Each one of the representatives was likely a treasure trove of secrets, potential ransom opportunities or a chance for Wanvath's competitors to get an edge. Such internecine conflicts were expected in the Hegemon over outright conflict.

The Corpus weren't the target though, because it was the twin giants towering over them that were.

They stood so still as to present as menacing statues or inert machinery, save for the glow of the lens clusters that burned coal red under the visors of their helmets. Resplendent in hulking Tetsudyne assault-harnesses, they were the manifest nightmares of the Hegemon's most terrifying creatures: The Barakan Elite. They had been hastily spray painted with Wanvath's colors across their left shoulder guards, but were otherwise a dull matte grey. Their armor plating was pitted and scorched from recent combat. In their too-long arms they cradled massive twin-barreled mauler rifles, almost as distinctive as the armor itself.

Ethio flinched as the final words bubbled up from the canals of his brain from the memetic package placed there by their unknown employer.

Capture. One. Alive

"This is impossible, they mean the Corpos, right?" Horne said, nervously checking and rechecking his pistols. There was a ripple of curses in various tongues and dialects of interlex from the skiptracers. The incredulity of such an objective was raw insanity.

"Is this for real, Old Man?" Makaba's previous humor and cocksurety was gone. "How are they expecting us to kidnap a *Barakan*?"

"Life is nothing without a challenge that reveals worth." Kusatokani's modulated voice couldn't hide the smile that must have been on his face under that mask as he gripped his sword hilt in anticipation.

Ethio was connecting the dots now as his memory was restored. He remembered the meeting with the agent on the *BeShem* waystation where he'd been drinking himself to conclusion. The agent's face was still a mirage, suppressed, but not their offer. He understood what was needed and why each of these skiptracers had been chosen, *with his help*. Their patron had planned meticulously for this. There was a pang of guilt as he looked at his team.

Pity we've already lost two.

He raised a hand and everyone quieted, "The simulations should now make sense. Why we were going up against large, fast, targets. With the training we did we're looking for the same thing that the simulation made us work for. We're aiming for gaps in the armor, splitting them up to maximize our attacks. We only need one—"

"One!" Horne said, eyes wide, already panicking, "Have any of you ever seen what these things can do—"

"Of course I have. Look, they'll be assigned to protect those Corpos, that's why they're here, which means we can distract them by focusing on their clients. They're probably on suppressants, something to keep them in check otherwise they'd be twitching—"

"*Gekak* does that even mean, aye? You think you know them? I know them!" Horne hissed through reinforced steel teeth, getting in Ethio's face. "I was on Jerome VII! I fought in the Corebound Withdrawal, the Meridian Overture! Nothing keeps them in check except their own bloodlust!" Horne had a wild look in his eye.

"Calm down, Butcher Six." Ethio cautioned. If they made too much noise they'd be dead before they could even attempt the suicide mission. Horne must have realized this too and he took a breath, grabbed a vial from a pocket, and squeezed it up into his nose.

"You couldn't pay me to fight alongside those *hoerdier* scum again. But to do a pitch against them? Even exogens will kill themselves before going up against the Barakan if they know what's coming."

"The scope of our memory suppression is understandable." Wazawa-Lia noted.

"Strange," This from Osino who was elegantly perched in cover, her widened eyes never blinking as she studied them, "They are like nothing I have ever seen before... They are... less? Than human? More? I have always wondered what they would look like. I can understand why I agreed to the inhibition to my hippocampus."

"Has anyone ever done this?" Makaba crept between Ethio and Horne who sat in the dust as the effects of whatever narco he'd inhaled slowed his heart and calmed him.

"No, of course not. But I have *fought* them before."

"As-have-I," growled Mordrake, "Old-foe." The near human bit the air and shuddered.

Makaba grinned, some of her confidence back, "Then there's a plan!"

"No one has a plan against those things except how fast you can run." Horne again.

"That will definitely be part of it." Ethio pointed at the Barakan, "We need to split them up, do as much damage as possible up to a point. The contract designates we need a living torso and cranial unit. I'll go over the schematics I'm aware of and their capabilities, but everything relies on us chipping away at them long enough for Osini to get within proximity and... do whatever she does to knock one out."

Osini's tongue flicked out and she joined the growing huddle, "It will take me time, up close, to understand their biology before I can enact any rite."

Whatever that means.

"No." Horne said, clearing his throat and spitting. "I'm out."

"No? What do you mean, we need everyone one this." Ethio rebuked.

"*Banty-shite*," Mordrake said, an accusation and a condemnation of Horne.

"Call me a *coward* again and I'll crack that amber." The veteran said without looking up. "I'm not a coward, I'll do this, but I want to know what you meant when you said you'd fought them."

"It doesn't matter."

"It does to me." He stood, looking Ethio full in the eye, "You some kind of Unionist? A bored Corpo that went and played rebel? How else can you afford being a

rewind? I want to know why you get to pick the plan!" He spit.

Ethio imagined punching the trib veteran's stitched-together face, but he supposed he needed to get the gunslinger on board if this had any chance of working.

Before he could though—

Wazawa-Lia chimed in, "Butcher Leader fought the Barakan registered to Source Unlimited MacroCorp during the Kanatha Cessation." Her head tilted, the boxy visor over her face sighing as it worked, "This is why he was made Lead." She tilted her head, absorbing information from whatever data stack she'd plugged into, "The Suns Confederated launched an attack on the Kanatha Dominion at Port Tapella, Dwarr-Ethio is listed as a mercenary—"

"I volunteered." Ethio snapped. He hadn't meant to. The thoughts came unbidden.

My friends screaming.

Her, dead in his arms.

Corrosive darkness eating the sky as we look up.

The Barakan unleashed without restraint as I rally the survivors for a final stand that only I survive.

Wazawa-Lia made a little bow, "Apologies, I am simply reading the report provided in the module."

"To kill for ideals is without honor." Kusatokani tutted, one of his claws clicking. "Only through profit does the leaf find purpose upon the wind—"

"You *fought* them?" Makaba insisted, cutting off the four-armed swordsman.

"I have. We did. We lost."

Everything.

The people before him waited for him to say something, anything.

"I have a plan."

He motioned to the ergoid, which began to unfold its armored shell. The skiptracers drew closer and prepared.

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Assurance Specialist Ilishaan, Grade 2, dialed up the sound dampeners in her helmet as she tried to focus on her data filings. It was getting harder to focus as the grounder natives got closer. The last of the tributaries had run off, which was a blessing as she hated being around soldiers. Too loud and clumsy, the kind of emotional that came with subpar education standards.

To her own team's credit, they were making great time as they prioritized the catalog of containers and got them to the shuttles. Said shuttles were doing a good job of surviving the trip back to the carriers above, covered by screens of Armada fighters keeping the skies relatively safe. On the ground it was different and Ilishaan worried about every rumble and tremble in the formacrete beneath her.

They were running out of time.

The tributaries had promised they could hold the line, even after that explosion at the entrance. She knew as the managing officer calmly explained through her mic that this was a momentary setback, that she was calling in heavier vehicles to block off the indigens, that everything was fine.

Ilishaan knew that this was because of the bonus Wanvath had offered for every shuttle that got through as well as the safety of Wanvath staff. She didn't worry about the latter. Not with... *them*, standing over her team.

The Barakan Elite, two instances, twins save for slight differences in facial masks. Ilishaan had never worked under the protection of Barakan and had made sure the anti-rads she took were the highest grade available. What little she knew of the things was that Wanvath had contracted the 198th Division at the start of the quat when the indigen resistance had started to encroach Directorate positions. They had sent a squad, a '*menace*' as the paperwork called it, which had then been dispersed across planetary operations.

It had been her call to do that, spreading the Barakan to all operations on the planet.

No one had questioned it, an extra layer of protection from the rabble was appreciated by her associates. There was already talk about a promotion when she got back to Corpo headquarters in the ExeCor.

Then she'd never have to suffer gravity again. She'd have an office on a proper orbital, maybe her own business, with clean air and regulated populations of the proper credit rating. This dingy little yard in a random city with its cheap orbital hoist was the last time she'd have to get her hands dirty with grounder jetsam.

Time to dream later.

"Cargo crates 9-4269 through 12-3231 get priority for the next run, got it?" One of her aides tapped into his wrist logicor, then started yelling at a bunch of porters.

She stole a glance at one of the Barakan behind her. It was already looking at her, its eye lenses whirring as they focused on her. Studying her.

“Um—” she pretended like she was looking for her personal assistant, a thin man named Ghet. “Make the porters hurry up, make sure they use the ergoids, we don't have time to care how the work is done, just that it's done!”

Ghet looked up, confused, mouth open and dull-eyed. He was the 'must-hire,' his father was someone notable who had pulled strings. She didn't like Ghet's face and he only ever wanted to work a day shift.

He turned back to her, his lips moving. Ilishaan realized her dampeners were still up. She reached for the dial to turn them off but saw his eyes go wide, tracking something behind her, “What's wrong—”

The Barakan was on her, covering her with its massive armored frame.

“Brace-self.” It rumbled like a pressure breach filtered through static.

She pissed herself.

The defensive hood in her collar snapped up and over her head just as the Barakan lifted her off her feet and held her away from a spray of incoming bullets. A round bounced off Tetsudyne armor and into Ghet's cheekbone before his own hood could come down. His face deflated in a spray of blood and bone fragments.

“Please don't kill me!” She begged as the Barakan gripped her vesturplate so hard the fabric-appearing armor twisted and bent. “Whatever you want! Founder's balls! I don't want to die—”

It barked something in it's own language, “***Kepalive I kilol!***” It looked down at Ilishaan, ““You-will-be-safe.” It flicked its wrist, tossing her away.

She hit the ground hard, skidding across formacrete, dislocating her arm. Her suit instantly injected her with soothing high grade narcotics that misted her face with calming scents. She watched as the second Barakan marched forward with its mauler, scanning for threats as bullets pinged off its body. A porter slipped in front of it and was instantly crushed to a pulp. The Barakan didn't seem to notice.

The first leapt into the air, thruster system in its boots erupting in a blast of heat.

Only then did she realize her dampeners were still on.
And that she was screaming—

The Barakan made a three point landing at the lip of a crater, backwash from its boots' integrated thrusters blackening the formacrete. With its integrated brain it was already making a dozen calculations far beyond the considerations of a standard human mind. Its armor made its body respond to thought almost in tandem without the biological delay of a regular human mind.

The skiptracer's had armed their ergoid with Butcher Two's sniper rifle. It swung about to engage the Barakan, firing. The Barakan bounded forward as it shrugged off high caliber rounds. It raised its mauler and shredded the front two legs of the ergoid in a sustained burst of armor-piercing rounds.

The ergoid jettisoned those legs, scuttling backward on the remaining two while its armed limb tracked the Barakan, but it wasn't enough. At eight meters away the Barakan leapt again, raised the mauler, and brought it down onto the central processing unit at the center of the synthetic. The gun's hyper-dense frame, designed to be a club and backed by the incredible strength of the mercenary, shattered the ergoid with a single strike.

And triggered the bomb that had been stashed within it.

Three tubes of kantex^{IB} formed a column of destruction that nudged the Barakan back exactly one step as destabilized plasma swept over it. The conflagration earned a dead eye lens and opened two rents in its armor that vented internal atmosphere.

In this moment another enemy appeared, outside of the crater, shooting controlled three-round bursts. The Barakan twitched, zeroing in, remaining eye burning through the smoke, focusing on the thermal trail of a small augmented human. There was a momentary shuffling of internal machinery and the leaks were sealed.

It raised its mauler to fire and squeezed the trigger, eliciting nothing but an impotent *click-click-click*. Peering down it saw that shrapnel fragments had jammed the firing mechanism. A bullet suddenly burst through the Barakan's neck joint eliciting a squirt of blood. It refocused on its prey. It tossed the useless mauler away and unsheathed a telescoping wrist knife, charging.

Makaba had fought giants before. Multi-limbed exogens from a dozen different worlds, gladiatorial pits with cobbled together chimeric human beings with all manner of augmentations making them into mythical and imagined beasts. She'd fought synthetics and monsters, hunted down criminals and chapak atrocities pretending to be human.

Nothing was anything like the Barakan.

It was too big, too strong and too fast. It bore down on her like a runaway locomotive, boots smashing the ground apart as it reached for her. Makaba skipped back out of cover, her artificial muscles snapping so hard she felt skin tear, but it was barely enough to keep away.

She kept firing bursts with her autorifle, each bullet a miniature rocket that was designed to burrow through shell, hide and skin before converting into an energy pulse that would cause catastrophic internal wounds.

If the Barakan was hurt it didn't show it. Every part of it could kill her, from stamping boots to blade strikes and slashes, even the merest glancing blow from its body would be like getting hit by an autocar on a highway.

Her size was her only advantage, weaving and—

It grabbed the rifle barrel and yanked it back, sending Makaba flying over its shoulder guard and back down into the crater. She twisted her body, rolling rather than crashing and was back on her feet, a knife already in her hand.

The red eye of light found her, tossing the rifle, now just a twisted wreck, and began to approach her with a measured gait. She readied herself, but, something was wrong?

The eye...

A fear, deep in her psyche, arose, twisted apart her focus—

Makaba couldn't ignore the pain anymore.

Her arms and legs were slick with blood, ribs bruised, it was hard to breath.

I'm ten again, I'm running, I can hear their howls.

Father's flock, I was supposed to keep them safe!

The red eyes of the shadow worgs—

"What— what the hell?" She clawed at her ears as if insects were crawling into her brain, drawing blood. Makaba slapped the organoid buried in her neck; An emergency cocktail of anti-psychotics, adrenaline and focus drugs rushed across her veins, straight into her heart and exploding across her body.

"That's right, let's go!" The chemical blastwave brought her back.

The Barakan was bearing down on her, armor clanking against itself in a growing cacophony. Whatever fear that had taken her was mercifully gone and now it was just focus and the thrill of an adrenaline-soaked high.

Makaba launched a series of molecular-sharp blades, each one perfectly balanced and aimed. She backed up, trying to slow the Barakan down, but it didn't even acknowledge the blades buried in its body.

"Now?" She screamed to the air, "Don't let me go like this!"

