

Chapter One

Obudon City Spaceport, Planet Ryca

Just once, why can't these dirtbags try hiding on a nice resort planet? Jesse Forster thought as he made his way through the milling crowds, mindful of the traffic as he crossed a busy thoroughfare. *They always pick the most miserable places to go to ground. Information better be right this time. I want off this planet.*

At least there was no rain. That much he was grateful for. Ryca in its rainy season was even worse of a slophole than it was now. The streets were muddy; the sidewalk was muddy, making navigation treacherous as his boots made wet, *slucking* sounds with each step.

He stopped before a dingy, windowless, two-story stone building with a single carved wooden sign hanging above the door that read: *The Wandering Nomad, Libations & Intoxicants for All Species.*

On the surface, there was nothing at all special about the Wandering Nomad. For the most part, it seemed no different from any other low-scale establishment in any city on any planet in the galaxy. Tonight, however, this particular watering hole was special.

His prey was here.

He paused as he stepped through the old-style wooden saloon doors, making a long survey of the crowd inhabiting the interior. A pair of spaceport punks, looking not much younger than him, glowered when he ventured too near. He returned the look, flipping the folds of his duster back to

reveal the twin Colt 77 laser pistols he wore on each hip, and the two toughs decided they had better things to discuss. Paying them no more mind, he continued scanning the establishment. His quarry was not hard to find.

Seated at a table in an alcove near the back, shielded by a pale haze of blue smoke from his smoldering cigar, the man was trying desperately to look inconspicuous. The tailored purple suit he wore around his wide girth clashed with the attire of the establishment's regulars—mostly starship captains and their crews, smugglers, vice peddlers, and the assorted trash who filtered through this part of town at all hours. Jesse shook his head. *Might just as well be sitting under a neon sign.*

Watching the man for a few more seconds, Jesse then turned his attention to some of the other patrons as he worked his way toward the bar. Gravelly har-harring laughter drew his attention to a table at the rail of the upper balcony, where an older man with a mop of silver-white hair carried on an animated conversation with one of the prettier waitresses. The man glanced down and briefly met Jesse's gaze, nodded, then resumed his conversation with the woman's breasts.

He ordered an ale from the amphibian bartender. Turning, he rested his elbows on the bar behind him and continued to survey the other patrons.

A gleeful roar erupted from one of the gaming tables in the back. A goat-faced Rycan thrust a three-fingered fist in the air as the dealer piled multiple stacks of gaming chips before him. In one corner, a tarnished DJ drone was letting loose with a decades old funk-tune that no one seemed to be listening to anyway.

Despite the datedness of the music, he found himself humming along until he caught sight of two beings seated near the stage. The taller of the two, a Vor'na'cik, was covered with green, armored scales, its face ending in a piggish snout and large pointed ears with tufts of fine grey hair at the ends. Its companion was half the Vor'na'cik's height, covered in mottled brown and white fur, with large, expressive eyes. Its short round ears twitched nervously every few seconds. Like the man on the upper balcony, the Warwick met Jesse's gaze and nodded before turning back to his companion.

There was a tap on his shoulder, and Jesse turned just enough to accept his drink from the bartender. Taking a swig, he dropped some credits on the bar and proceeded toward his quarry's table.

The object of Jesse's attention was staring into his glass, trying his best to keep from drawing attention to himself. A plate of fatty, half-eaten grommet ribs was pushed off to one side. He kept his gaze on the tabletop, avoiding eye contact, hoping that his visitor would go away if ignored long enough. Jesse shrugged off his jacket, tossed it on the table, and slid into the opposite seat. The man regarded him with bloodshot eyes.

"You're Forster, the bounty hunter. *Captain Kid*," the man said, brushing the long white hair of his mohawk away from small, beady eyes set deep in a face thick with jowls.

"And you are Aril Krebs, vice-president of Pulsar Industries, maker of some of the finest holo-vid entertainment systems in the galaxy. Now you're wanted for the murder of your boss, Jason Farrees, President of

Pulsar Industries.” Jesse took another drink as he nonchalantly rested one boot on the tabletop.

“I had hoped you had maybe mistaken me for someone else,” Krebs pulled a grommet rib from the plate, and placed the whole thing, bone and all, in his mouth. After a moment of rolling it around on his tongue, he spat the bone back out on the table, cleaned of all meat. He wiped away a spot of grease from one corner of his mouth with a fat finger. “I’m surprised it took you this long to find me.”

“Surprised me, too.” Jesse ran his free hand through his unkempt blond hair before returning it lightly to the hilt of the pistol at his hip. “Considering you didn’t do a very good job of covering your tracks.”

Krebs’ eyes went vacant as he stared into his glass. His voice trembled as he spoke. “I didn’t mean to kill him, you know. I just took leave of my senses. Didn’t realize what I was doing until it was all over.”

Jesse nodded. “I believe you. I saw the security vid. What I believe, however, doesn’t really matter. I’m still bringing you in.”

Krebs kept his silence for a long moment, still staring at the amber liquid in his glass, shaking his head. When he looked up, his rodent eyes had taken on a hopeful gleam. “What are they paying you? I can double whatever they offer! I’ll triple it!”

Yeah, I was waiting for that. Jesse sighed in disgust. Any sympathy he might have held for the man dissipated like the smoke from his cigar. “Don’t make me shoot you under the table. I hate when someone offers me a bribe. If I had a credit for every time someone’s pulled that one, I wouldn’t still be doing this for a living.”

He leaned forward over the table so quickly that Krebs jerked back in his seat in surprise. His voice was a harsh rasp when he spoke again. "You killed a man. I don't care about your reasons or whether it was justified or not. You killed him, you ran, and now it's my job to bring you in to stand trial."

They regarded each other in tense silence for several seconds, before Jesse settled back in his seat, his tone conversational once more. "Besides, money was a secondary concern in this case. I owe the Farrees family a favor. This just turns out to be a convenient way to pay them back."

Krebs's shoulders sagged, as if he were deflating. Sighing, he gave Jesse a half-hearted smile. "I had to try."

With a speed that caught Jesse off-guard, Krebs upended the table and bolted for the back exit. Jesse, one leg still propped on the table, went over backwards, his head hitting the ground hard. The plate of grommet ribs crashed to the floor inches from him, meat and juices spattering in all directions.

Jesse staggered to his feet, shaking his head as he drew his twin pistols, swearing in multiple languages. An animal shriek caught his attention. The Warwick seated near the stage had leapt onto the bar. Launching into the air, it landed hard on Krebs' back, the two crashing to the floor, upending tables in the process.

Jesse fought his way through the ranks of spectators, the Vor'na'cik doing the same. The older man from the balcony leapt over the railing, scattering the patrons seated at the table he landed on.

A yelp of pain issued from the Warwick. Jesse saw Krebs get to his feet, a razor-thin dagger dripping blood in his hand. He shoved through the crowd and continued for the rear door.

Jesse, the older man, and the Vor'na'cik all reached the Warwick at the same time. Looking down at his injured companion, the older man turned his attention to the fugitive. "He's mine!" he growled, already starting to push through the crowd.