The Barakan suddenly caught one of her blades, reversed it and threw it back at her. She tried to dodge but the dart went into her leg down to the hilt. She went down, grabbing her last weapon, a specialized ax, and got back up.

"I could really use some help!" She pleaded.

As it reached for her she spun the ax in a momentum-multiplying arc and aimed right at its face—

The Barakan parried the ax on its own blade causing it to split by two inches against the superior alloy of the wrist dagger. There was a terrible moment, the worst second of her life, as she looked up into the skull-like faceplate with its twisting coils of tubes and the cloying stink of its reactors.

Its rasping, almost sickly breathing through the grill filters.

She pressed a button in the hilt of the ax.

The axehead exploded outward and up into that mask, its integrated cartridge of shot and powder erupting through specialized grooves in the blade of the axe.

A *blast-ax* was designed to breach a door or carve through autoplate by directing an explosion into the breach the ax blade made. It technically wasn't supposed to be a melee weapon, but then everything in Makaba's hands was exactly that.

The Barakan didn't so much as flinch even as that faceplate cracked and the breathing tubes in its grille shredded. It groaned through its amplifiers and batted the ax away and swung back in a single motion that knocked Makaba back minus her left hand.

She didn't scream. The blade was so terrifyingly sharp that her bone, muscle, and even the myoflex reinforcing both didn't snag on its edge. Her hand was spinning away as she danced back again to avoid another blow that would have decapitated her.

"Now." Ethio ordered over the comms.

Mordrake ran into the base of a container stack at full speed. The mule's strength in the autoplate sent the column crashing down into the crater directly onto the Barakan. Makaba missed being flattened by all but an arm's length.

Ethio watched from across the yard as the entire stack came down. Horne was next to him, eyes not leaving the remaining Barakan which was scanning for enemies while covering the Corpo representatives as they scrambled toward a shuttle that was still landing, dust kicking up in clouds.

"That's only going to hold it for a few minutes. We focus on the Corps, they'll be contracted to protect, ready?"

"Don't have to ask me twice," Horne's twin pistols came up and he began to firing. Despite the range, two, then three Corpsos fell. Their armor was top

grade, but the people wearing them were not soldiers. They did more damage to themselves trying to jump out of the way, jostling each other with magnified strength that broke arms and legs. Ethio noticed out of hand that Horne avoided the hitting the porters. It made sense. He was likely poor credit and the poors always had a soft spot for each other.

The second Barakan's head snapped to exactly where Horne and Ethio were crouched behind a truck and returned fire. An hailstorm of superheated tungsten swept into their cover, splintering steel and chewing the vehicle apart.

"Wait for it!" Ethio yelled as a bullet fragment sliced through his cheek. Horne reloaded and only winced as his boot exploded, revealing synthetic toes.

The barrage stopped as abruptly as it began.

The Barakan ejected the double cartridges in a single twist, its other hand already grabbing a fresh magazine from the hopper carriage on its legs.

In the seconds before it could reload, Horne was up, aiming both pistols like some kind of gunfighter from a visutel Frontier drama. He hit the Barakan seven times before it reloaded and immediately fired back, knocking Horne off his boots and onto his back.

The bullets didn't, couldn't, penetrate Tetsudyne armor but Horne had picked his ammunition specifically for this. The digit-long bullets were magnetized, glowing brightly as they attached to shoulder guards, chest and legs.

On the ground, Horne squeezed the handles of his pistols, initiating a signal connecting them to their bullets. There was an eruption of electricity that engulfed the Barakan that spread to two nearby Corpus whose hair cooked and skin blackened, leaving them writhing and screaming.

A single one of the shockrounds would have downed a grown man of two hundred pounds and Horne had struck the Barakan with seven. Its eye lenses darkened, body convulsing, the mauler's handle snapping beneath the strength of its constricting fists. The pilot lights of the autoplate went out and it fell to a knee, smoking and sparking as the shockrounds expended their charge. With its autoplate shut down it couldn't protect itself. Tetsudyne armor weighed close to nine hundred kilograms without empowerment.

"Kusatokani!" Ethio bellowed, grabbing Horne off the ground and hauling him onto his feet.

"I'm fine—" the bullet had cratered his caraplate which had saved him.

"Let's go!" Ethio was running toward the crippled Barakan.

The approaching shuttle angled a nose mounted cannon toward them, dust kicking up from the backwash from its thrusters. Ethio aimed his own pistol at the shuttle in what would look like a pathetic act of defiance.

That is, to the uninitiated.

Ethio held the trigger for two precious seconds, sapping from the pistol's irreplaceable energy source, before letting go. Light accumulated around the end of the barrel, gold light as pure as the sun of Protea. Without any recoil, it produced an orb of opaque light that emitted through a series of lenses along the barrel, amplifying and intensifying it, before producing a ray that briefly connected the weapon to the shuttle's prow.

The fire of a star, even for the briefest of moments, was exposed to a single centimeter of the shuttle, passed through it, and continued for a kilometer. Everything and everyone graced by such light was utterly obliterated in a column of collapsing matter, the atmosphere within a meter radius of the beam vaporized entirely.

The shuttle ceased to exist, its halved pieces falling away to crash into the lines of freight cargo. The screams of surviving Corpos and porters were drowned out by the resulting explosion.

Lit by this firestorm, Kusatokani appeared at top speed from the other side of the courtyard. Low to the ground, his organic-looking crab arms splayed outward to balance him as his two real hands gripped his unsheathed sword. It was insane, but then all conflict made by humanity was madness. A man with a sword rushing toward a giant in armor made to survive combat in space, backlit by the wrath of a technology that should have stayed lost in the hands of a bankrupted failed rebel.

"Aim for the generator on its back!"

Kusatokani chuckled over the comms as he somersaulted through burning wreckage, cutting a confused-looking Corpo in half.

"Steel sings in the dawn."

"Butcher Five, stick to the plan, acknowledge—"

"One perfect cut—fame blossoms."

"He's going to kill it." Horne wheezed, "He's going for it."

"Honor bears my name!"

"Kusatokani STOP!"

At nine meters from the Barakan the swordsman leapt, blade rising up in an executioner's configuration. A lifetime of training, sacrifice, augmentation, self improvement, forced improvement, forbidden education modules.

Kusatokani was a master of the Nine Deaths, his hands blessed by Kuntao, he was a high priest of the Nedu-kob, the Blade of the Sea. There was none like him, none who could match the perfection he had achieved and the wealth that stood as evidence of his mastery. With the life of this Barakan monster, he would be anointed.

A single cut.

One perfect thing.

This is why he had been born. Why he had made himself. All for this moment. His stroke would be perfect, the curved single-sided blade alight with reflected flame angled to behead the Barakan just above its neck guard and below its casque helmet. His blade was made from quarkalloy, forged in the darkness of a singularity by exiled Saami Bladesmiths, he could have cut directly through the Barakan, but he would give it the honor it deserved.

He had composed a poem as he had laid in wait, not looking at the Barakan lest its cogit-hood pick up on his intention before the attack. His mind, the technology within him, his true Self, all were focused on exactly where his strike would land. He spoke the words now in his mind as the world became quiet and time slowed.

The war of peace, With no enemy, allies untrusted.

Moment of—

The Barakan's arm shot out, its fingers punching through Kusatokani's lightweight armor and impaling him in a geyser of blood.

Shit.

"Shit!" Horne stumbled, dropping one of his revolvers as he rushed to reload.

Ethio had never seen this, he wasn't sure what he should do as he aimed the pistol at the giant who was already turning on him, eye lenses coming back online, its fist articulating and closing around Kusatokani's spine.

This was supposed to work!

Ethio's mind raced at the failure of his plan. At Port Tapella they had detonated a small yield atomika to short out the first wave of Barakan, sacrificing the small city with a thousand years of radiation poisoning to shut down twenty of the Barakan so they could kill them with an army's combined firepower. That had worked!

What just happened?

It flung Kusatokani at Ethio, the swordman's rag doll of a body slamming into him and knocking him clear off his boots, painting him in gore.

"No! Oh, gods! Please!" Horne screamed a high-pitched howl as the Barakan barreled into him, not even bothering to use its hands. It began stamping on the former tributary whose many organoids kept him alive and screaming far longer than anyone should be.

Ethio pushed Kusatokani off of himself and got up, his exoskeleton taking over for his faded strength. He looked at the swordsman, the broken beast mask revealing a scar covered face, his remaining eye still blinking as it looked up at Ethio.

"Sorry." Ethio spat Kusatokani's blood out of his mouth.

He needed to move, fast, the Barakan was pulling Horne's limbs off and was momentarily distracted as to how its victim was still alive. Ethio's matritic pistol was still charging and the chances of hitting a Barakan, now somehow moving, was going to be almost impossible. He stumbled away from the Barakan.

"Butcher Three? Five and Six are dead, I... *help!*" He yelled into the comms.

"Considering alternatives, Butcher Lead." Wazawa-Lia needed to be more alarmed but instead sounded like she was ordering a delivery meal.

Horne's screaming stopped with a sickening squelch as his head detached. The Barakan threw it over its shoulder and searched for Ethio, who was now running. He fiddled with his pistol's settings, getting clumsy, but got it.

The Barakan was stomping toward him.

Calm down. It breaths, it bleeds, you can kill it.

He turned, activating his coat, and aimed. There was a series of archaic clicks and whirring before a friendly chime.

I might get lucky.

Ethio manifested as micro-emitters hummed to life across his coat. A second later he fired, trying not to think, all instinct. Barakan could pick up on your thoughts, or something like that.

Stay random, it can't preempt an unknown.

But the Barakan had already shifted, the single spark of a star blasting a section of dirt and creating a fist-sized fused explosion of formacrete. It moved faster, arms pumping, recognizing a real threat to its existence.

Ethio fired again, taking a step back, again, then again. He strafed, letting his reflections criss cross, hopefully confounding the Barakan, the emitters able to proxy the matritic hard-light bolts.

The Barakan somehow dodged even the fake rounds, getting closer and closer.

Ethio had considered his own death many times and had adopted a malaise about his own existence. He lived because that was what living things that didn't have to die did. To somehow "end" was beyond his comprehension in the same way that a planet didn't worry about an asteroid. The universe was random chance and having too much of an opinion on the subject was... *mortal*.

He closed his eyes.

To hell with it.

And fired.

And the universe rewarded him. The bolt of light had struck the Barakan, searing right through its shoulder pauldron. It lost its footing, careening forward, still reaching for him, roaring in its own guttural language. Its fingers tore into Ethio's face, ready to rip his jaw off, but it fell through one of the photo-proxies, stumbling.

Ethio actually laughed, two meters away and safe, lining up another shot. To watch a thing so massive, so calculated, in its movements at almost a tonne, to flounder and almost fall face-first was outright comical.

Until it looked up at him, eye lenses blazing, and pushed off the ground coming right at him. Ethio spun back and the sympathetic logicors in his boots reacted to his thoughts. Blue orbs of cold fusion winked into existence, sending him back and up ten meters into the sky. Lucky for him the boots sensed the mass of an inert labor ergoid and he spun away from a collision.

The Barakan moved without hesitation, kicking off the ground and after him, its own thrusters blasting a contrail of ignited gasses and blackening the ground.

You things are never surprised.

He fired, straight down, but this time the Barakan reflected the bolt with its wrist blade. The quarkalloy scattered the light even as it was atomized, not slowing the monster down even for a second.

Ethio exhaled. Ready for whatever came next.

"I am enacting a protocol, Butcher Lead." Wazawa-Lia's interrupted his thoughts.

The construction ergoid came to life, pilot lights suddenly blazing, reaching out and grabbing the rising Barakan in a forklift of a fist. The Barakan squirmed against the machine, arm hammering down but it was solidly pinned. The ergoid made a strange bleating sound, maethish code screeching before flexing its 'fingers.'

The Barakan groaned, the sound of nusteel crushing and ultradense bone snapping. Ethio watched from above, suspended on orbs of cold fire, "Quick thinking, Butcher Three, how did you do—"

The Barakan raised its other fist at Ethio and with a burst of gas its *second* blade ejected straight up into Ethio's chest.

He fell.

}

Makaba willed the arteries in her arm to close and pulled a hunting blade out of her boot as if it could do anything in this fight, but it was all she had left. She sucked in air, gagging on the ash on the wind, suddenly wishing she had taken Ethio up on that mask.

Mordrake was roaring in some archaic language through its collar speakers, thumping its armored chest and throttling the smaller Barakan who took the strikes on its forearms. The Yahow's skull was blazing with cogit implants as the man in amber on its back glowed through the armored frame of the autoplate. Mordrake barked, gnashing blocky teeth and spraying gobs of spittle as it wrestled.

But if strength was all that was needed, the Barakan would never have become the Hegemon's most terrible weapon.

It caught one wild haymaker and twisted, using Mordrake's own weight and momentum to angle the arm to overextend and snap at the elbow. With its other arm it made a quick jab that pulverized the elbow entirely.

The Barakan made a chopping motion that severed the cabling in Mordrake's right leg forcing them down. It backhanded the Barakan with its other arm, sending the monster back in a shower of broken faceplate. Mordrake grabbed at the broken helmet, twisting, exposing a face that was an atrocity of humanity.

The Barakan was hairless, eyelids surgically removed, completely androgynous with its flesh stretched obscenely over an altered skull with overdeveloped facial muscles. Datattoos were inked across half its forehead and down its jawline. Scars, so many scars, and stud implants further twisted its features.

Mordrake lifted the Barakan off the ground, servos in its empowered arm straining. The Yahow revealed its face, ready to bite the Barakan's own clear off.

Which the Barkan had clearly waited for.

Explosives, similar to what would be seen on an anti-personnel mine or the countermeasures on a tank, were built into its chestplate. They exploded in a fan of ball bearings, reducing the Yahow's exposed face to smoking pulp.

Makaba licked her lips, cracked and bleeding as the Barakan regained its footing. It slowly turned its freakish head toward her. She had had moments like this. In a great battle, in a prolonged hunt. The body of any living being needed to reassess, to take a moment to consider the situation.

She regarded the monster. The monster looked back at her.

She knew as much about the Barakan as most consumers in the Hegemon.

Nothing.

Its black eyes never left hers as it kicked Mordrake over and brought its heel down on the amber coffin on the Yahow's back. It shattered like glass, scattering across the ground.