Jesse grabbed his arm before he could get far. "Don't bother."

The muffled sound of laserfire rang out, and Krebs crashed back through the door, landing unconscious atop a gaming table. The Rycan gambler assailed the inert fugitive with a plethora of obscenities for scattering his winnings across the floor.

A saucer-shaped drone measuring a half-meter across hovered through the shattered door frame on a repulsor field. Its body had a brushed chrome surface, marred by a single scorch mark that ran nearly dead center across the top of its plating. Numerous appendages tipped with instruments were folded against its underside. Yellow photoreceptors peered out from between twin stun guns trained on the unconscious Krebs.

"Good work, Sneaker," Jesse called. He turned his attention back to his smaller companion, who was just now struggling to sit up. "You okay, little brother?"

Podo Forster nodded as he sat up, clutching an arm as blood stained the white patches of his fur a sickly pink. "It's not bad. He just nicked me. What ticks me off is, it

wasn't his knife. He pulled it from my boot while we were struggling.”

Jesse smiled, tapping the buttons on the comm-band on his wrist. “*Starhawk*, this is Forster.”

A millisecond of static, then a female voice issued from the speaker. “*Tirannis here, Cap'n.*”

“Kym, you and Bokschh get the med-bay ready. Podo's been hurt.” Hearing her worried gasp, he added, “Don't worry. He'll live. Morogo's bringing him in.”

“*Good,*” The relief in the woman's voice was palpable. “*What about our objective?*”

“All taken care of. K'Tran and I will be along as soon as we collect the bounty. Forster out.”

Jesse patted Podo on the shoulder and, with the Vor'na'cik's aid, helped him to his feet. Once certain he was steady enough to walk, Morogo guided him to the doorway.

As the crowd of spectators began to disperse, K'Tran Pasker walked over to Krebs and placed a pair of manacles on his wrists. Though only in his early fifties, his shaggy white hair and leathery skin gave the impression that he was quite a bit older. His gray eyes still held a youthful gleam, and his body was lean and muscular.

Jesse turned to the bartender, and caught the *who's-going-to-pay-for-this* look on its face. Before actually voicing his concern, Jesse dropped a pile of credits in his hand.

Turning from the barman, Jesse tossed some more credits to the game dealer and more yet to the Rycan, who was still cursing Krebs. The Rycan looked down at the credits, promptly ending his verbal assault. Looking at

Jesse, its face twisted into its species equivalent of a grin. It saluted him with the upthrust fist gesture.

Jesse returned the salute and turned away. K'Tran was struggling to lift Krebs over one shoulder, making more of a show of it than necessary. "He's a heavy bastard." Gasping, the older man strained with the effort. "I think I'm getting too old for this."

"You could always retire again. Try your hand at something else."

"Sure." He brushed white strands of hair away from his face. "Maybe I'll apply for vice-president of Pulsar Industries. I heard the position's open."

Jesse laughed and returned to the alcove where Krebs had been seated, scooping up his jacket from where it had fallen on the floor. Spatterings of grommet sauce were evident on the item and he sighed. *Just had the damn thing cleaned.*

He shared a glance with his companion, noticing that the little drone hovered at the older man's shoulder, refusing to take its eyes or weapons off Krebs.

"Sneaker," Jesse called, trying to draw the drone's notice. When no response was forthcoming, Jesse rapped the top of its dome just hard enough to gain its attention. Photoreceptors swiveled to focus on Jesse, weapons staying trained on Krebs as K'Tran carried him out of the building. "It's all over, Sneaker. Stand down. We got the bad guy."

Sneaker burred a response; guns retracting beneath its dome. Smiling, Jesse pointed in the direction K'Tran had taken. "Lead the way."

Chapter Two

Stenax Prison Asteroid Facility Number Three-Eight-Six was the furthest thing from a model penal facility. The asteroid had been mined dry of the starship fuel Tydrium and abandoned for years after that until the Galactic Confederation converted it into a prison at minimal cost.

Conditions inside were deplorable. Prisoners were housed six to a cell three meters square. The atmosphere recycling units broke down frequently, leaving prisoners to breathe the same foul air for hours, if not days, at a time. Water was transported in, and was dispensed only at mealtimes. The staff of janitorial drones had dwindled from two dozen at the time the prison opened to a mere four.

Despite all this, facility three-eight-six *worked*. In the five years since its systems went online, three escapes had been attempted and failed. The only ways in or out were its two hangar bays, one for patrol fighters and one for transports. Escaping to the surface was suicide. The asteroid held no atmosphere, and sensor-guided laser batteries stood ready to vaporize any who might try escaping in a stolen environment suit.

In the prison's main office, overlooking the transport hangar bay, Warden Jerekk Grimmel leaned back, the seat groaning beneath his weight as he shifted his considerable girth to a more comfortable position. With effort, he propped one leg up against the console before him, causing crumbs of red soil from the asteroids corridors to drop from his shoes, collecting on the etched plastic of the prison's readout system. He scratched lazily at his belly, brown eyes

set deep in his pudgy face watching with disinterest as a transport ship approached the docking bay. Stifling a yawn, he used his leg to push away from the console, swiveling his chair one-hundred-eighty degrees to face his assistant.

“And what charming personages are we receiving today?” His tone was evidence that he could care less about the answer. Grimmel despised his job, but found that it became a little more bearable with each passing work cycle. Due for retirement in another six months, he counted down every minute until, on that glorious day, he would leave this rocky hellhole behind and find some planet that was warm and bright, with fresh air and lots of greenery. He would find himself a woman to settle down with and raise a dozen children, if he so wished.

At first, it appeared as though Ferret had not heard the question; then his yellow feline eyes rose to peer at Grimmel from over his data-pad. The near-human stood, the top of his head just missing the ceiling as his lanky frame stretched to its nearly full two-meter height. His eyes darted back to the pad once more as he took two steps closer to his superior, his usually bland expression turning to a grimace before answering. The fine hairs atop his head stood on end like a cockatoo’s head feathers. “The Nexus Gang, sir. Ten in all.”

The very mention of that name caused Grimmel’s head to ache. Breathing a heavy sigh, he turned back to his tracking board, one hand combing through long strands of greasy black hair, the other absently reaching for his glass of pale blue Bertelsian Ale. “The galaxy will be a hell of a lot better off with the Garrakis brothers out of the way,

that's for damn sure. When are we scheduled to torch them?"

Ferret consulted the pad again; his voice had returned to its normal volume. "Tomorrow at oh-nine-hundred, sir."

The sooner the better, Grimmel thought, lifting his glass of ale and contemplating it as the light caught it, sending ribbons of light dancing across the comm-panel. Throwing his head back, he swallowed the last of the drink, letting it burn a path down his throat. The Nexus Gang, and the Garrakis brothers in particular, were one of the galaxy's most vicious crime syndicates. Disposing of that group was a true service to the galaxy at large. Moreover, Grimmel got to oversee it. One of the few perks to this job.

He looked out the viewport overlooking the docking bay. Hangar crews were milling about, preparing for the transport's arrival or doing maintenance on the two crew shuttles docked within. Two-dozen armed guard drones took up positions to surround the transport when it touched down.

The transport appeared in the distance beyond the atmospheric shield, saucer-shaped, with directional vanes protruding from its aft section. The cockpit bubble jutted forward from the bow like a giant pimple on its light grey skin. The ship loomed ever larger as it turned to make its final approach.

An uneasy feeling—the kind he usually got before a prisoner riot—tugged at the back of Grimmel's mind. He could not place his finger on it, but there was something odd, very odd about the way the transport was approaching the hangar. "When was the last contact with that transport?"

“Just after they cleared the inner marker. Five minutes ago.” The tone of Ferret’s voice implied that he had picked up on his superior’s suspicion, eyes glued to the approaching transport.

“Who’s the pilot? Is it Tiberius?”

Another glance at the data pad and Ferret nodded. “Correct, sir. Willis Tiberius. He could make the approach blindfolded.”

The transport was nearing the edge of the atmosphere shield now. “Shouldn’t Tiberius have signaled for final clearance by now?”

Ferret didn’t answer. His feline eyes grew wide as he pointed out the viewport

Following Ferret’s line of sight, Grimmel saw the transport had halted its advance just outside the atmosphere barrier, its dorsal laser cannon swinging around in their direction.

Damn, I hate when I’m right. Tiberius was dead, as was the rest of the transport crew. Grimmel was certain of that. “Emergency shields. Seal the hangar.”

The transport guns opened up, energy beams lancing out, strafing the hangar from one side to the other. The shuttles within were torn to scrap. Workers scrambled to make their way free of the destruction.

The guard drones stayed their ground, but did nothing. Without a direct command, they were unauthorized to open fire. The transports cannons began to leisurely pick them off; targets in a shooting gallery.

“Shields, dammit.” Grimmel shrieked, watching the carnage. “Get those damn shields up!”

“No good, sir. The ship is already within the shield boundaries.”

Grimmel watched the last drone go down as the transport continued its random strafing of the hangar. A fuel barge erupted, vaporizing half the hangar bay. Only the viewport set into the wall overlooking the bay below saved Grimmel and Ferret from incineration by the fireball.

Grimmel rose from where he had thrown himself and looked out through the viewport, now scorched and blackened. Support crews were rushing throughout the hangar, attempting to extinguish the flaming debris of the two ruined ships. The transport maneuvered away from the hangar and ran for the cover of the asteroid field.

“Perimeter guns, open fire. Blast them before they get out of range.”

“We can’t fire, sir. Control circuits are damaged.” Ferret’s hands danced across the master control board, rerouting damaged systems.

“Then tell our sentry ships to intercept. They have permission to fire at will.”

“Sentries already moving in. Ten seconds to intercept.”

“Homebase, this is Centurion One,” Colonel Roark Goddard spoke into his helmet mike. “I have visual on the target and am arming weapons. Starting my run. Centurion Two, close up on me.”

“*Affirmative, Boss,*” came the response from his wingman.

Goddard feathered the throttle on his outdated T-37E Tomcat, rewarded with a healthy roar as the fighter accelerated. Though easily surpassed by newer fighters,

Tomcats held up remarkably well when properly maintained. It was more than agile enough to navigate the tricky obstacle course that the asteroid field presented.

Through his canopy, Goddard saw that the transport was accelerating, engines glowing hot white. The ship banked hard around a large asteroid, and Goddard marveled at how maneuverable the craft was. He would not have thought the transport could handle such a tight turn at the speed it was pulling. The ship disappeared from sight.

“Not picking it up on my scanners, Boss,” Zevo’s voice was steady, but Goddard detected the slight nervous waver. His wingman was new to the Stenax facility, just completing the first month of her tour. While she was a more than capable pilot, flying precision maneuvers at high speeds through the debris field still made her a bit squirrely. Goddard knew it would wear off. He had been the same way when he had first accepted this assignment. Now it came as second nature.

“It’s the iron content in these damn rocks. Those bastards didn’t go anywhere. Break off and head around to the far side. We’ll catch them in our crossfire.”

Zevo affirmed, her Tomcat peeling away from Goddard’s wing and circumnavigating the kilometer-wide chunk of space rock. Goddard banked to his left, beginning his own run. His eyes supplemented his ship’s scanners in surveying the terrain of the asteroid’s surface. He dropped into a large crater and hugged the surface.

“Where the hell is it?”

Goddard wished he knew. Zevo’s Tomcat was cresting the rim of the crater on the far side, coming at him. It executed a sharp turn to starboard, heading for a crevice

that split the crater wall on one side, passing over a smaller crater that dimpled the floor of the one they were traversing.

And there it was. The transport rose from that smaller depression, engines glowing as it hurtled skyward on the Tomcat's trail.

"Zevo, they're coming up fast from astern." Goddard shouted. "The bastards are right behind you."

Zevo's engines flared as she accelerated, heading for the crevice. *The damn thing's gaining on her. That shouldn't be possible.*

The transport opened fire, energy blasts flying above Zevo's fighter, restricting her from gaining altitude and channeling her further toward the chasm.

"Zevo, hit your retros to kill your momentum, then lean hard on your rudder. There's a good chance they'll overshoot you. If they get you into that canyon you'll be boxed in."

"I'm making a run for the canyon," Her voice quivered. She was on the verge of a full-blown panic. *"They can't follow me in."*

Before Goddard could reply, the transport opened fire again, each successive burst forcing Zevo's Tomcat down closer to the rocky surface of the asteroid. She'll never make it to the canyon.

"Zevo, eject. Punch out, dammit."

There was no reply. He saw the cockpit canopy blow off the fighter. Another two seconds and her ejection seat would blast her clear.

Zevo never got that chance. Her fighter's nose plowed into rock. The Tomcat began to cartwheel wildly across the

crater floor. Wings and engines tore away from the spiraling ship as it tumbled across the rocky surface. What remained of the main fuselage landed in a cloud of dust meters shy of the mouth of the canyon.

Goddard watched, sickened, as the remains of Zevo's fighter come to rest on the asteroid's surface. There was no way she could have survived such a wreck.

Ahead, the transport angled into a steep climb, clearing the crater wall by meters and racing away from the asteroid. Goddard switched weapons over to missiles and centered his crosshairs on the transport. The heads-up display showed that there was still too much distance between the two ships for a positive lock. Goddard diverted all extra power, including lasers and partial life support, to engines. The distance reading began to scroll down.

Grimmel broke through on the comm-set. *"Their trajectory shows that they're heading for the shallow end of the asteroid field. If they clear the belt, they can go to hyperspace."*

"They're not going anywhere," Goddard replied. "Another ten seconds and I'll have a lock."

The distance display continued to scroll down, the transport growing larger as Goddard's fighter closed in. The asteroids began to thin out, most of the debris not much larger than the transport.

The crosshairs on the HUD went green at the same time that the target lock tone began to whine throughout the cockpit. Goddard stabbed down on the firing stud. With a muffled roar, a single sidewinder missile loosed itself from the Tomcat's launcher. Goddard willed it on as it picked up the transport's ion trail and homed in.