Then it began to limp toward her.

She raised her knife into a guard position. It had had two crates dropped on it, been blown up, shot, and stabbed more times than it mattered to count and throttled by a near-human in autoplate.

And it was limping.

"Let's finish it then." She smiled and, shockingly, it smiled back—

Osino appeared, stepping out of thin air, and stabbed two fingers up into the Barakan's exposed neck in a smooth, gentle motion. It stopped walking, eyes twitching to Osino, its smile replaced by a mouth stretched open as it began to choke. Osino pushed deeper, fingers pushing open flesh and under the jaw, into veins and muscle. The Barakan sank to its knees, limbs going limp.

Makaba couldn't believe it as she crept forward, watching as the veins in the Barakan's face bulge, squirming like worms under the corpse-pallid skin. Its eyes were vacant, almost clouded over as it gasped for air.

"What are you doing to it?" Makaba asked when she was close but far enough away if the Barakan snapped out of whatever trance Osino had put it in.

"I... am... calming... it." Osino was struggling to speak, Makaba saw spittle and tears.

"Is it working?"

"Yes..." Osino used her other hand to push something in her own neck, fingers pushing downward and producing a strange, milky, substance which she drew like spider silk. This she put into the Barakan's mouth, feeding it directly. "Yes, huntress, it is working."

This lasted for several minutes, the Hexan feeding more and more of her bodily fluids into the Barakan who seemed to have become catatonic.

"How did you do that? I didn't see you coming?" Makaba said when she thought it was alright to ask.

"I move within your natural blindspot and that of the Barakan." Osino mumbled. She was straining with exertion, droplets of sweat running down her distended neck. "You have my thanks, without your sacrifice I could not have traced the heart rate, brain activity, pheromonal excretions."

Makaba raised her stump, the blood already clotting, and pointed to Mordrake, "At least I didn't end up like them."

"Indeed. The Tributary veteran, the provoked swordsman, both premier in their craft have also had their lines ended. A pity, although I suppose four of ten for one such as this is an impressive capture by any measure." Blood dropped from the long nose of the Hexan witch, but she didn't stop the slow drawing from her neck.

"Liable for a bonus," Makaba considered, their success compounding in her mind. "But then we still don't know the patron."

"I have high expectations when we meet them. But our journey is not done yet. I will not be able to move this one. Its immune system and... willpower?" It was a question that Makaba couldn't begin to understand how to answer. "Resists and adapts to me. I will need to administer a constant dosage or it will awaken."

Makaba nodded and ran. She was still careful. Osino was right, you still had to get back to camp after you made the kill. This was when people made mistakes and when other predators would take advantage of your exhaustion.

The battle had taken just under seven minutes since Ethio had launched their attack. In that time there was a downed shuttle, dozens of dead porters that had been caught in the crossfire, and the wrecks of vehicles and labor harnesses.

She sped past a construction ergoid, its chest logicors strobing out of sync, obviously cracked by a skiver which meant Wazawa-Lia had survived. In one of the ergoid's limbs was the crushed form of the second Barakan, looking more like a compacted auto than anything that had been alive.

Makaba got around the ergoid to reveal a small crowd of Corps, huddled together as the Old Man held a pistol over them. He was beaten, bleeding, a blade almost a meter long impaling him through his upper chest. Wazawa-Lia stood on the other side of the group, also holding a revolver.

A crash site smoldered nearby, a shuttle killed by some kind of energy weapon. She approached, knife at the ready. Ethio regarded her, his face a patchwork of cuts and bruises. Makaba considered him handsome in a way she hadn't thought of before, except for his eyes. They were too old.

"You lost your mask," she began, "This air'll kill you."

He laughed, a hollow sound, "Did it work?"

"Yes. Not sure how or why. It's just me and Osino left, she needs to stay with it to keep it sedated." He saw her own wound and she suddenly felt self-conscious. "Not the first time, I'm fine. I'll get it reconstituted, maybe even improved with this payday. We're all going to be prime credit after this!"

"Good job." He coughed, blood coming up. He wiped it away with the wrist of the hand holding his ornate pistol. The other arm was limp, likely due to cut tendons.

"The locals are getting closer. Won't have much time to get out of here." She shuddered. Her body was exhausted and soon the narco withdrawals would hit.

"The last shuttle out of here will be us." He was definitive but she could also hear the same exhaustion. Whatever he was pumping into his body to counter

the damage done to him was slowing him down. None of them could go another round with tributaries or angry indigens for very long.

"Osino says she'll need help moving its body. In the armor we'll need a something big to move it." There were a few labor harnesses sitting inert, they couldn't be too hard to operate.

"I'll do you one better," Ethio said, spitting and walking over to the Corpos. They cringed, holding onto one another in their suits of armor. Many started pleading, offering wild sums of finance, begging.

He ignored them and cleared his throat and said loudly, "*Culture fit, red, camio, hatchway, seventy-seven, brigand, adoration.*"

The Corpos looked at one another, confused, then one woman stood.

"Uh, that's me." She had her visor up so they couldn't see her face. "I'm your contact."

One of the Corpos gasped, another shouted, "How could you?"

"You have a shuttle?" Ethio winced, aiming his pistol back at the Corpos, just in case any of them got angry enough to get stupid.

"No, but I can signal one, we can take the asset and just go—"

"Traitor!" another Corpo yelled. The woman took a timid step back, toward Ethio.

"There, uh, can't be, um, any— you know." She pointed at her co-workers. "This, all this, can't be, you know— they can't tell Wanvath I was involved!"

Ethio sighed, "No. We're not doing that. They can have as good enough of a shot as anyone to get out of here, but we aren't killing anyone else."

"I'll do it." Makaba said, almost joking. She didn't mind wasting Corpos. No one did in her experience, not even other Corpos.

"Enough," Ethio said, an edge beneath his weariness. How he was still moving with that blade straight through him must have been a trick he could pull. Like how she had stopped the stump of her hand from bleeding.

We all have tricks.

Makaba shrugged, "That gunfire's almost on top of us."

"You have a way of moving the body?" Ethio prodded the Corpo woman.

"Of course, everything's ready," she referenced a screen integrated into her wrist. "Cargo container 001/01/32 has priority shipping with a cryogenic unit—"

"Let's go then."

}

The shuttle took them up to the carrier where the remaining skiptracers posed as associates of Assurance Specialist Ilishaan, Grade 2, who had absolute authority from Wanvath to operate as she pleased. No one bothered them, the withdrawal was taking everything the Directorate had and they were still leaving a lot behind, never mind the tributaries still engaged screaming on every channel for help.

The planet fell entirely as they reached orbit an hour later. The indigens

had no stellar capabilities but they did have surface to orbit ordinance. These they launched en masse, filling the northern hemisphere with hundreds of missiles. Ethio knew that this was both to destroy any Armada vessel too slow to get out of the way but, more importantly to the indigens, to fill their orbit with so much debris that it would block reentry into their atmosphere unscathed.

Ethio didn't care, and neither did the Hegemon. This world, he wasn't even sure of its name, would die alone. Its histories would be forgotten, the ledger of its value passing into the index of the fiscal year.

The carrier fell into formation with the rest of the Armada vessels which slowly made their way out of orbit and toward a rendezvous point where they would likely translate into the Outside once they reached an aperture zone.

With ships going back and forth, ferrying wounded and material to their proper conveyors, the MassTrader quickship silently transferred the skiptracers and their cargo before igniting its afterburners. There were demands for deceleration, even a brief target lock, but the Captain of the quickship initiated her vessel's far more advanced countermeasures and they slipped away, all but invisible.

"Where are we going?" Ethio asked, wincing as the rising inertia pressed against his many wounds. He was healing well, the quickship housed an extremely advanced medical facility. He had taken the Barakan punch blade and made it into a makeshift blade on his belt which he gripped to steady himself now.

The Captain, an orbiter with a clean-shaven head, kept making a face like she'd stepped in something whenever she looked at him. Orbiters were like that.

"We go where the Pilot points us," she nodded to the man plugged in, literally, in a cradle at the center of the small bridge. "But, not wanting to make you jumpy before we descend in the Outside, we're headed to the Vela Nebula."

Ethio frowned. He'd expected the ExeCor.

I hate the Vela Nebula. Too few planets, too many velanite barons that called themselves the 'Copper Kings,' acting like Corpos but ruling over their little kingdom. Self made royalty.

"How long are we going under? I'll tell my people to get some sleep."

"Nine days under." She glanced at him, "But then, our patron said you can use the sensation pods for your own use. A bonus, I guess."

Ethio was shocked at this gesture, "Thank you, that's generous of them."

"Sixteen hours until we can descend, stick to your own quarters. If you want to get in a pod, that's fine with me but I don't want my people bothered by the likes of you and your killers, especially when we get into the Outside." She made dismissive gesture, the fingers contorted in what was probably an orbiter curse.

Fine.

He left, heading down the narrow hallways. The ship's caeliners, also orbiters, slid past him and didn't acknowledge him.

He reached the mess hall, a small room that could fit twenty around several tables. Makaba was there speaking with Wazawa-Lia in hushed tones over cups of tea they must have bought from the dispenser.

He was about to say something but he just nodded. They weren't a team, they were co-workers. He didn't know them and he didn't want to and his role as their leader was over now that the Barakan was sealed in a vault with Osino. The 'Old Man' had been around for too long to make more friends. After this job was done they'd go their separate ways, or at least he would.

Instead he went back to where the sensation pods were. The Grade S coffin was ironically just like the CrashPod^{tB} he'd been crammed into. It was all rounded edges, Yinntoshi tech, without any cables or neural needles, just a little water that would connect with his nerves and senses with guided reciprocating electricity.

He stripped down and eased into it.

Thoughts that were not his own whispered in his mind about what he would like to experience. Scenarios, lewd or exciting, blossomed as possible ways forward, but there was only one place he would ever want to be when not suffering in a life that never ended.

With her.

Rain clouds about to make landfall against a beach of volcanic sand.

Her, in his arms, getting closer to him even though they were pressed against each other.

Before their world ended, again, and before he had to be alive, chasing more and earning profit and fighting and killing. One day he would be able to pay for one of these pods and lock himself away forever.

But not yet.

Part 2

Everyone hates the Outside, whether they know it or not.

Ethio no longer partook in religio-subscriptions, they were intoxicating but, ultimately, the universe got too big for such simple answers. He had gotten over the questions that dogged intellectuals and he'd been in enough foxholes to appreciate the panicked notion of a greater being to beg to for more time. It was the rituals that had done him in, and his diminishing funds that had plagued him since the start of his third adulthood.

What he had taken away from his experience as a devout Katik subscriber for sixty fiscal cycles was that there was an objective human experience beyond the confines of direct physical engagement. That is to say, he believed that there was what a man could see and feel and have an opinion on, but that that same man was also subject to the collective experience that influenced all opinions.

And everyone hated the Outside.

Grounders didn't believe in other worlds, not deep down in their sense of Self, until they actually walked on one. They thought of planets like islands or mountains, floating in the dark as much as Orbiters that lived on torusan stations or the larger worldrings thought everything was suspended in a vast, directionless, void. If humans didn't experience something, if they couldn't register it with all five of the natural senses, then they could never really believe anything.

But there was something about the Outside that rubbed everyone that tried to understand it the wrong way. Advertisers and Entertainment Corps did their best to mitigate anyone from thinking about it too much. Ships left their orbits, blasted into the unknown and arrived shortly thereafter safe and sound. Fleets of freightliners filled with goods came from resource wealthy anywhere and brought goods right to your opti-unit, effortless and without concern.

Only when you wanted to leave the safety of your home star were you forced to learn even just the basics of the Outside. The Outside made one realize that every conception that attempted to reduce existence to a manageable state was futile. Reality shouldn't be shrunk down to a more manageable state when it was indeed, miniscule to the enormity of the abyss it was surrounded by.

Most Consumers wrote off the Outside to an abstract necessity, the way Grounders might consider the sky, or an Orbiter the outer composition of the hull. The sky was obviously 'out there' and vital in some way connected to the air they were breathing, but not something to think much more on. If one were to ask a Consumer, even one with access to advanced education modules, they would still struggle to truly grasp the paraquantum nothing outside of their understanding of reality.

Grounders often had panic attacks when they saw the world they had grown up on appear no larger than a ball as they flew above it. Orbiters could lay catatonic on the ground when they comprehended how small their stations were when compared to a planetary biosphere. Everyone, and that meant everyone, struggled for the rest of their lives to reconcile how small reality really was when they went through the Outside.

Ethio remembered that in his childhood, his first one, that is, of being enamored with the stars and the stories of the worlds that spun about them. Most people who grow up in the ExeCor systems can think of little else. Beyond the borders of the overdeveloped and entirely claimed worlds of the ExeCor at the heart of the Hegemon was the promise of adventure and new properties.

Even born into wealth, as Ethio had been as a member of the Dwarr clan, he was limited in upward mobility, forced into middle-management and destined to wait for someone to die before he'd be able to get a chance at anything meaningful.

Leaving the ExeCor had been his chance along with the millions of others that emigrated every fiscal-cycle, to get to the unclaimed universe where fortunes could still be made and where you could become the you you were meant to be without tip-toeing through the endless financial rituals and CorpoSoci expectations of the ExeCor. To do that you needed to go through the Outside.

Ethio, like every traveller before him, had wished that he had known what it took to cross the boundary into the Outside for the first time. Not aboard a Corpo ship with an upper-grade dawndrive or through a gatewell, but on one of the ugly hopper ships. In that moment the traveller realizes they are in a place, or a 'un-place,' where a person's body and mind was never meant to go. Ethio's first trip was a sanity-shredding journey that had been suffocating boredom mixed with psychedelic nightmare.

Even getting into the Outside was a gamble. A craft fired a series of velanite-empowered "keyheads," which made an implosion that formed the accretion disk of a pseudo-singularity. The vessel then accelerated into it and, if the Pilot was worth their fee, made the dive into oblivion. In the minutes that followed, if 'minutes' continued to have any meaning at all, the passengers then enjoyed the feeling of every cell in their bodies being passed through a docu-shredder, lit on fire and then doused in ice.

And then nothing.