When the missile was within a few meters, the transport pulled another impossibly tight turn, ducking behind an asteroid. The missile struggled to reacquire, slamming instead into the center of the asteroid. The rock split into three large fragments and hundreds of smaller ones.

Two of the pieces drifted away, harmless, but Goddard knew he would have a hard time avoiding the third. He yanked his control yoke hard to port, leaning hard on the rudder. The Tomcat responded with characteristic agility, heeling over onto its side, but the maneuver did not come fast enough. The chunk of space debris struck his starboard wing and engine, tearing them off. Goddard's fighter went into a wild spin.

Struggling to regain control, Goddard killed power to his remaining engine. Warning sirens screamed at him as systems shorted out. His computer screen scrolled off a stream of damage reports before it sputtered and went dark.

Goddard grabbed the ejection lever and gave it a hard pull. When the unit failed to respond, he continued yanking in frustration until the handle came off in his hand. Cursing, he threw it at the cockpit viewshield.

As the galaxy spun wildly around him, he caught a glimpse of the transport. It had doubled back, heading for him, then was out of sight again. When it next appeared, Goddard saw its cannons firing, their crimson rays lancing out towards him.

The last thing Colonel Roark Goddard saw was his fighter vaporizing around him, before he too was engulfed.

“Damn!” Grimmel watched on his monitor as the white blip that was Goddard’s fighter winked out of existence. The transport had turned again and raced clear of the asteroid belt. It, too, winked out as the ship cleared the debris field and made the jump to hyperspace.

Cursing, Grimmel threw his bottle, blue ale spilling everywhere as it shattered against the viewport. Numbers were still coming in on his screens, tallying the dead and wounded.

Grimmel contemplated the last of the ale with a sigh as it streamed down the viewport, knowing he had to report the incident. “Do we have long range communications, or were they damaged?”

Back at his console, Ferret ran a quick diagnostic. He nodded, the hairs on his head rippling as though he were floating under water. “All communications equipment checks out, sir.”

“Open a channel to Sector Governor Mahlcobb. We’ll need his authorization before we send out any hunter groups.”

“Yes, sir. Coding the message now.”

Knowing it would be some time before the message worked its way through the bureaucratic aides to the Governor himself, Grimmel started for the corridor. “I’m going down to assess the damage. Signal me as soon as the Governor comes on the line.”

He was stepping through the doorway when Ferret spoke up. The assistant made no attempt to hide the surprise in his voice. “Sir, the Governor is already on the line.”

“That was...fast,” Grimmel stepped back into the room.

“Yes sir, especially since I haven’t sent the message yet.”

Dread caused Grimmel’s stomach to lurch as he faced the wallscreen. After a few seconds of static, Governor Mahl Cobb’s image filtered through.

Governor Rans Mahl Cobb looked as close to a corpse as any living, breathing being could. Though only middle aged, his skin was so pale and thin and his dark eyes so sunken that he looked as though someone had wrapped his skull in a clear wax sealant. What little hair was left on his skull was the color of slate, in sharp contrast to the paleness of his flesh.

Mahl Cobb fixed Grimmel with a chilling gaze for several long seconds, and when he finally spoke, his voice was an unhealthy rasp. “*Warden Grimmel, I understand you’ve had an escape,*”

“That’s correct, sir,” *Now how the hell could you know that already?* Grimmel glanced at Ferret, who looked just as confused. Grimmel cleared his throat before continuing. “The prisoners somehow got control of their transport. We no longer have a signal from the shipboard tracer, so we assume the prisoners must have disabled it. However, we have our computers calculating all possible destinations along their last known trajectory. It should only be a matter of time before we pick them up again.”

“*I should certainly hope so, Warden Grimmel.*” A fit of dry, hacking coughing overcame Mahl Cobb, interrupting him for almost a full minute. When it subsided, his voice was raspier than before. “*This is a disgrace. I understand*

that it was the Nexus Gang who made a mockery of your defense systems.”

Grimmel glanced at Ferret. The aide shrugged, and Grimmel knew that he had not mentioned who had escaped. “Correct again, sir. I suggest we put out a call to all the available hunter groups within five systems, at least.”

The governor made a *tsk*-ing sound through pursed lips, shaking his head. “*Spend all those credits to cover up your incompetence? I think not, Warden Grimmel. I think not.*” Mahlcobb paused again to catch his breath. Such long speeches were not easy for him. “*No, I will dispatch only one group, and I know exactly who it will be. I think Captain Forster and his crew will do nicely. They did the job once. I’m sure they will be more than capable of doing it again.*”

The announcement stunned both Grimmel and his aide. Ferret, who had maintained his composure even through the Nexus Gang’s violent assault, now looked taken aback. As it was, the statement caught Grimmel so off-guard that he sat in silence for long seconds before finding his voice again. “Sir, I know Forster is probably the best hunter on hand, but even he and his crew aren’t enough to handle the Nexus Gang again. Not this soon.”

“*They will be quite enough,*” Mahlcobb hissed, dismissing any further rebuttal with a wave of his hand and another fit of spastic coughing. “*You will pass on my condolences to the families of the crew you lost in this debacle.*”

Grimmel nodded. “Yes, Governor.”

“*And Warden,*” Mahlcobb waited until Grimmel made eye contact once more. “*I understand you are due for*

retirement soon. If I were you, I'd consider tendering my resignation before then, in case Forster is not good enough to stop these vermin." With that, the screen went blank.

All was quiet in the office for a long moment. Ferret finally broke the silence. "That was a bit . . . odd on the Governor's part, wasn't it, sir? Dispatching only one team, I mean."

This whole damned affair is odd, Grimmel thought without looking at his aide. "It's almost as though he wants Forster to lose on this one." *Like he hasn't already lost enough.*

That thought troubled Warden Grimmel. Of all the bounty hunters he had dealt with in his career, young Jesse Forster was one of the few that he genuinely liked. *Be careful, Captain Kid.*

"Come on, Ferret," Grimmel started for the corridor once more. "Let's see what we can do to help out downstairs."

Chapter Three

“You’d think they’d show us a little more respect,” K’Tran was griping as he and Jesse, with Sneaker hovering along behind, stepped out of the local militia station and into the cool Rycan night. The pink twilight sky had faded now to a deep star-speckled purple. “We practically did their work for them! Stupid bastards should have arrested Krebs as soon as he set foot on this rock!”

Jesse waited out his friend’s tirade. He had heard it before. It came as no surprise that they should receive scorn from the local authorities. In most instances, licensed, registered, and bonded bounty hunters received little more respect than the criminals they targeted. It was something every hunter had to deal with. Jesse had learned to accept it years ago.

K’Tran, however, would never quite comprehend. He was still growling. “Twenty years I’ve been in this business and still I get treated like something scraped off the bottom of a boot!” He gave his friend a scathing look. “It’s times like this when I think we should take the bribes we’re offered.”

Jesse gave a slight recoil of surprise. “What bribe? I never said anything about a bribe.”

K’Tran paused in mid-stride and gave his friend a knowing look, and Jesse shrugged. “Okay, yeah, he did offer a bribe,” Another look, quizzical, and Jesse replied, “Triple.”

K’Tran gave a soft whistle. “It’s a shame that we’re so damned honest.”

The elder huntsman chuckled softly, and Jesse knew the storm had passed. K'Tran's shoulders slumped in a more relaxed position and he raised his arms over his head, stretching fatigued muscles. For all his gruff and tough posturing, K'Tran was the type most likely to have "Mom" tattooed on his arm.

"My back's gonna be sore for a week from carrying that fat bastard," he changed the subject, and hailed a cab. The vehicle glided over to them, its passenger door hissing open. "I can't understand why the Guild put a whole team on just one guy anyway. Should've sub-let the hunt out to a few of the independents."

Jesse shrugged. "Our debt to the Farrees family is paid off. That's all care about."

K'Tran nodded. Exaggerating a grunt of pain, he began to climb into the cab, stopping when he realized his friend was not following. "You go on ahead," Jesse handed him the credit voucher containing their bounty. "I want to walk back."

"Obudon isn't the best place to go wandering at night."

Jesse chuckled lightly, throwing back the folds of his jacket and resting his palms on the grips of his twin sidearms. "You don't think I can take care of myself? Besides, I'll keep Sneaker with me." He paused, not meeting the gaze of the older man's eyes. "I need to think."

K'Tran turned a sympathetic gaze on the younger man. He had known Jesse since birth and had been partners with him as bounty hunters for the last six years, as he had been with Jesse's father before that. He knew all of his younger companion's quirks as well as he knew his own, and K'Tran knew exactly what it was that Jesse had to think

about. “All the thinking in the galaxy ain’t going to bring her back, Jesse.”

Jesse made no effort to disguise the annoyance in his voice. “Just head back to the ship,” he snapped. His tone grew softer and added, “I’ll be there in a little while.”

Without further argument, K’Tran retreated into his seat. Repulsorfield whining, the cab raced off down the dark, semi-deserted street.

Jesse waited until the vehicle had disappeared around a corner before he started walking, looking up at the stars shimmering overhead in the cool, cloudless night sky. Sneaker followed a few feet behind, sweeping his photoreceptors vigilantly from side to side. Riding shotgun, as the rest of the crew was fond of calling the defensive posture Sneaker often took up when at Jesse’s side.

Jesse stopped walking and continued staring into the sky. “Damn it, Lohren. I miss you.”

Sneaker let out a questioning trill. Jesse turned to face him; took a deep breath. “Nothing, little guy. Just talking to myself. Let’s cut over to the next boulevard. There’s a weapons dealer I want to check out.”

He was crossing the street, stepping out of the way of a trio of drunken, raucously singing Verbans, when his comm-band pinged. “Forster here.”

“*Sorry to bother you, Jesse,*” Podo’s voice crackled from the speaker.

“How’s the arm, little brother?”

“*I’ll be okay,*” By the tone of his voice Jesse could tell that he had already dismissed the entire affair. “*Dr. Drone says I’ll be playing the snoov harp again in no time.*”

“Well, I certainly hope it improves your playing ability.”

If Podo heard the jibe, he chose to ignore it. *“Bokschh said to notify you. We’ve got a call for another hunt.”*

Jesse sighed, rubbing the bridge of his nose with both hands as he felt a sudden headache forming behind his eyes. “Tell Bokschh to turn it down. I think we all deserve a few days rest.”

“I told him that would be your answer, but he said to call you anyway. This is a real big one. We could be pulling down as much as a half-million credits.”

The announcement stunned Jesse into silence for a moment. Jesse looked at Sneaker who, despite the lack of facial expressions—or lack of a face for that matter— still somehow managed to look surprised. Jesse looked back to his comm-band. “Did I hear you right? Did you say a half-million?”

“That’s what Guildmaster Nord said,” Podo replied. *“We’ve got His Bulkiness on the holo now, waiting to talk to you.”*

Jesse was impressed and let out a small whistle that Sneaker’s own ululating trill echoed. It was rare indeed that the head of the Hunters Guild put out the call himself. That alone told Jesse the offer was serious, and not just another one of Podo’s jokes. “I’ll catch the nearest cab. Have Bokschh contact the city central computer and do traffic reroute. I’ll leave my signal open so you can track me.”

There was a pause on the other end, almost a full minute long, and Jesse thought he could hear muffled voices arguing before Podo finally replied with a sigh. *“Bokschh says to remind you of...”* His voice took on the

precise clipped tones that Bokschh spoke in. Jesse could almost hear Podo's eyes rolling. "*Galactic Ordinance three-nine-eight dash seven-two-two which specifically bans the use of central computer access for use by private parties.*"

"Tell Bokschh they can fine us all they want. I am coming back now."

"*I told him you'd say that, so I took the liberty of already locking on to your comm-band signal.*" Jesse could picture the smirk on the Warwick's face. "*Just grab a cab.*"

Stepping to the curb, Jesse whistled. In seconds, another drone cab pulled up before him. Up ahead, he could see the other vehicles pulling to the side of the street, clearing the way for him. With a grin, Jesse slid into the passenger seat, Sneaker settling beside him, and the cab raced for the spaceport.

Chapter Four

The *Starhawk* was an old and ugly ship. Its gunmetal hull scarred and pitted by decades of use and abuse, patched in spots where it had taken damage from meteor showers and space battles. To an outsider, it seemed a miracle it could even get off the ground.

From the viewports on the *Starhawk's* bridge, Kym Tirannis kept watch on the starship pad. She used one hand to brush long strands of her curly, flame-red hair out of her dark brown eyes while pressing for the ramp release with the other. The same age as Jesse, the *Starhawk's* engineer was an attractive young woman, and would have been considered even more so if her face was not perpetually smudged with grease or coolant or some other by-product from her work on the ship's engines. She turned to face the others, moving easily in bulky, dark blue coveralls laden with tools. "K'Tran's coming in now."

"It is about time. We cannot keep Guildmaster Nord waiting much longer. He is not a patient man." Bokschh replied from beside the center command chair. The former military procurement drone had served with K'Tran and Thom Forster during the Harkonian War a quarter-century earlier. Thom later rescued him from decommissioning after the war had ended. His considerable talents went to work for them as they started out in the trade of bounty hunting. The drone's trademark list to his left, due to his left leg being several centimeters shorter than the other, gave the impression that it was ready to topple over at any minute. It also gave it a pronounced limp when it walked.

“Relax, Tin Man,” Jesse scolded as he leaned back in his command chair, his jacket and holsters abandoned now; the sleeves of his tunic rolled high on his arms. “The Guildmaster can hold a minute more.”

A few moments later, the bridge hatch slid open and K'Tran stepped in. “Pay day!” He held the credit voucher up for all to see, stopping short at the sight of his captain there ahead of him.

“Get stuck in traffic?”

K'Tran glared. “You rerouted the traffic patterns again, didn't you? Don't mess with an old man's head.”

“Take a seat, old man,” Podo chimed in from the communications console. “The show's about to begin.”

“What show? What's he talking about?”