Not the absence of things, like an empty room, but a suffocating, all-encompassing, feeling that everything is gone. And that's because it is, because you are in an abyss, a place within zero. It is an incalculable nowhere-place where the protective envelope of meaning, substance, and intent start to melt away without the collar of reality to hold it in check. The only thing keeping anything anything is your own mind.

Ethio reflected on this as he felt the rumble of superpositional turbulence up through the foundations of the capsule. Unlike the CrashPods^{IB} that had carried him and his team to the target planet, this one was filled with temperature regulators, gentle foam padding, and silken restraints.

He closed his eyes as external vibrations riddled the superstructure of the quickship and began to rattle him down to his bones. They were getting close.

The only way for the vessel to exist in the Outside was for its crew and passengers to stay awake in order to locally enforce reality. Meanwhile, the Pilot would use their rutter to trace leylines back to reality and, hopefully, to their destination.

Ethio knew that everyone aboard had been psychologically screened prior to the mission, and that they knew to keep a desperate oversight over each other. If a single person fell asleep, even for an hour, they could all dissolve from existence. The crew would follow a stringent regime of activities designed to keep the mind engaged, especially with one another, and never be alone.

Hot pitchers of kahvic were always available in nearly every room in the half-kilometer long quickship. Stimms were used sparingly, since you could crash out if you weren't careful. Instead, travellers through the Outside relied on activities, their many duties, and a constant state of mental stimulation. Fighting, exercise, arguing, contests, sex, there were curated lists of activities and guidelines to keep the brain from slowing down.

What made it harder was that, even with a full crew active and trained, parts of the ship could seemingly change, ever so slightly. Fatigue-induced hallucinations were common enough.

Nothing moved or worked correctly in the Outside and everyone's experience was different, save for the constant pressure from reality straining and the fact that you could hear the roar of your own blood flowing if you were too quiet. This, and the cloying exhaustion from having to be awake for days on end, made every transit through the Outside a special kind of impossible that humans accomplished millions of times every day.

The vibrations ramped up, riddling Ethio's entire body with paresthesia. He felt like his teeth were all about to slide out of his skull. His ears popped, his eyes bulged forward from the orbits of his skull, and a migraine began to push upward like a hot poker piercing his brain.

Then it all stopped and Ethio knew he, and everyone, were now in the Outside.

"Acknowledge *Self*." The sexless voice of a logicor prompted.

That was all true unless, like Ethio and the survivors of his team, you had access to a sensation pod. He smiled, relishing in the coming emancipation from having to worry about the journey.

"I am." Ethio answered.

A hood descended over his eyes and his ears were capped. A rattling of impossibly advanced internals trickled around him and a moment later, one hundred and seven prehensile tubes latched to his Marma points.

His eyes were still open when the sensation pod activated and his core consciousness, his 'Self,' was disassociated from his five senses. The biological functions would continue to witness and engage with his surroundings and thus keep localized reality cogent. As a redundancy, the pod would maintain his bodily functions with ludicrously expensive logicors on the edge of legal shacklement, as well as a team of caeliners who would be set to regularly check on him and the others.

Meanwhile, the pod would allow his Self to be free of discomfort and allowed to roam freely through the tailored digital dreamscape that he was the architect of. A universe of his every whim would be his alone, or, he could "visit" anyone else on the closed intranet. It was how the skiptracers of his team had trained so comprehensively before the kidnapping.

He didn't bother with Wazawa-Lia or Makaba this time, though. This time he shut off all distractions and selected his carefully curated experience.

The same one. Always the same, whenever he could. The one where his wife survived.

The dream began and ended in the blink of an eye and the whisper of a memory.

Ethio's senses returned to him, tubes and restraints receding as the hatch opened in a sigh of equalizing atmospheres. He looked up at a bulkhead and read the ship's onboard timer. The dive had lasted almost a full span, thirty three standard days. A long one, which meant the quickship's captain had been paid a fortune to get them here, wherever here was, as quickly as possible. Another quirk about the Outside was that the longer a ship stayed in it, the faster it arrived to its destination.

The chamber was small, little more than a closet for extra cargo. The floor was cold, made of cream colored plasta tiles still wet from the pod's condensation. The door opened and a caeliner appeared, looking haggard with bruised rings under her eyes. She was squat, an Orbiter, her upper body muscled while her legs were disproportionately slim and slightly bowlegged.

"Heya..." She grumbled, tossing Ethio a thin square towel two handspans large.

He covered himself, realizing he was naked, "Thank you. Where are we?"
"Like'd know. First shift's a go'n I'm on me way to crash."

Her accent was a thick cae-lang he thought might have been Bellor supersector. "Your kit's in locker three, plus a vial'a kick. Go'n up to the caf for grub, m'out."

"What do I owe you?" He fumbled with the sheet then gave up and began to pad himself down. "If you give me a minute."

"Nah, no charge, cap'n wanna'ya fit and up, proper. She'll wanna off'n tha ship pronto'right-quick." She turned and sauntered out.

He met Makaba and Wazawa-Lia in the passageway outside the cafeteria, now fully dressed in a pair of the quickship's white overalls and grip slippers. Unlike everyone else on the ship, the three of them were clear headed and they greeted one another with the smiles of three people that were on the cusp of true, generational, wealth.

"Hungry?" Ethio asked Makaba.

"Always." She winced, touching her right stump that was encased in a medisleeve.

"I have this," Lia's third arm held up a small container, "kahvic grounds from Cicatrix, I believe nostalgia and taste would create a celebratory environment."

"That they would, and it'll taste better than whatever runoff this ship's serving!"

They ate hungrily in their own booth, squeezing out tubes of flavored gruel which rolled and tumbled around their bowls in the quickship's lower gravity. Conversation was kept light, cursory, certainly not about their experiences in the sensation pods chosen for the journey.

Paradise was best when it was a private experience.

"I think I'm going to retire after this one." Makaba said, sipping from the straw in her mug. Her eyes widened at the taste and Ethio grinned knowingly to Lia. Cicatrixian kahvic was a special delight, rare beyond the ExeCor, both smooth and fruity and with the kick of naturally occurring stims.

The smell of Lia's kahvic brew was making the caeliners all but salivate as they sucked down their own watery brown substitutes. The rest of the ship was coming online, clanks and loud groans as the velanite furnace that powered the ship fed fresh power into the ion-centrifuge that would continually accelerate the ship to its destination.

"Retire?" Ethio said, finishing a warm tube of... something, that he'd been squirting into his mouth. "You don't really strike me as the retiring type." The flavor violating his tongue would best be described as garlic dental cream but he kept it down.

"You think people just want to work forever?" A chuckle, a flash of white teeth in her obsidian dark skin swirling with ritual scars. Makaba was almost bubbly compared to where she'd been a few weeks ago; success had that effect on people, even tribalists from the Akksüm Drifts.

"Statistically, human beings of every legal deviation live five to twelve percent longer if they remain professionally active, that is to say, they receive compensation for invested hourage. Inactivity, or 'retirement,' has a higher fatality result than disease." Wazawa-Lia was lit by her screens, eyes screwed to the endless march of maethish code. The young woman's secondary brain was exposed, no longer hidden under her headwrap that she had worn during the mission. The back of her skull had been enlarged with a transparent plastalloy which twinkled with internal light diodes from the black coils of her additional brain organoid.

Ethio twisted his back, mercifully cracking his spine. "They can cure cancer but not boredom. What are you reading?"

"Trying to understand where we are." The muutech's expression didn't change, it rarely did, her skin had been slightly stretched and reshaped to match Protean aesthetics, starkly symmetrical. Ethio finished his own kahvic, enjoying the grains at the bottom which he chewed.

"Waste of time. The Captain's probably shut down the signal array. We'll get to where we're going when we're there."

"She cannot mask radiation reflecting off the hull. I can at least narrow down the system." Wazawa-Lia remarked, flipping one of her screens so Ethio could see it: more numbers.

But then Ethio still didn't want to know more than what he needed. So he nodded politely and turned back to Makaba seeking more interesting conversation, "What does retirement look like for a big game hunter?"

"It looks like buying an island." She said, wistful.

"An island, hot? Cold? Where? Paint me a picture."

"Selobaht, it's warm, second phase worldshaping with a lot of storms. Three moons that make it tectonically unstable. It's amazing."

"I've never heard of it?"

Wazawa-Lia perked up, "It's in the Bellion Frontier, Coreward. Originally licensed for colonization by Stratos Industrial in a joint venture with TeleStar but later abandoned due to cost. A small population still remains."

Makaba sighed, "They built a Grade 3 colony out there and dragged a torusan station into orbit but couldn't tame the wildlife. They've got these big, toothy buggers. I fought one in a pit on Prime Orbita a few fisks back which put me onto the planet and the diea." Her tone was subdued, almost dreamy, "I'd buy an island there, open a reserve that I'll populate with whatever I want from all over Known Space. Take in a few tourists, just to keep it interesting or ship in new Exogens. Then I'll never, ever, go back through the Outside again and everything I need will be in my backyard."

Ethio chuckled, revising his own fantasy of retirement to incorporate that last part. Although, he'd never retire. He wouldn't know what to do with himself if he stopped trying to recover the fortune he'd lost all those lifetimes ago. Makaba continued, "I've always wanted to hunt Shigue."

"What's that?" Ethio held up a hand before Lia could interrupt with an explanation.

"New Exogens that started showing up Coreward in Elyon supersector, been the rage since they took on the Barakan. I bet I could get a few and maybe breed them, open up a small shooting safari."

"They fought Barakan?"

"Exogen 20-23Ω represents a developing event with migrations across three supersectors. It's very exciting, there hasn't been an Exogen presence of this significance since—"

"Bet you we'll hear more end of this fisk, come RevShare Day." Makaba said with a wincing smile, not wanting to weather another data barrage from Wazawa-Lia. Ethio winked so the muutech wouldn't see, he didn't want to be mean and he was starting to like her.

Both of them.

He cleared his throat and looked away.

The job was almost done and they'd go their separate ways.

Makaba poured more kahvic and breathed in the steam, "This stuff is really incredible, Lia." She sipped and relished. "I doubt I'll get to be in one of those sensation pods again but, damn, if that is not the only way people should travel." She twirled a small knife out of thin air and dissected a food container. The stump of her missing left hand, cut off by the Barakan, didn't seem to bother her. "I've made eighteen descents, not including this trip, and on the last one I ended up hand-bound to some Orbiter. Took a week to enact traditional divorce."

Ethio chortled, causing a few bloodshot eyes from other people in the cafeteria to turn toward them and, immediately, fill with jealousy. He was sure the entire crew knew about them and the fact they'd just travelled in luxury usually reserved for Barons and Magnates.

Ethio waved them off because he couldn't, wouldn't, be bothered with the misery they must have experienced. That had nothing to do with him, or his companions, and he wouldn't be shamed because of the choices that lead to his preferential treatment. Besides, he'd weathered those looks from behind the tinted windows of his father's luxury autocar when being dropped off at the academy. This was no different. He turned back to Makaba, "Why not spend the chits and buy a pod?"

"A poor investment." Wazawa-Lia was emphatic. "You could purchase the vault, but the licenses to possess such a device? Upkeep? And the staff to continually take care of your comatose body? And what of the rapid physical decline and mental decline or the addiction to immersion in the datasphere? There is a reason such devices are not widespread. A plan to buy an island and populate it with violent fauna is more practical and sustainable."

"See? *Sustainable*, Old Man." Makaba nodded and Ethio made a face when the audio system throughout the ship chimed and the tired voice of the captain piped up.

"Captain to crew, we are now seven hours inbound on-the-burn to Kerdosea Nine."

Ethio stifled a laugh as Wazawa-Lia pursed her lips and closed her screens. "I will remind you that despite the best efforts of the OVES and the system security forces, there are still pirates and other criminal elements throughout the system. As such, I'll be taking preemptive evasive maneuvers, so, strap in or enjoy getting tossed around." Caeliners were getting up around the cafeteria and heading for the exit.

"Where should we go?" Wazawa-Lia said, closing her screens, worried.

"C-minus one hour before I hit the afterburners; act accordingly." There was a crackle of static and the audio died.

Ethio frowned, he knew where they were, "Kerdosea... we're in Demyre supersector. You might get your shot at a she-goo."

"She-gway," Wazawa-Lia corrected, brow furrowed, "The Organization of Velanite Exporting Systems is on the driftward border of the Hegemon. I've never been this far from home."

Ethio got up, "I'll go check on Osino."

"Why? Let the witch do her part." Makaba grumbled, looking at her wound.

"Each of us was chosen to perform a primary and a redundant role," Wazawa-Lia said, standing, "If Osino had expired it would be me having to subdue the target. I would appreciate it if Ethio checked on her progress and performed his duties as our leader."

"There are faster ways of saying you're lazy." Ethio offered a mocked salute and made his way down.

He passed through absent exhalations of narco sticks from busy caeliners who went about their tasks. This represented the dayshift crew, having drawn the short straws while their comrades for the nightshift were already sleeping. Universally they were short and thin, clearly of orbiter lineage, most of them sporting cheek datattoos that indicated their contracts with the quickship. They didn't look at him and had the stance that Ethio knew all starship crews had on passengers.

Cargo.

Down a series of lightly padded corridors, he made his way across a kind of lounge area where suddenly saw Ilishaan sitting by herself. She was still wearing her vesturplate but had her helmet tucked into the collar and the empowered elements were shut down. Her exposed face was haggard and she was clearly sleep deprived judging by the red rings under her eyes.

"Greetings." He offered, "You didn't take one of the pods?"

"Ha, no, no of course not, no." Ilishaan said, brushing a stray hair from her forehead. She was striking, in an *expensive* way. She'd had some cosmetic therapies, Protean style like Wazawa-Lia but much more expensive, incorporating subdermal gold tinting along her jawline and eyebrows. "The Yinntoshi Linnet Sensation Pods are an exclusive experience that were assigned to you individually and at great expense."

"Only three of us made it. We wouldn't have snitched on you if you'd slipped into one. They're incredible, it's the best way to travel. It's the *only* way to travel."

"As much as I would have liked, no." She shuddered, her empowered fingers left small grooves in the metal of the table. He'd seen it before, heavy stim withdrawal and lack of sleep. That, coupled with being in expensive autoplate, her jitters could get someone killed, nevermind herself for that matter.

"Vesturplate takes getting used to."