“We've got a call from Guildmaster Nord himself,” Jesse said, raising an eyebrow for dramatic effect. “Podo, if you'll please put the Guildmaster on the holo.”

Podo's paws danced across the controls and the bridge holo-comm system hummed to life. In the center of the bridge, the full-scale, three-dimensional image of Guildmaster Nord flickered into existence.

Jesse did not consider himself a prejudiced man. He firmly believed in treating all races with respect regarding their customs, cultures and appearances. However, every time Jesse looked upon a Drassian, he could not help but conjure up the thought of a large eggplant with tentacles. The appearance was deceiving. Roughly a meter tall at adulthood, they were covered in fine hair that ran through the entire spectrum of colors, but their tentacles were almost always a drab green. Drassians were fast and agile, making good use of their tentacles to propel themselves

effortlessly across land or water. They were surprisingly graceful, despite their ungainly appearance, and respected for their business savvy and formidable fighting skills.

“Hello, Guildmaster,” Jesse forced as much false cheerfulness into his voice as he could muster. “How are the wife and hatchlings?”

Nord’s image looked directly at Jesse, fine blue hair standing up in small spikes atop his head. He leaned forward, his image distorting as he leaned too close to his holo-comm transmitter, and stabbed a holographic tentacle at Jesse in the same motion. “*I do not like to be kept waiting, Captain.*”

“Apologies, sir. We’ve been a little busy. I thought you’d like to know we just collected the bounty on Aril Krebs.”

Nord waved a second tentacle, dismissing the comment. “*Small fish. I’ve got a far tougher job in store for you, and I’ll tell you now,*” a third tentacle stabbed out from somewhere behind him. “*If you were not specifically requested for this hunt, I would not have considered you for it. There are a dozen other hunter groups I would much rather see this assigned to. But as I said, it is a high-priority request.*”

Everyone’s eyebrows rose at the mention of the request. “High priority? Who commissioned us?”

Nord ignored the question and pushed on. “*There’s been an escape from the Stenax prison asteroid. Ten inmates in all. The Nexus Gang.*”

God, no. Not now. Not so soon. Jesse’s stomach twisted itself into a knot and a wave of nausea swept over him. *The dreams have finally stopped.*

He struggled to keep his features neutral, though his fingernails were cutting into the padded arms of his seat. The nausea increased and his head was swimming now. “I thought Stenax was escape proof?” He was fighting the oh-so slight tremor in his voice that he hoped no one had noticed.

Nord’s head bobbed once in agreement. *“The asteroid itself, so far as we know, is inescapable. However, the gang was somehow able to take control of their transport just prior to docking. They shot up the prison hangar and destroyed two patrol craft before jumping out of the system. They disabled their onboard tracer. The transport was later found abandoned in the desert outside of New Providence City on Melarii Two. The Melariiian authorities have been specifically instructed by your employer not to touch the craft until after you have had a chance to examine it. That is to be your starting point. We believe they may be joining up with some of the other surviving members of their outfit.”*

“What other teams are on the hunt?”

“Yours is the only one.”

Jesse heard Kym give a low whistle of amazement, saw Podo and Morogo exchange glances across the bridge.

“Sir,” Jesse kept his speech slow and steady. “I admit we’re good, but I don’t think that even we could take the whole gang by ourselves again, especially if they have reinforcements. Even if we could, the *Starhawk* isn’t equipped to handle that many prisoners at once.”

“As to your second concern, you needn’t worry about holding space. This is a termination order. We don’t want them back this time.” Nord’s voice held a note of

satisfaction. *“Every escapee’s sentence has been upgraded to termination. Bounty for each individual is payable on proof of their destruction. DNA templates are preferred.”* He paused briefly. *“As to your first concern, your team, and your team only was specified.”*

“Specified by whom?”

“I’m not at liberty to say.”

“Never mind who assigned us,” Podo spoke up, and Jesse shot him an annoyed glance. “What’s the bounty?”

Jesse saw K’Tran and Morogo nod in greedy agreement, and a flash of anger coursed through him. *Sometimes money isn’t enough.*

“Bounty on the two Garrakis brothers is one hundred and twenty-five thousand each. Fifty for Khyber, his mate, Jahrna, and the Mantilorian, Tesk. Thirty on Ho’jisk and Trank. Twenty for S’biz, Feros, and Skritz. Expenses to be paid separately after you’ve completed your hunt.”

“Five hundred and twenty- thousand,” Bokschh calculated.

The dam burst. Everyone began talking at once, each stating aloud what he or she would do with their share.

“What about the smaller players working for the Nexus?” K’Tran asked, as the din subsided. “Like the transport pilots or small musclemen?”

Nord cast a thoughtful glance at the older hunter before replying. *“If you have an opportunity to detain any such individuals, and provided they are marked for bounty, those sums will, of course, be added into the total reward.”*

“I still don’t like being in the dark about our employer,” Jesse stated.

“You don’t get to pick and choose your employers, Forster. That’s my job,” Several of Nord’s tentacles twitched with annoyance.

“Yes, sir, but I still don’t like it.”

“Just do the job, Forster,” Nord rumbled. *“The Nexus Gang was bad enough the first time around. I shudder to think what they will do now that their tiny minds are probably bent on revenge.”*

“I guess we really don’t have much of a choice then.” Jesse drew in a deep breath, exhaled slowly. “All right, sir. As soon as we get our clearance to depart, we’ll get on the trail.”

Bobbing his head in satisfaction, Nord’s face softened as he blinked his large, black eyes. His voice, when he spoke again, had lost its harsh tone. *“Jesse, I want you to know that I’m not unsympathetic to your discomfort about confronting the Garrakis brothers again. I know what capturing them the last time cost you. Lohren was a wonderful girl.”*

The words, meaning to bring him comfort, only darkened Jesse’s mood further. Still, he found it within himself to conjure up a small smile. “Thank you, Guildmaster. I appreciate that. We’ll do our best. *Starhawk* out.” He signed off, and the Guildmaster’s image dissolved into snow, fading away.

A heavy silence descended upon the bridge for a minute after the transmission ended. The crew watched Jesse closely. For the barest second, his shoulders slumped, but the motion passed as quickly as it had come on. If any of them had noticed his earlier discomfort, they made no mention of it. For that, he was relieved.

“Okay everybody; let’s get ready to get this crate off the ground. Set course for Melarii Two.” The deckplates began to vibrate softly as K’Tran and Morogo brought the engines online.

Jesse turned to Podo, “Fuzzy, signal spaceport control for clearance.”

The Warwick nodded and spoke into his headset mike after establishing the proper frequency. “Obudon Spaceport Control, this is the *Starhawk*, docking berth seventeen, requesting clearance for departure.”

“Starhawk, *this is Control*,” the spaceport traffic control drone came back in its gender non-specific voice, “*Clearance is granted. May your journey be free of incident.*”

Jesse saw Podo’s cheek puff up slightly as he grinned. “Unlikely, Control, but thanks anyway.”

Hearing the comment, Jesse allowed himself a grin. Then, setting his gaze forward he said, “K’Tran, you heard them. Take us out of here.”