"Well, I've been in it for almost two spans!" She cleared her throat and smiled haphazardly, "I'm just glad we made it."

"A deep dive is hard, even for experienced caeliners. You're lucky you're this put together and not raving down a corridor."

"I am, aren't I! That's why I kept this on." She indicated the suit of amor, "and the caeliner's crew was as accommodating as can be expected." Ilishaan laughed again, a sound that went on too long, manic. She fell back into silence, shaking her head.

He stepped away from her, just in case, "You should sleep, madame."

"Imagine what that would look like to our Patron if I were to have 'slipped' into one of the pods? Me, let myself be reduced to a common thief? I don't think so. I have an ethos, *Skiptracer*." She imperiously proclaimed, complete with a natural hair toss despite it being pinned to her skull so it wouldn't catch in her visor.

Ethio wasn't buying it.

"You helped orchestrate a lethal strike, stabbed your colleagues in the back and left them to die." Ethio said matter of factly and without condemnation. His own pay for all of this was the largest of his career, and with the bonus that would come in surviving? But to bribe an Advocate to orchestrate a job like this would have been a fortune atop several fortunes. How could she have said no and still been a member of the species?

Ilishaan still took these facts hard. Tears welled up in her eyes and she bit back a sob. "I don't expect Basics to understand. I'm a Person. It's easy to think you can do whatever you want, fly around Known Space as independent contractors. But to climb the CorpoSoci? You can't fake the bonds of comradeship. To betray years of friendship takes—"

"Ruthlessness," Ethio interrupted. Clearly she didn't know who he was. "You'd be surprised how similar being a contractor is. You don't think we're all happy that there's only four of us left? We're feeling the residual empathy made by those pods but we all know it's just leftover chemicals. That doesn't mean we don't feel guilt."

Ilishaan looked up at him, confusion becoming recognition, "That's right, you're not one of them, you're the, um, the 'old man.' I'm sorry, obviously with your status, former status, as a member of the Patron class, sir—"

He rolled his eyes, "I'm not a king, Advocate. I lost everything. I am a Basic."

"But you were of the Patrons, you understand the weakness of empathic tolerance! Guilt is something that only Avarice can help us evolve beyond, as it is said—"

"You should try and get some sleep, I'm checking the cargo and I'll stay there until we reach our final destination."

"Oh! I couldn't sleep, no, no-no, *no no no no*."

He left her repeating herself and went to the ship's single monorail that ran the length of the quickship from prow to stern. Little more than a square platform, it was designed for cargo with retractable straps a passenger could hold onto for the parts of the ship that didn't have a localized gravity field.

As he passed through the different decks of the ship he absently looked at the various spray painted or daubed graffiti along the tunnel walls. There were funny jokes in several langs he recognized, some he didn't, wild symbols that made less and less sense and then just splashes of paint.

There was blood in one section, dried but still that unsettling hue when an artery is severed. He looked away, unwilling to speculate what could have happened during the transit. He knew that when the crew nudged into port there would be hired porters that would sanitize the entire ship so the caeliners didn't have to dwell on the insanity that often gripped a crew in the Outside.

If anything, a Consumer of the Hegemon knew when it was cheaper to forget.

The platform suddenly stopped, sending Ethio lurching forward. A red light in the floor he hadn't noticed switched on.

"You didn't ask permission to leave the deck, skiptracer." The Captain's voice came out of a nearby speaker panel in the ceiling. She was angry, tired, like he was the first of a long list of troubles she was setting right.

"We were given full access to your ship, Captain. I'm going to check on the reason why we're all out here."

"Out here, on *my* ship!"

Ethio rolled his eyes, recalling verses of the Second Edition of the Manual that described the differences between the Grounder and Orbiter members of New Mankind. Orbiter ways, their customs, their little power plays that they liked to abuse as they treated vessels like their own personal planets on which they were gods. "Do you want me to retroactively beg for forgiveness or ask your permission, Captain?"

The captain made a harumph exhalation, "No need to quote the Manual to me... What I want you to do is act like there's an atomika in my cargo hold that's being looked after by a homeopathic sorcerer. I wish you could have waited for me to send a security

detail with you because not everyone has checked in since our ascent, including the forward sections of the ship."

"Is there something wrong?" A stupid question when it came to coming back from the Outside.

"No, Skiptracer, this is not our maiden voyage. There have been check-ins just not the verified kind, you know, when we send people to ensure the other people are still people."

Ethio realized his error. He didn't have his gear, weapons, but then if the Barakan they had captured had gotten loose then everyone on board the ship would be dead. He held his breath and gave a long sigh.

"Then I suppose I'm sorry, Captain."

"We're dealing with an issue in the velanite furnace section. I'll have a security team move to the prow as quickly as possible but you might be on your own."

The platform continued forward.

"Thank you."

Ethio remembered his first descent as he looked at the stations every few hundred meters. He could make out a few caeliners, a meandering three-legged ergoid examining pipe alignment, but otherwise the ship was empty. He'd been young, his first early-twenties, after successfully passing the prerequisites for interstellar travel with his father to tour the family holdings in the Midworlds; only a few 'days' travel. It had been exciting, thrilling, their family's personal cruiseliner filled with intriguing and brilliant people from all over the Hegemon.

The light of the twin keyhead missiles streaking ahead of them and the birth of the pseudo-singularity had been the culmination of his father's toast on the observation deck as the captain started the countdown. His father's personal Pilot, one of the finest in Protea, had taken over from the navigators and expertly skimmed the secretion disk sending a shower of transdimensional eddies across the observation deck before the ablative shutters came down.

What had followed were endless parties, soirées, ballroom events and countless activities fueled by high-grade anodynes that had been his baptism into true adulthood. Pretty daughters from the barony families that worked for his father had each taken a turn on dance floors and flirted as he showed off his prowess in any number of physical challenges.

Yet it was only when he had explored the ship, following his own curiosity, that he began to understand the risks of the Outside. The caeliners that crewed the vessel were kept on rotation, servicing the Patrons only after being screened for psychological stability. Those that couldn't pass, or needed to break, he best remembered as unhinged.

The lower decks were places of wild debauchery, chaotic festivals and ancient rituals that stretched back to the dawn of the Second Exodus and the First Hegira. Ethio had realized then his love for the honesty of the lower credit scores and the underclasses. Their authenticity had inspired the genesis for the man he would later become.

They fought, they loved, they cherished one another as they all struggled to survive the Outside. Avarice was different below decks, it was raw and more in the spirit of anything that Ethio had seen in his life. Perhaps he'd been impressionable but, even now, Ethio found more in common with the people that fought to live.

He had returned to the upper decks disgusted with the ceremonial waste of food or watching the bloodsport from safety. The antimony cups to purge their bodies only to refill time and again, pushing their altered bodies so that pleasure was constant. His father had noticed the change, had challenged him and his new found philosophy but to no avail.

The debate became an argument, the argument turned to fists and a broken nose. The rift had grown and Ethio's further declarations and public criticism of his father in front of his friends finally led to disownment. Ethio had mocked the decision and willingly sunk his credit score and became stranded on a backwater world after his father had kicked him off the cruiseliner, his mother screaming for him to return.

He never did. Couldn't, even centuries later, and he wouldn't. Not until he stood on his own and could look that bastard in the eye just to spit in it.

Ethio shook off the reverie as the platform reached its terminus in the cargo hold and exited. The station was modest, little more than a formacrete section that overlooked two small cargo sections.

He passed through a hatchway that opened for him on well oiled hinges—

Into a charnel house.

"What the—" his right hand fell to where his pistol should have been, now in a safety locker somewhere else.

Osino had had little need for profit anymore, at least in the monetary sense. She had felt the desire to accrue more like any true human being but the balance of financials was something that, a century earlier, she'd accomplished in the functionaries she employed in the hive-palace she nested in.

Now she craved only knowledge. Knowledge of the biological potential within her and every human being in the universe. With it she had adapted her body, awoken her potential, and then like a gardener, encouraged those parts of her toward perfection. It was her calling to unravel the many racial mysteries hidden within the sacred geometry of biology.

Secrets that the scientists and Corpus of the Hegemon claimed they didn't have time for. They were, of course, lying. Behind the veil of mundane commerce was the race to unlock the proper patterns to bring New Mankind beyond the staircase of evolution to its final destiny

That's why she had taken this 'job.'

On that insignificant planet the memetic constraints she herself had placed upon her own mind had dissolved as she looked upon the Barakan. The rush of memories had been overwhelming in their meaning, which she had kept from the other members of the team. Those who had ordered this near-suicidal mission had chosen their tools well, and, more importantly, had given her the ultimate means to subdue the Barakan.

Cardiac rhythms, protein keys and cerebral fluctuations to unlock concurrent chains, glutamate and acetylcholine values. All of it had allowed her to bring the full expression of her skill to bear, distilling a method to halt both Barakan in a state of tonic immobility.

The thrill of capturing such a thing, such a wondrous specimen of intention made manifest with flesh, had thrilled her. She knew the knowledge imparted was for the two Barakan and that it had taken almost twenty fiscal cycles to get such details on the individuals. They were both of the post-hominidae genera, 2-0-8, and both members of the Thalar clade, otherwise they would have never been able to function as bodyguards.

As far as she knew nothing like this had ever been accomplished. The Barakan were mythical even to the Hexan covens. They were immune to any toxin or poison that might sedate them. The only way to stop a Barakan was to kill it, and even that wasn't a sure method.

But she had done it.

And now she looked upon the Barakan.

Her Barakan. Who could say that? Not even the Archonists of the greatest MacroCorps that sat upon the Summit Council could make such a claim. She could... reach out and touch it. Her will had dominated it, subdued it, and now it was her control that restrained it.

She wanted more. Now. She *needed* more. Everything was there.

She needed to look beneath the skin of shaped nusteel and at the mysteries that had brought together the finest minds to work together. It had been their desperation and mutual greed to outcompete their contemporaries to overcome the scientific boundaries that had restrained New Mankind and connected it to something... ancient.

Osino reached out to the locking mechanisms on the Barakan's casque. There was an audible *click* and the equalization of gasses. She could detect the subtle differences escaping the helmet.

Higher oxygen levels?

The hint of unknown soporifics.

There was barely any smell, no pheromones, only a strangely chlorine smell, almost like disinfectant.

She lifted the casque and looked upon perfection.

And perfection looked into her.

Pride filled her.

Pride, for the Hexan sisterhood and the truth they sought and the answers she would now receive. Pride for the skills she had sacrificed everything to master.

Pride.

If only she had remembered what pride so often preceded.

A caeliner had been split perfectly in half and then had her organs and bones carefully deconstructed across the floor like hell's own map. Ethio bit back the urge to vomit and realized there was no blood, only congealing viscera.

He searched for something, anything, and grabbed a metal pole used for guiding shipping crates from their moorings when there wasn't gravity. It wouldn't help, every lesson from every battle told him it wasn't going to be enough but the iron felt good in his hands.

Something moved, or to better describe it, skittered.

"Shit." It was coming closer. If he ran to the platform it would hit him in the back, running. He needed space and he earned it by thinking fast and ducking back through a series of hanging cables. Whatever it was moved into the space he had just been in.

Stepping out on the other side the horrors continued.

A security officer, a few more basic crew, each one intricately torn to pieces. Hanging between two containers was the spread eagle form of a central nervous system, tatters of inner flesh like tissue flapping in the sigh from the air filters of the ship.

Ethio had seen his fair share of nightmares and he liked to think that anything the universe could think up, he'd be prepared for it and modify his perspective accordingly so that he would still be able to act without terror crippling him. But when the murdered caeliners began to speak, Ethio's nerve left him.

A mouth, unconnected from the head that turned up to him with no eyes, gasped in a voice that shouldn't have been somehow familiar. A communicator was dangling near the mouth which, Ethio realized, was how regular check-ins had been maintained.

"For it is I who am acquaintance and the stranger, will you ready a place for me?"

His stomach turned and he began to run, right into the body of a woman who hung upside down, hanging from the ceiling by her glistening, bloodless, entrails.

"It is I who withhold and reveal, do you not see the difference, Ethio?"

Her voice. How was it *her* voice?

"Great Provider, I ask for strength in my weakness!" The prayer slipped past Ethio's lips for the first time in this lifetime, the words bubbling up from the part of his brain the Kantic Priests had reserved for their faith. The memetic conditioning soothed him, becoming a buffer from his terror.

In the core of his being his Self distantly admonished him, knowing that if he lived through this he would have to pay a crippling fine for renewing the religio-subscription like this.

Ethio broke through the passageway and into the main chamber, slick with sweat, his lungs begging him for more air as he ran. Something crashed above him, knocking into gear or the roped cables tethered to the ceiling. That something was getting closer, moving above him. He zigzagged through the corridors made by cargo units until he got to the end of the prow, the very front of the vessel—

And almost vomited as he looked into the eyes of the Barakan.

It was standing, arms spread out and anchored by mooring cables used to tether the starship at port. Ethio had not been involved with confining the Barakan, that had been Osino's job, and he didn't want to be around the monster any longer than he had to be.

She had left the unique assault-harness/autplate on its body, the indicator lights blinking red and yellow showing it was 'locked' in place. Maybe that's why she had felt safe to remove the thing's helmet.

Ethio saw that the flesh was unnaturally smooth and loose, as if a child's skin had been stretched over the skull of a giant then left to moulder. Ethio could see dark veins, biological and wire, spider webbing out and pulsing with the thing's heartbeat which was calm and measured.

But its eyes.

Ethio couldn't move. He was transfixed.

Osino had taken two indentured in their bodybag style uniforms indicative of their credit score, and hung on either side of the Barakan like intravenous sacks. Plaque-yellow cerebrospinal fluid filled the various tubes leading out from their spines and into various ports of the Barakan's assault-harness that drank from them in choking gulps.

Their heads, hooded, turned toward him.
They spoke, muffled, through the sheet plastic of their masks. Their voices
interchanging between verses from some psychopath's poem.

"You know me."

"You are ignorant."

"I am shame."

"I am pride."

"I am strong."

"I am afraid."

"There are no crowns in this kingdom."

"Only slaves."

"I am the name of the sound."