“Be my pleasure.” The older man nodded at Morogo, and the two of them lifted the *Starhawk* out of the docking bay and into the Ryca sky.

“Engines are operating at their peaks,” Kym’s eyes never left her diagnostic boards, “We can bring the stardrive online as soon as we’re clear of Ryca’s gravity well.”

“Then as long as everything’s under control, I’ll be in my quarters,” Jesse rose and started for the hatch. “Bokschh, you’re in charge. Notify me if anything comes up.”

He stepped into the corridor beyond, the hatch closing behind him.

Podo and Kym both looked after him as he left the bridge.

* * *

Gohrmann Garrakis lay in the dirt, red eyes staring blankly into the night sky. His right arm, severed at the elbow, lay several feet away, stained blue with blood and still clutching the laser pistol in its claws. The smoking wound in the Kleezha's forehead was assurance that the gangster would not be getting up again. Ever.

Small comfort.

Jesse dropped his weapon and knelt to cradle Lohren's head in his lap. Her russet hair fell across his arm in long waves. He could still smell the sweet scent of it.

The laser blast she had taken in the chest had burned through her clothes, revealing scorched flesh beyond. Her breathing was labored and growing weaker by the moment. Jesse stroked her cheek gently, and her dark eyes fluttered open.

Those eyes. The first time they met, those eyes had nearly bought Jesse to his knees. From then on, every time she would look at him in that certain way, he would have the same reaction. She was giving him that look now, only the effect was different, because he knew this would be the last time.

"Hey you," Her voice was barely a whisper. The hint of a smile traced her lips.

Jesse hushed her. "Don't try to talk. The others will be here any minute. We'll get you fixed right up."

"They can't help."

“Don’t,” Jesse said. “Everything’s going to be okay. You’ll be okay. You’ve got to,” He was saying it more to himself than to Lohren.

She reached up and touched his face. Her eyes were glassy. Pulling his face to hers, she kissed him softly.

“I...” Her voice faltered. She inhaled sharply, struggling to gather strength. Jesse could see that she was fighting to get the words out. “I...love you, Captain Kid.”

She looked past him then; dark eyes staring up at the night sky over Piraxis Three. The faintest of smiles passed over her lips just before closing her eyes. She took another shuddering breath, her hand falling away from his face as she went limp in his arms.

“Lohren?” Jesse’s voice was a tight, trembling whisper. “Lohren, don’t you die on me.”

She was gone.

He held her closer to him, letting the tears come now, his body shaking from powerful sobs. His chest that felt like it would explode outward.

Still gazing down at Lohren’s peaceful face, he reached out for his sidearm laying in the dirt beside him. Gripping it tightly so that it would not shake free of his trembling hand, he raised it to his head.

The sound of footsteps rushing up from behind him belayed his attempt to join his love. He dropped the pistol again, rocking Lohren, willing her to come back.

He felt K’Tran’s hand on his shoulder, shrugged it off violently, and the older man took a cautious step back. “Jesse, why don’t you let us take her now? There’s nothing more you can do.” He said, his gruff voice choking with

emotion. “It’s over. We’ve got the rest of them. Let’s send Lohren on her way. It’s what she would want.”

His crew was had gathered around him, watching and waiting for Jesse to make his next move. Kym was on her knees, sobbing, clutching Podo, burying her face his fur. K’Tran wept openly. Morogo stood to one side, revealing no emotion, as stoic as the two drones that stood beside him.

Jesse laid Lohren on the ground. Rising, he turned away without a word, staring blankly as he made his way through their ranks. K’Tran and Morogo knelt to retrieve the body. Kym rose to follow, but Podo caught her hand and held her back with a solemn shake of his head.

Jesse walked further out onto the prairie, trying to lose himself in the darkness.

The darkness that Jesse awoke to in his cabin was stifling. Sitting up, he untangled himself from the mass of sweat-soaked sheets and swung his legs over the side of his bunk. He took a long moment to slow his breathing, and calm his pounding heart.

The damned dreams had come again. They had begun to subside in the past few weeks and now Nord’s announcement had stirred them back to fruition. He cursed Nord, the Guild, the Nexus and whoever had been keeping them and had allowed their escape.

Hands still trembling, he reached to the shelf next to his bunk and switched on the miniature holo-stand there. Lohren’s full-length, holographic image stood a foot tall on the stand, and for the longest moment, he avoided looking at it.

When he finally found the courage to glance over, he found her eyes had remained the way they had been during life, and were gazing out at him lovingly. He felt another surge of emotion and cursed. “I’m so sorry, Lohren. It should have been me.”

He was grateful when the chime came from his cabin door. Reaching over, he shut the holo and called for entry. The door hissed open, and Kym stood silhouetted in the light pouring in from the corridor. “Can I come in?”

Jesse nodded, bringing the lights up just enough to see clearly. The *Starhawk’s* engineer entered and sat on the edge of the bunk, tucking her long hair back behind one ear. Jesse gazed at her for a long moment, marveling at how like her sister Kym was, yet how unlike at the same time. The eyes were definitely the link. That deep, coffee color that seemed to hold one’s gaze forever was a trait both Tirannis girls shared, but there were other hints as well. A certain, quizzical tilt of the head; the same crooked, yet warm smile; the way each would brush their hair back behind one ear.

Their differences, however, had been just as obvious. Lohren had been outgoing, quick to laugh. She had the ability to charm a roomful of the roughest, rowdiest scum the universe could put out. Kym, on the other hand, was an introvert—quiet, insightful, more at ease around drones and machinery than people. Lohren always had to be out experiencing life. Kym was content by herself, tinkering with her machines, watching life from a discreet distance. Like her sister, however, Kym was also always well in tune with Jesse’s thoughts. “The dreams again?”

Jesse took a deep breath, and cursed himself inwardly when it sounded like a snuffle. “How’d you know?”

She cocked her head, “Every time the Garrakis brothers are mentioned, you go crawling into your own personal black hole. I figured word of their escape would trigger something.”

Jesse nodded. “It’s been weeks since the last one. I figured that they were done with. Then, when Nord mentioned the prison break...” His voice trailed off as his throat began to constrict. Staring down at his bunk, at the twisted sheets, he avoided her gaze. He could not stare into those eyes that were so much like her sisters.

“We’re all still hurting, you know,” she countered, her voice soft and soothing. “We all loved her.”

Jesse turned back to her, but still avoided her gaze. He gave a violent shake of the head. “Not like I did.”

“Of course not like you, but we did all love her and we all miss her just as much,” She blinked back tears that welled up at the memory. “She was my sister, for pity’s sake. Hell, even Sneaker misses her. You know how often I’ve found him hanging around outside our cabin door waiting to be let in?” She managed a faint smile. “Poor guy still doesn’t realize that she’s not coming back.”

“Lohren always did have a soft spot for the little guy,” Jesse chuckled. Lohren had treated the drone like a puppy.

They both fell into a melancholy silence after that, each avoiding looking at the other. Kym wiped her eyes; took a deep breath, but it was Jesse who broke the silence. “It just seems like every time I think I can put that day behind me, something new always comes up to remind me.”