The Barakan's eyes twitched to study him, looking like they would fall out from its skull as a result of the surgery done that had removed its eyelids. Ethio looked into bleached irises, the pupils dilating erratically like the lenses of a camera as they found him, surrounded by datattoos marked into the soft white of its sclera . Chewed lips made a permanent scarred smile revealing blocky, uniform teeth and the stump of a tongue.

The human beings hanging on either side of it recited,

"I am the one."

"Who you have pursued."

"Come and sit with me."

Ethio began to uncontrollably shake. The Barakan studied him. It looked into him. Ethio felt his entire life stretched out and scrutinized. He remembered a thousand embarrassments and failures from a life too-longed lived that all started with the face of his mother on the day of his birth.

The Barakan spoke a single word, heavy and thick, and all of Ethio's nightmares were suddenly forgotten, replaced by the monster's gentle whisper.

"Beg."

Ethio had had an organoid placed at the rear of his skull, just above his second vertebrae. It was designed to act as a reservoir of selected memories and reactions to the information his senses fed to his brain. It had taken him a decade before it finally worked in a way that he could depend on it. As one didn't think of their kidneys or heart to function, the motorex did its job when it was needed.

It saved him now.

He was kneeling as his Self completely failed him with the Barakan's command, but the motorex triggered just as the hairs on the back of Ethio's neck stood up as Osino caught up with him.

The organoid shot adrenaline into him and fed memories into his muscles reflexes.

He swung his makeshift club despite being unable to break eye contact with the Barakan. Its pupils were all he could see. His whole life inside those twin singularities.

Black hole suns.

The piece of metal in his hands connected with the contorted face of Osino as she fell from the ceiling toward him. The rod hit her in her jaw, dislodging her arm-long tongue and shattered the bone into broken fragments in a spray of her own overoxygenated pink blood.

"Shit!" Ethio roared, a strange battle cry, but one that seemed abstractly appropriate as the Hexan witch shrieked and twisted, mid-air, to hit the deck in a roll.

All four of her limbs flopped out of their sockets on impact, cushioning her impact then rearranging and snapping back as the inertia passed through her body. She sprang back at him but he was already running toward the wall mounted communicator on a nearby pylon. His vision had come back, the darkness scattering like sleep from his eyes.

He dove, this time with self-controlled instinct, and Osino barreled over him, smashing into a cargo container like an insect on the windshield. She screamed, spraying spittle and saliva as she readied for another pounce.

She smelled incredible, almost overpowering his fear with sheer desire for her. There was a disorientating rush of different sensations as her scent wafted over him. He was hungry, thirsty, tired, wired, turned on and so in desperate love with Osino that his heart broke as he hurled the metal rod like a spear through the witch's elongated skull.

Pheromones are a hell of a narco.

He was too old for old tricks and the artificially induced feelings washed out of him as he willed himself into emotional ambivalence as Osino wriggled around the rod now pinning her to the side of the container. It had passed through the seemingly delicate bone of her elongated skull and out a pointed ear. She screamed through tearing vocal cords, hands slapping at the metal that should have killed her.

Ethio was sure that with her perverted biology a wound like that would barely slow her down, but it gave him the time he needed to grab the receiver on the communicator.

He screamed the most dangerous words you could say on an Outside-capable starship.

"Para-Breach! Para-Breach! Forward cargo bay! Emer—"

Then the air was smashed out of him and his body hurled across the chamber. He smashed into a bulkhead, most of his ribs breaking on impact, snapped like the branches of a tree he'd once kept as a pet growing up under the Lhunarka dome.

Absently he scrutinized why this job had made him so nostalgic.

He spat, blood bubbling up from his tongue that he had bitten through. His brain wasn't responding, he couldn't get calm enough to will himself back together to stop the bleeding.

This is bad.

He'd been in worse binds over the centuries, faced all kinds of bad and worse. The problem was that he'd had a gun, or a team, or something other than his fists to give him a chance. He got up, not too quickly so he didn't puncture an organ, and readied those fists in a final, useless defense of his life against Osino.

Osino was already walking toward him, over two meters even with her elongated neck swaying like a serpent and the hole in her head closing. The Hexan witch had gone insane. Ethio wondered if she had dozed off while in the Outside and had woken up as someone else, it happened all the time. Maybe she was still asleep and she thought this was some kind of dream.

Ethio knew it had to do with something with the Barakan.

"What happened?" He felt blood creep up the back of his throat. "What happened to you?" She could at least answer that before she added him to the human furniture dotting the prow of the quickship.

Her head cocked in a crackle of shifting vertebrae and her jaw snapped back into place. Ethio could hardly believe asking a simple question had momentarily halted the assault.

But, she *was* insane.

"Can you understand me?" He pushed his luck. "Do you remember me? We spent a lot of time in each other's heads... I'm Dwarr-Ethio? The Old Man?" He pointed to himself. Recognition crept into her gaze, the tension in her fingers softening and she stopped walking.

"It spoke to me." She started crying, milky white streaks down her face.

"That's it, we're on the same team, tell me what happened." He looked around the chamber. If she wanted she could kill him in a few seconds and there was nothing here that could stop the physiological nightmare before him.

Nevermind the monster he would never look at again on the far side of the room. He could feel it, something preternaturally wrong in the world nagging his brain, like someone watching you inside your own home as you slept.

"I have never been so close to one. To such beauty. It spoke to me and I understood. It spoke to me to tell me the Secret, do you understand?"

"Okay."

Keep talking.

"And you took its helmet off? Seems a little foolish but I get it. Curiosity leads to profit!"

"It isn't like the lesser instances. The casque can be removed without patent tools as a result of the absence of a cogit-hood."

"That's interesting, really interesting." Ethio could hear in the distance a klaxon ringing.

The platform!

Help was coming! Hopefully a full team of angry caeliners who'd want to beat the witch to death with clubs and burn-torches!

KEEP TALKING!

"It spoke to me for a lifetime, Dwarr-Ethio. It told me where it came from and where we will all one day go. It told me of its *becoming*. It told me the mysteries I have yearned for. I now know where the secrets are, Dwarr-Ethio," She looked at several of the dissected crew and pointed with a crooked finger. "It made me see! It's inside of us, the truth, real truth, within all of us!" She started walking, fingers splayed out and pointed at him.

Well. He'd bought himself as much time as he was going to get.

Then someone charged into Osina, someone clumsy and in autoplate.

Osina's head twisted around, but not fast enough.

Ilishaan propelled forward, her boots lit with thruster fire as she crashed into the witch. The Hexan screamed, fighting back with her unnatural strength, but couldn't match the vesturplate's Grade 2 machinery.

Wrists snapped, bone splintering up through moist skin.

A spray of stomach acid splashed uselessly against Ilishaan's visor from Osino's mouth.

The bookish Assurance Specialist shocked Ethio as she yanked and spun, hurling Osino over her shoulder in an advanced level *Trogat'paha* martial arts maneuver that, coupled with the empowered armor, ripped Osino's right arm out of its socket as it brought her head down into the deck.

There was a sickening splat as Osino's elongated skull exploded.

Then silence.

Ilishaan's visor opened, her armor now steaming with Osino's lifeblood. She looked like a corporate hero from a visutel drama as she turned toward Ethio.

"Thank you." Ethio winced, hands dropping to hold his side.

Ilishaan nodded, "I heard your warning. At first I didn't understand how a para-breach could happen when we'd already cleared the gateway."

Ethio gagged on his own pain, pushing himself to shuffle forward. He was very much the *old man* everyone thought of him as, "Like yelling fire sale on RevShare Day."

"Yes. Well. This would all have been for nothing if the asset had broken loose. I got here as fast as I could."

That was a shocker. She ran *toward* a Barakan potentially getting loose on a starship. He'd have to keep an eye on this femme, she had that measure of quality in her that would put her on the chart, if she survived of course.

"It's still there. I think it has some kind of memetic defense mechanism or a bio-weapon. Osino took its helmet off and it must have contaminated her. Maybe they have some way to disorient captors to get you to set it free."

"Hardly. They must have been together for relative "days," alone, pretending that everything was fine. She could have released it easily."

Ethio nodded, "She was telling me what happened—"

"The Barakan happened, Ethio." Ilishaan's voice was sure, strong, as if a lot of self discovery had just occurred. That was fine. He just wanted this job to be done.

The quickship entered orbit over a rocky, unassuming moon without further event. The nearby gas giant pulsed with deep purples and eye sore crimson. Like all the worlds in the Kerdosea system it was infused with velanite from the surrounding Vela Nebula. While there would be refineries in their thousands skimming the surface of Kerdosea 9 protected by defensive monitors and gunships belonging to the so called 'Copper Kings.' The lesser moon had long been scanned, probed, mined and abandoned.

The quickship neared, running silent, passing over a rocky surface gouged out by perfect circular boring holes that dotted the crust until it slowed over one of the largest, a five kilometer perfect circle that went down five kilometers. Only after the correct radixa code pinged up and down did a single shuttle craft rise out from the chasm and connect with the quickshio.

There was a quick transfer of cargo: three passengers and the Barakan containment vault without fanfare or commentary. As soon as the shuttle cleared the blast wake of the quickship it fired its afterburners and headed back out into the black.

There was little chance of detection as the system was filled with unusual signatures from the ongoing extermination against the Shigue Exogen deeper in-system. Still, the shuttle waited, scanning before using pressurized gas for thrust and sinking down into the heart of the moon, dropping like a coin down a well.

The bag was yanked off his head.

Ethio was in an elevator, made from rose marble, gilded in gold and lit by pseudo-fire that flickered in multi-colored lanterns. A silent attendant in a smart lavender suit kept a hand on the lift controls. The security guard that pulled away from him, indiscernible under a suit of non-reflective black caraplate, turned his back on Ethio and adjusted his snub-nosed Silex-pattern autosub. There were two other guards, each standing next to Makaba and Ilishaan who looked back at him.

"How's your everything?" Makaba asked nonchalantly. They were all in full regalia, a final request from their soon to be revealed patron. Clearly they wanted to see what the skiptracer team looked like in all their professional glory.

"I'll heal." The quickship's surgeon had given him a hit of something wonderful, bringing his healing factor up to what he'd invested in. They'd taped him up with healing pads, the rest he could do by himself with time and patience.

They'd been asked politely to put on the black bags by the shuttle's crew and had been led by the security team across what Ethio had assumed was a loading bay. These were final theatrics on behalf of their employer, but Ethio was done with caring. He wanted his pay and he wanted to be back on the shuttle and get as fast as he could back to the life this bounty would buy him. If that meant not knowing where they were that was fine with him.

The Barakan had been handled by Wazawa-Lia who was somewhere in another elevator. The muutech hadn't asked what had happened, only placed her equipment over her eyes and ears and done what she needed to to re-secure the asset who did not struggle or speak.

Osino had biologically induced compliance with details given by their Patron. Wazawa-Lia did so technologically with noise bafflers, balanced chemical releases from the Barakan's own armor and her own optogenetics algorithm that fed into the thing's cogit-hood. He hoped it would be enough.

The elevator slowed and glided to a stop.

"Observation deck." The attendant said briskly and the doors opened.

Sound hit them first as they stepped out, a thrumming bass that made his broken ribs throb. The pulse of the music was matched by roaming spotlights above that rotated, burning lines through the smoke-filled darkness packed with bodies.

Wherever the light fell was its own scene of debauchery, the kind Ethio had seen on his first trip into the Outside. Bodies wrapped around and throttling one another to the beat of whatever madman called himself a musician.

Makaba and Ethio fell in line behind Ilishaan who followed one of the guards, the other two shepherding from behind. Ilishaan still had her visor down, Osino's blood now a dried splatter across her vesturplate. She wasn't afraid or timid, even despite the sleep deprivation. Ethio thought that her own personality and memories had been suppressed, like the skiptracers had, or if slaying the Hexan witch had transformed her. Trauma can change the Self. These things happened.

A writhing couple, completely naked save for black leather undergarments, slammed into him, grabbing at him with mouths open with narco supercharged lust. Makaba was there, responding as fast as if they were in a combat zone, twisting kicking before one of the security guards jabbed the male with the barrel of his automat.

Makaba's arm was around him, holding him up. He hated relying on her, on anyone, but he could taste blood at the back of his mouth.

"I got you." She said, "Get your footing, you can't show up to the boss looking like the job killed you or they'll give me and that poindexter the whole bounty!"

"You'd... like that, wouldn't you." He relinquished his weight and she didn't even grunt taking it.

"What kind of party is this?" She said as they pushed forward, her tattooed expression disgusted.

"The bad kind." The carnality swarmed like its own tide of flesh. Cages were suspended above the party where males and females of several recognizable near-humans danced or cried out for help next to—

"That's a Beta-four-kay!" Makaba said into his ear. He glanced up and there, sure as sure, was a Harvester. The bulbous, amphibian exogen was hissing and spitting in its cage. People below would throw bits of food at it, antagonizing it and cheering it on as it bit the bars with fangs a handspan long.

"They aren't supposed to be allowed to leave their home star." Ethio said, recalling the species that had once gleefully attacked pre-Hegemonic human colonies. They'd been allowed to survive as a source of entertainment but not like this. The savage species were a Grade 1 threat and, if allowed, could kill everyone in the party.

They passed a seated section where the people were huddled around a bionetic tentacled machine that pumped reservoirs of glowing liquid with needles that poked and injected indiscriminately. Ethio looked inside of the liquid and saw an alien head suspended, eyes open and moving despite decapitation.

"That's not the only thing not supposed to be here."

She was right.

Containment units of every kind held Exogens from all over Known Space and beyond. Ethio was by no means an expert, he didn't care about alien life, but Makaba was like a schoolgirl in a sweet shoppe, rattling off names and details under her breath as they pushed through. To him they were just the masses of tentacles, feathers and disproportionate limbs and tales all muddled together.

They reached a flight of crystal stairs that dazzled with painful light and Ethio stopped, suddenly worried. Makaba felt his hesitation, "C'mon, Old Man."

"I recognize the stairs?" He couldn't believe it himself. "Wait, wait, this isn't possible--"

"Keep moving." The guard behind them said and backed it up with a shove.

Ethio stumbled up the stairs, Makaba helping him. Ilishaan turned, regarding them but didn't say anything.

They passed a balcony overlooking a party where a clutch of thin, bejeweled individuals wore gilded masks and flowing silks. Ethio could make out that a large man was laying on the table, a Tributary helmet fastened over his face and nothing else. One of the masked femmes knelt over him, pulling her mask back. Ethio wasn't sure if it was the medical cocktail flowing through him or the dazzle of lights mixed with darkness but he thought he saw small, fingerlike appendages, tease out from under the gold mask like some kind of oceanic invertebrate, but then Ethio couldn't see anything else as a pillar blocked his sight.

"Don't look." Makaba scolded, her head bent and eyes averted.

"You know what that is?"

She grimaced, "Parasites. They can hear your thoughts and follow you through your nightmares."

"That's not..." But then so many things in the last few spans had seemed impossible.

"Force yourself to forget them. If you don't want to end up like that poor bastard when they break into your room and drag you into the night."

They reached the top of the staircase where an enormous Longshan near-human stood in a Protean style suit. He towered over Ilishaan, his arms as round as her entire body, the sleeves tailored shorter to show off his forearms, which seemed swollen and smooth but Ethio knew were layered with muscles. Longshans were an ancient people, originally bred for mining if their own legends were to be believed.

He looked down through thick tinted glasses, "Name?"

"Assurance Specialist Ilishaan Eretís, Grade 2."

The Longshan nodded his impossibly thick neck and stepped aside. The security guards turned, taking up position in front of the entrance as Ilishaan and the two skiptracers walked into the lounge.

As they did so there was a warble as they entered a sphere of projected audible nullification. The music shifted to more traditional, ExeCor jazz performed by a small band on a private stage, male musicians surrounding a beautiful woman who breathed into a micaster of love lost and refound.

The shock hit Makaba, momentarily disoriented, but not Ethio.

No. Ethio finally understood everything.

The staircase should have been enough, but the private lounge hadn't changed even if the rest of the pleasure tower had. The cruiseliner was familiar for a reason.

Because his father hated change.

A man in a gold lamé suit stood and smiled with teeth that glowed white in the low light. He presented not a day older than the day that Ethio had broken his nose. Handsome, perfectly toned, Ethio knew he looked twice as old as his father.

"Ethio, my boy, come!" Arms open, Dwarr-Rowat beckoned them to sit.

To Makaba's credit she kept her face neutral but she let go of Ethio. He reckoned that she was preparing for a doublecross. He would certainly be doing the same thing if he wasn't half dead already.

He sat, heavily, wincing and impotent to the rage welling up in him.

"You... look good, my boy, as good as I could expect." Rowat didn't get closer but his expression was filled with an empathy that Ethio wished he could spit on. Makaba sat, tense, Ilishaan did the same and folded her gauntlets on her knee.

The moment hung, jaz drifting in and out of the awkward silence. Rowat didn't seem to mind, now seated, leaning toward Ethio's face and all smiles. Ethio looked around and, sure enough, a waitress appeared with drinks which he took and drank, barely feeling what was sure to be an exorbitantly valued spirit.

"Where's mother?"

"Cicatrix. She hasn't left the nature reserve in the last thirty fiscal cycles and I don't blame her but I will not my reduce myself for her. She misses you, son."

Ethio nodded at the band, "Still like Protean jaz, eh? And you kept this part of the ship the same."

"Some things should *never* change, so that you know what must."

"Like the brothel downstairs? You should have grown out of that."

Rowat grinned, "Keeps me young! That and a new therapy. Exclusive."

Disgust welled up in Ethio's stomach. He knew all too well his father's proclivities. He took his hat off and tossed it on a nearby couch, sweeping his greying hair back, "Did I know?"

A perfectly manicured eyebrow curved upward, "You mean, have you and I seen each other before this? No, Ethio, I didn't have your memory changed beyond what was absolutely needed. You know how harmful memetics can be. This is the first time we've seen one another in two lifetimes." The younger looking man touched his nose and Ethio could see a slight imperfection where his fist had struck, kept perfectly in place by surgery or genengineered youth.

"Touching." Was all Ethio could muster.

"I'm glad you wore your little outfits," he gestured to Makaba and Ethio, "Very Fringe, very authentique!"

"It's your chits." Makaba shrugged but Ethio thought he heard a note of self consciousness.

Rowat ignored her, all his attention on Ethio. "I've been following your deeds, your escapades! The so-called 'Old Man,' I don't know how I feel about that particular monicker being that it would make me, what, the Older man? Ha!" He made a show of looking Ethio up and down, "Your retrogenic therapies don't seem to be working, lower grade, I can already see the signs, you have... what, one more reversion before your cells wither? We'll fix that when we return to Protea."

"W-what?"

Perfect teeth, seductor's eyes, "You've become a man of avarice and capability!" Rowat reached across toward Ethio, "You've made me, and our Clan, proud. We want you, I want you, to come home."

Ethio closed his eyes. Some part of him was screaming at him to reach back toward his father and embrace him. To fall back into his family, his Clan, into all of it.

"Especially when you finally banished your childhood notions and stopped playing the freedom fighter. My own fault really, you were at an impressionable age to be exposed to the Outside."

Ethio felt his fist close but the pain in his chest kept him from considering breaking his father's nose again. He knew where this was going and the elder Dwarr was taking on a performative tone, starting to regard Makaba and Ilishaan who sat by, confused at this familial encounter.

"You know, it was that business in the Kanatha Dominion that did it, that made you eligible despite your many other acquired skills. Not many fight the Barakan and survive, after all, but you did, my son." He pulled back, realizing Ethio wasn't going to get any closer. "I'm sure that was an experience. You stopped volunteering after that for one, started taking yourself more seriously as a professional. I'm assuming the loss of... what was her name?"

Don't say her name.

"Dahla? Dala something, she imagined herself a rebel but, let's be honest, she was little more than a Unionist. A prostitute? Former prostitute? No shame in that, son, but the report described a near suicidal level of empathy... I imagine it was painful when she died. But, everything for a purpose, no? Her death provided you with the right perspective to purge yourself of the cognitovirus that--"

"Dahlia. Her name was Dahlia."

Her name held the promise of renewed violence and Rowat picked up on it. He crossed his legs: all business. "Either way, it's good to see you."

"When do we get paid?" Makaba looked like she was ready to start stabbing, her drink untouched.

"Excuse me?" Rowat said.

"This is touching, but we just captured a live Barakan." She held up the stump of her hand. "I want to get paid and I want to disappear. I was promised both and I want them now."

Rowat leaned back into the plush sofa, shifting to regard Makaba and dropping the empathic tone he'd shared with Ethio. Rowat had been a Dwarr Clan elder and a Magnate of Pryxian Group, a subsidiary paraCorp of Yinntosh MacroCorporation. That was three centuries ago and Ethio doubted Rowat had lost any momentum in his climb upward.

"There are three of you left," Rowat gestured to a heavy glass visutel screen that slid up from one of the armrests. It showed Wazawa-Lia and the vault that held the Barakan. The room was filled with specialized equipment, mostly ergoid synthetic laborers that began to dismantle the vault and reveal the Barakan who was under a constant spray of what Ethio hoped was a heavy sedative.

"You'll each be given new credit scores connected to different, accomplished, Corpo entities with comprehensive backgrounds that will stand up to an audit. This solar system along with a few others is currently embroiled in..." he waved his hand dismissively, "What they're calling the 'Exogen War.'"

"Sounds like a new visutel drama." Ethio sniffed.

"Yes, I'm not a fan myself. There are pirates, mercenaries from the Copper Kings and these Exogen. The Armada has shown up after this disaster of a cross-system hunt. In short, there are enough opportunities here for the three of you to choose any number of paths and we'll finance it to your final destination where you'll be enjoying three mithqals of phosphorus as traded on The Market. Multi-generational wealth, as contracted... But, I would prefer if you came with me, son."

"I have questions."

"I don't." Makaba cut in but Rowat acted like he didn't hear her.

"I'm sure you do."

"I can't imagine the Dwarr nor a paraCorp sanctioning the capture of Barakan Elite. You operate within the ExeCor, how in all the hells and balancesheets do you expect to hide when they found out what you did?"

"Valid, truly." Rowat snapped his fingers, a habit of his when someone asked the right question, "I am, of course, only representative of the brilliant minds that have made all this possible. None in the Thousand Empires could have done what we have accomplished, nevermind your own expertise."

Ethio considered this doublespeak. His father was alluding to quite a bit but, he knew, each new morsel of information only damned him and Makaba further. As of now they were paid contractors, skiptracers, and that came with a degree of legal protection under the Lex of the Hegemon.

Unless their patrons were not of the Hegemon and they had been bamboozled into working for the Karanovan Republic, the Uthmani League or any number of the nation states that rejected membership to the Hegemon. If that were the case they'd be tried as unconscionable employees, traitors and potentially Unionists.

"What guarantees do we get you didn't just kill us with this job?" Makaba realizing the potential threat. "Who's getting the Barakan?"

"Have no fear of that. All our payments will be legal and under the Lex. You are amongst the Persons of the CorpoSoci and we don't wriggle out of our debts—"

Ethio put as much scorn in his laugh as his ribs would allow.

Rowat wasn't bothered, "That is to say, it will be legal under the Lex. The Barakan Elite of the 208th Division have lost one of their number and you kidnapped a Taskmaster."

"And what's that?" Makaba said, head darting between Rowat and Ethio, "What is a *Task-Master*?"

"Think of it as a kind of conductor for the lesser instances. You all *need* to run, not from us, but from them. We can disappear you, all of you, and we plan on doing so."

Ethio pointed at Ilishaan, "What about her?"

Rowat barely looked at the Assurance Specialist, "Lady Ilishaan is a believer. Her reward is to come home, like you!"

Don't fall for it. Take the three fiscal cycles worth of one of the Galaxy's most valuable resources and go!

"A believer in what?" Makaba was confused, looking at Ilishaan who wouldn't meet her eye line.

"Well," Rowat smirked, "Isn't that the interesting piece of the puzzle? After all, what sane human being would ever seek out a Barakan nevermind spend the credit to have some of Known Space's most capable skiptracers to go after one?" He indicated the visutel, "Wazawa-Lia and your former partner, Osino, both trained for fiscal cycles with data computed by an entire Mindworld for those two specific instances that you engaged with. The bounty you will be sharing is likely the most affordable aspect of this venture."

Ethio raised his glass and it was instantly refilled by the waitress behind him. No matter how long he lived it seemed that he was still embarrassed by his father's way of spinning a story like the dirty great spider that he was. He could see that Makaba was already enthralled despite her fear. Ilishaan was a statue, eyes unblinking and glassy.

Ethio had refrained from trying to keep track of his father. There hadn't been a point after he was legally removed from the family. He had meandered around Clan properties but with his father's condemnation, politics reduced him to a pariah in the Protea system.

Space was big, and his only option.

Beyond the occasional mention of the Pryxian Group on The Market's bulletins, Ethio had no idea what his father had been doing. The man sitting before him now was younger, far wealthier and was speaking like he was the spokesperson for some off-brand religio subscription.

"The science that was used to make the Barakan is, quite literally, unable to be studied. Just as your minds were altered to accomplish this mission there are things the architects of the Barakan somehow blocked the human Self from comprehending."

On the visutel, Wazawa was joined by several Longshan who each held a chain that yanked a hunched over figure toward the muttech, who stepped back in fear. Makaba leaned forward, "That's a Dabrak."

"Indeed! I have made it my niche to collect as many Exogens that exhibit adaptive intelligence to New Mankind sciences as possible."

"That's illegal." It was pointless to say so. What Ethio had just walked through below broke hundreds of Hegemon laws that would have you sentenced to a hellscrapers by association. "You can't teach Exogen."

Rowat made a face like he'd eaten a piece of rotten fruit, "Laws are for the *alignment* of society, son, not the furtherance of it. I am an apex member of New Mankind, as is every member of our organization." He motioned back to Wazawa-Lia who, despite looking uncomfortable, started working as the alien's 'arms' extended and began to probe the Barakan with a swarm of soft looking tentacles that, as they glowed, the visutel screen began to fill with static.

"What we can't understand we will through the lens of lesser intelligences. This Dabrak has studied fragments of Barakan debris we've accumulated over time and is the closest thing in Known Space to an expert on the subject. It will see what we cannot."

"What does that mean?" Makaba's brow was furrowed in concentration.

Rowat took his own glass up and sipped, rolling the spirit around his mouth, "We will never really know. We've spent planetary fortunes on research, employing individuals such as Lady Ilishaan, and the only thing we know is that there is a pattern. Like the study of gravity or light, we can infer that we are not seeing something that has become outlined by all the things we do see. A *known unknown* if I'm butchering Lady Ilishaan's theory?"

The corpo shifted in her armor and dared to look at Ethio, "We know of several mass cognitive events that affected Old Humanity but only distantly. Our emancipation from the Five Lesser Needs and the adoption of metamotivation inoculated New Mankind, giving us awareness. Using this same—"

"Why the runny-shits is an Assurance Specialist explaining this?" Makaba said, all but spitting the word *assurance*.

"Temper... but then what can you expect from a jumped-up cavedweller." Rowat sucked his teeth, "In the simplest way to state incomprehensibly important revelations; when New Mankind asserted Avarice we became aware of events and effects that we were blind to. And, now, using that same pattern recognition it is evident that the entire human population has been exposed to an authorized cognitovirus that prevents us from perceiving what the Hegemon deems prohibitive. It is the ultimate betrayal."

It was Ethio's turn to laugh, "Who's the conspiracist now! A pan-species memory virus? Next you'll tell me you've figured out where Ur is!"

Rowat pursed his lips but kept his volume conversational, "Your outburst is warranted." He locked eyes on Ethio, "And you were right to question the Hegemon and its methods when you left us. Three centuries later and I am where you stood," he pointed to the balcony where Ethio had struck him so long ago, "Questioning everything that I thought. The difference is is that now I have the means to open our eyes to what the Summit Council has been hiding!"

"So, what? You're trying to make Barakan?" Makaba said, horrified.

"Bah, no, nothing so *gauche*. Leave it to warmongers and those that would jeopardize our species to tinker and build the next post human atrocity. No, within the Barakan we believe there is the means to unlock a proverbial door that the architects discovered almost a millennium ago. Once we open that door, we believe we can 'go back' to more egalitarian and safe epochs before we embraced the notion of eternally unfulfilled desire."

"You've bitten the lure, be careful of the hook, Makaba." Ethio didn't need to know more, he needed to get paid. "It's customary, father, to ask someone before you expose a cognitovirus with them." The waitress tried to refill his glass and he dropped it, expensive crystal shattering on the floor. "It's funny, you once called me a *Unionist* but now, look at you, flouting rejections of mutual Avarice on a starship built and filled with all the luxuries only the CorpoSoci could give you."

"It's not a viral memetic, it is truth." Ilishaan's raised voice made even Rowat a little surprised after her relative silence. "Osina was tempted by it like a moth to a flame."

"And she set herself on fire and almost killed me doing it!" Ethio barked. He heard a security guard behind him tilt a weapon toward him. "I won't represent Makaba's opinion but I want out, more so now than ever. I don't want to hear about lofty plants of rebellion and philosophical swine piss, I want you to pay me and then I want passage back to wherever it is I want to go. Get me?"

"It is truth," Rowat repeated, "Why run from the reality that the civilization you hated so much as a young man is truly damned? Why participate when you could come back with me and we can prepare for the Return?"

"*Unto the waters of the womb.*" Ilishaan said, an obvious poem or prayer or—

Bullshit.

"And then?" Ethio said, finishing the second glass. "And what, father? To what ends? To what hope to do anything? I left Protea and after a few lifetimes, yeah, I understand the Galaxy enough to know that at the end of the day, it's just about *me*. Me, my Self, and I, and if someone's tricked you to live in some ignorance but you're still walking and breathing and *choosing* the life you want to lead then it doesn't matter. Better that than a leash around your throat," he nodded to Ilishaan.

Rowat was crestfallen. Ethio had never seen him so morose but he was happy that something had finally gotten through to the man who'd kicked him out of his life.

"Ethio is right. It is customary to ask before sharing wisdom. I was merely wrong that a fallen son and a huntress from the Akksüm Drifts that sacrificed cognitive awareness for heightened mundane senses possess the proper mental facilities to comprehend the wisdom of Sarkahn."

Then his father's best autocar smile and tone returned "Let's get you paid!"

Somewhere, far from the pleasure tower in the front of the ship, something smashed into the hull of the cruiseliner in a twisting CRUNCH of failing nusteel and buckling superstructure. The grav plating below shuddered and the band stopped singing, the pretty woman in a glittering gown dropping the silver micaster as the lounge began to quake.

"What is this?" Makaba was up, a blade in her hand and her stump defensively to her cheek.

If this was the doublecross the huntress had been expecting, Rowat wasn't in on it. The Magnate jumped to his feet, lurching as an explosion lit the viewports outside of the lounge. The milling bodies of party goers screaming and running was witnessed in silence as the noise cancellation sphere was still active.

"Is it the Directorate?" Ilishaan stood, gauntlets closed and ready.

"H-how did they find us?" Was all Rowat could say.

A chime rang out from above and the house lights came on while the sound cancelling sphere faded, unleashing the panicked screams of the party goers. A man on the speaker system shouted down the screams, "Alert, this is the Captain, we are being boarded! Unidentified belligerents are attacking the ship. Get to your assigned escape shuttles immediately. I repeat, this is the CaaAGGGHHH!"

"We need to go! Ethio?" Makaba backed toward him, knife up.

The jaz group was running, tripping over themselves and knocking over their instruments. Longshan bodyguards drew weapons headed for the staircase. Ilishaan matched Makaba, all but leaping to Rowat's side, "Sir, she's right—"

"You were part of the assessment!" Rowat yelled an accusation, "We were told the quickship would lose them before coming here!"

"There was a chance percentage that the Barakan have some kind of retrieval process for missing instances—"

"Of course, but they can't leave contracted zones! They do retrieval of corpses, equipment, vehicles! They use Armada ships, we would have known! We would have seen them coming!"

"There is no reference of a complete specimen taken, sir. There may be exceptions to the *Fejdu pg Gprochypo!*" Ethio was sitting right in front of his father when Ilishaan said words that seemed to scramble his thoughts, made his ribs hurt.

"*Cognitovirus*." Makaba snarled.

Ethio knew then that his father had damned himself. He had climbed too high, playing with something he clearly didn't understand. The hubris of the upper credit scores was what made them so powerful. Their greed could bleed stars, literally, and they could reshape the face of planets.

But there was always someone higher up and people like his father *always* forgot that. Those beings that looked down upon these 'apex' people didn't share power.

Ethio got up, painfully, and slowly pulled his pistol out as his father cowered, satisfyingly terrified. "Where's your shuttle, father?"

"We took every precaution! The local Armada was paid, there is no conceivable way that anyone could have found us!" The color drained from his face, "Unless... the Audit?"

Ethio shuddered because that's exactly who it could be, "It's different, out here in the black. There's always something you can't expect changing the field. You poked the bull, father, now that bull is coming for you."

The visutel proved his point as screams emitted from its small speaker. They looked as a shadow stepped into view. Static surrounded it, making it impossible to discern what it was, except that it was larger than the Longshan that it was quickly killing. The Exogen, unable to move, looked like it entered a blender, spitting out chunks of shredded meat. Blood sprayed everywhere out of the static, across the walls, across Wazawa-Lia who was the one screaming.

The Barakan she'd been operating on was rising, its restraints unlocking. It gently reached out and plucked Wazawa-Lia off the ground, brought her up to its face where it bit down onto her skull.

No helping her.

"Come." Rowat stood, buttoning his dinner jacket, and began to retreat.

They reached a hidden elevator at the rear of the lounge just as the gunfire started downstairs. The door was intricate, hand wrought filigree in ancient, oiled wood.

Rowat put his hand on the reader interwoven with the grain of the wood and his unique Dwarr genes opened the door. He walked in, then Makaba and Ethio, but Rowat put a hand up at Ilishaan, "Not you."

Ilshaan's mouth opened to protest as the doors shut.

The elevator ascended, rising quickly to the uppermost deck of the tower. A rumble echoed up into the lift.

"Why?" Makaba asked, "She was loyal?"

Rowat sniffed, indignant, "Should I hire an individual they must deliver in the adopted task. Her task was to ensure the safety of my person and the interests of our organization. Failure results in a loss of benefits."

The elevator lurched but continued rising.

"I'll recover from this, don't you worry," Rowat assured Ethio but it was clearly more for himself. "Most of those people down there, common degenerates and the spoiled children of Barons."

"Yes, father."

The doors slid open to a small launch port, a personalized shuttle already powering up with two porters uncoupling power cables. Rowat quick stepped toward the ramp with Makaba hurrying behind him. Ethio limped, and dialed up the energy into his pistol.

"Stop." He cautioned, the whine of the matritic gun rising.

Rowat turned, Makaba taking a step away, confused but ready. There was residual memetic training shared between them and she would still trust his orders.

"What is this?" His father asked, hands open.

"We delivered a Barakan Elite to you, fulfilled the bounty, and now you need to pay us."

"Of course, I'll pay—"

"Now!"

The porters, noticing the rising danger, hurried to get on the shuttle. Rowat saw this and looked back at Ethio, frustrated.

"Something truly awful is coming to kill us, *boy*."

"Then you'd better make it quick. We don't have time for the account numbers," Ethio took two palm sized plates from his coat and tossed them to Rowat who caught them, confused. "So, I want you to program those."

Rowat spluttered, "You can't be serious—" Ethio decided to aim his pistol at his father for emphasis. "I don't have this kind of—" Ethio dialed the power up. "Alright." He held both cubit planks to his wrist-wallet, a beautiful golden chronometer that Ethio remembered his father saying belonged to his grandfather. There was a series of clicks as the delicate logicor in the wallet referenced Rowat's last updated credit value.

Ethio briefly wondered if such a sum had ever been charged onto two unassigned cubits. The dense colored plasta had its own simple logicor that used a decentralized system of coding that could only communicate with corresponding numbers assigned by The Market itself. Any wealth assigned within was cross referenced and ensured the reality of the value.

Three mithqals worth of anything would have been a fortune but they were getting paid in direct shares of *phosphorus*, used in worldshaping, farming, weapons and more. The resource was desperately rare in the universe and three mithqals of it was, indeed, multi-generational wealth. That said, Makaba and Ethio were about to risk it all since the planks wouldn't be associated with any account.

Rowat scowled, "You realize that these two pieces of plasta are now worth more than a mid-grade planet's lease?" Makaba plucked them out of Rowat's hands and returned one Ethio, the other disappearing into her leather britches.

An explosion, closer, caused black smoke to rise between the doors of the elevator. "Can we go now?" Rowat pleaded.

"We are... Makaba, please prevent my father from walking." Makaba hesitated for a single second then pulled a throwing knife from her belt and flicked it into Rowat's right kneecap.

He went down, and to his credit, he didn't look surprised.

He did scream, toppling over. Ethio limped past him, "Goodbye, father."

Rowat grabbed his boot, "Did you do this? Did you double-cross me?"

Makaba ran toward the shuttle and Ethio could hear the porters shout and protest as she kicked them out. He looked down at his father, feeling the ancient weight on his shoulders lessen.

"No, I didn't double cross you. I'm just making sure I survive. We did a job, that job is complete and you've paid. Another satisfied customer." He kicked his father's hand away, "Now, we're nothing. Again."

He was almost to the shuttle as the porters fled when Rowat yelled after him, "Tell your mother—"

His words were swallowed by the shearing obliteration of a sudden black maelstrom that roared through the elevator doors. The metal seemed to melt or disintegrate as swirling, living, black sand ate at it. Wherever it touched layers of material were eaten rapidly like accelerating decay.

Rowat was yelling something as the clouds surrounded him.

There was a figure inside of the storm, Ethio could almost see clusters of red eyes. But this wasn't his problem. He'd been paid. Makaba had been paid. He hit the panel and the shuttle ramp closed.

The shuttle was small but high grade, with a compartment for luggage, a small lounge and galley that connected to a cockpit for four. Makaba was already in the co-pilot's chair, frustrated as she stabbed at the bank of switches, knobs and buttons.

"Trying to leave me?"

"Maybe."

"Watch," he held his hand over a small panel that stabbed his fingertips, reading the lineage written in his blood. The shuttle buzzed to life as Ethio fell into the pilot's chair. Despite his father's disownment he was still Dwarr, which meant Clan technology would work for him.

"Show off." Makaba said, looking at a bank of visutel screens that showed a full range view of around, below and above the shuttle. "What... is that?"

Ethio grabbed the controls and threw them into high-gear, "I didn't ask."

The shuttle rocketed forward, blasting out of the private launch bay and out into the cavern. Below them the damage to the cruiseliner was accelerating. Ribbons of black sand were arcing up and down, like a mythological wyrm plunging in and out of the ocean. All along the many kilometers of his father's ship bright explosions lit the mining shaft, but Ethio wasn't focused on that, only directing the shuttle upward.

"That kind of damage is going to be catastrophic, Ethio." Makaba said, teeth clenched, her remaining hand clenching the arm of the chair.

"I know." He angled his trajectory, never the best pilot but he'd learned enough, and hit the afterburners. The power furnace in the shuttle had been upgraded for his father and it was as smooth as silk as it accelerated. "You're going to want to hold on. Primary ignition." He pushed the throttle forward and both skiptracers were slammed against their chairs.

In seconds they breached the lip of the boring hole, a kilometer long trail of particulate plasma from their ignition behind them.

Ethio barely saw, his head pressed firmly into the crash padding of his chair, a single vessel waiting like an avian predator over the chasm. It had no

pilot lights, no crew windows, just a single fragment of reflective obsidian that seemed more like a piece of the star flecked blackness than anything man made. He chose at that moment to close his eyes.

They couldn't maneuver at this speed without being torn apart. Either this alien vessel locked onto them and destroyed them with close point fire, or the things commanding the ship would be too surprised that something could move at this speed.

1...

2...

3...

"Secondary... ignition..." He pulled the second throttle, which used the inner ring of the shuttle's thrust array and—

Ethio woke up a few minutes later.

"Are you okay?" It was Makaba. She was floating over him. "You blacked out."

"Yes. I know. I'm..." He touched the chit in his coat. "Fine."

"I'm not going to rob you, Old Man, I can give you my word on that."

"Would that mean anything to you if I said it?" He undid the restraints, feeling his fragile ribs. He looked at the logicor screens and started turning everything off until they were running silent save for a few cold-lights which wouldn't give them away.

"Oddly. Yes, Dwarr-Ethio. It's not every shift you see someone stick to the path they've chosen... or ask me to throw a knife in their dad's leg."

Ethio nodded, pulling himself back into the lounge, Makaba following him.

"Figure we drift for a while. Whatever was hunting my father's ship is likely tied up with the fallout or they recovered what we stole."

"You don't think they're looking for us?"

"I'm saying it won't matter, we've done everything we could. Either they got our trail and in a few seconds we'll be... worse off. Or this is it and we've got time before we head in-system."

Makaba considered this then opened a drawer.

High end tinned goods and squeeze sacks of ethyl and spirits, and at least some water for the discerning survivor, were packed into the galley. She tossed him a sack of Colaris and he caught it, cracking the plasta tip and sucking some of the carbonated beverage.

"*Colaris, the ExeCor's favorite drink!*" He mimed the famous visutel advertisement and Makaba laughed.

"Eh, I prefer Hydris: *Breath in refreshment!*"

"Those are fight'n words." He gently pushed into a lounge seat and tethered himself so he wouldn't float away. "If you plan on killing me, wake me up, alright?"

He glanced up at her. She was holding the chit and spinning it in the zero-g, "No, you know what, I think that this is more than enough. It'd be nice to try and trust someone for a change." She glanced at him with... something behind those hunter's eyes.

He smiled, which hurt, but it was alright, then pulled his coat tighter around him and closed his eyes for what he hoped would be a deep and long sleep. When he woke up he'd reassess the universe and how it was likely to change for him... or more likely stay very much the same as the Galaxy so often did in its indifference to the struggles of the specks of life that struggled within it.

Makaba left him, heading back up to the cockpit and there was only the silence of the lounge. Sleep crept up to take him. His final thought was that maybe, just maybe, he would get lucky one last time and his dreams, his natural mind, would bring him back to his wife, Dahlia, and the past he truly wished he could return to.

End.