Kym nodded, the action causing red curls to fall in front of her face. She absently brushed it away from her eyes with one hand. “I admit that hearing Rahk and Kahr escaped did nothing for anyone’s mood. How many times do we have to put these guys away?”

Jesse looked away again, staring at the opposite bulkhead, or rather, staring through it, possibly seeing the trials that lay ahead of them. “Maybe this time things will be different. This time it’s either them or me.”

“Them or us,” Kym corrected. “You’re not the only one involved here, you know. We’re a team, remember?”

Jesse’s face suddenly hardened; his voice a harsh rasp. For the first time since she had entered, he met her gaze with steely eyes. “I’m taking them down Kym. Rahk and Kahr are mine. I don’t care who burns the rest of them, but I want those two.”

Jesse’s sudden harshness took Kym aback, and for the slightest instant, she was frightened. The look in his eyes scared her, and she fought back a shudder. “You’re the boss, Boss,” she answered, trying to sound nonchalant. “We’ll do it whichever way you want.”

“They’re going down.” Jesse replied.

Chapter Five

Ugly, even by the standards of his own race, Rahk Garrakis was a child's nightmare monster come to life. Standing nearly two meters tall, he looked as though he had been assembled from spare body parts; an otherworldly Frankenstein's monster. His left arm was heavily muscled, while the right was a gleaming chromium cybernetic replacement. His leathery skin was a cold, gray color, and the long, bony tail that extended from the base of his spine twitched from side to side with jerky, spasmodic movements. Half the flesh on his jackal's head was blistered and scarred, a black metal patch surgically welded over the socket where his right eye had once been. The remaining red eye had a feline's slitted pupil.

As a child, Rahk had learned death at an early age. Born deformed, with only a stump for a right arm that ended where his elbow would have been, he had been looked down upon by his family for being a misfit. So ashamed was his father that he had suggested, on more than one occasion, taking the child up into space and jettisoning him out an airlock.

The ridicule he received from his family had been bad enough, but growing up as a boy on the harsh ghetto streets of Kleezhakistan's major spaceport had been torture. The gangs of feral children that ran wild among the alleyways constantly teased him and beat on him. One, in particular, a human child called Grub, had been especially vicious, on one occasion gouging out Rahk's right eye. As though that

deed were not bad enough, the boy had thrown it on the ground and stomped it into a smear on the pavement.

Rahk had thrown himself upon the much larger Grub. With every bit of savage strength born of rage that he possessed, Rahk disemboweled the boy, noting with grim satisfaction that the boy cried for his mother, a high, piercing shriek that lasted a full fifteen minutes, before death finally took hold.

Rahk had returned home that night, proud of his accomplishment. To prove his deed, he brought Grub's head home with him to show his family. Both of Grub's eyes were missing from their sockets. Rahk had savored their flavor.

From that day on, Rahk Garrakis had become a respected and feared member of Kleezhakistan society. No one dared to so much as look the wrong way at him again. He earned new respect from his father, who now proudly brought him into the family business, which at the time had been a small narcotics smuggling ring. Together father and son, and later, Kahr, formed their small business into one of the largest crime syndicates in the galaxy.

Now Rahk knelt in his personal quarters aboard the freighter *Dark Blood*, deep in meditation. Since transferring from the prison transport, Rahk had spent the majority of his time in the small cabin, stripped of his prisoner fatigues, his personal armor awaiting him in one corner. Gazing out of the cabin's tiny viewport, he pondered the battle that he knew was coming.

It would be an enjoyable battle. There had been many before this one, many with more glorious results, but this one was of a personal nature.

This one would bring either a glorious end to himself, or to his most hated foe.

Forster. The name brought to Rahk feelings of pure rage and hatred, but at the same time, a grudging respect and admiration. The boy had killed Rahk's father, though the death had been justified since old Gohrmann had only moments before assured the death of Forster's mate. Gohrmann had died with the satisfaction of knowing that he had hurt Forster far, far worse than if he had caused the boy any actual, bodily harm.

Of all the enemies Rahk had fought over the years, Forster was the one he respected the most. The boy was a capable hunter, as his father before him had been. Rahk had never actually faced off against the near-legendary Thom Forster, but the tales were well known. Jesse Forster and his crew were extending that legend further. The boy had taken up the trade after the premature death of his father, and had become one of the most successful hunters of the day, with almost six hundred captures, dead and alive, in five years.

The apex of that career should have come with Ghormann's death and Rahk's capture, along with the rest of the Nexus Gang, but the death of his mate had sapped Forster of his fighting spirit. He no longer accepted the truly challenging hunts, opting instead to retrieve petty criminals—smugglers and assorted other flotsam that the underworld of the galaxy only minimally tolerated.

Rahk sincerely hoped that word of his escape would re-energize the young hunter. He wanted Forster's death in their final battle to be an honorable one. It was no fun killing an enemy whose heart was not in the fight.

Especially since that heart would taste so much better after a satisfying battle.

* * *

The computer chimed softly in the darkness, but received no response. It chimed again, louder this time, but still no response was forthcoming. Sounding a third time, it replaced the chime with the sound of a crowing rooster, followed by a rousing rendition of the *William Tell Overture*. This time, the desired effect was achieved.

Kayla Karson sat bolt upright, and despite the cramped confines of her bunk, her diminutive five-foot-two form easily allowed her to avoid hitting her head on the ceiling. Groggy, blinking her eyes in the near-darkness of her cabin aboard her ship *Nebula Dancer*, she reached to the panel above her head and violently slapped at the computer controls, muting the sound. With somewhat less savagery, she engaged the audio pickup. In a voice that was still half a yawn, she grumbled, “I was just in the middle of a very good dream, OATS, so this had better be good.”

“I do wish you would not call me that, Miss Kayla,” the computer replied, making no indication that it acknowledged the threat, but there was a slight hint of annoyance in its male, but effeminate voice, “My designation is Onboard Assistant, Ten Series, as I have repeatedly reminded you.”

Kayla mimicked the words with more than enough annoyance for them both. She was beginning to regret having installed the shipboard assistant program only weeks earlier. “Sure thing,” she answered, more sarcasm than sincerity. “Soon as you stop calling me Miss Kayla

and especially when you stop waking me when my dreaming gets good.”

“I do apologize for having interrupted your rest period, Miss Kayla.” Kayla found herself wondering if this particular model had been programmed for sarcasm, or was learning it from her. “You have received an urgent message from the sub-administrator of Stenax Prison Asteroid Facility Three-Eight-Six.”

Ferret comes through again. Kayla grinned and pushed out of her bunk, padding softly across the short distance to the wall console. “Patch him through.” She pulled on a robe, pushing strands of shoulder-length blonde hair away from her eyes.

With a buzz that Kayla took to be the computer version of a sigh, OATS said, “Transferring!”

“Ferret, what have you got for me?” she asked as the image of the assistant warden came slowly into view. She found the poor quality of the transmission perplexing. Ordinarily, messages from Ferret came through with considerable clarity due to the top-of-the-line communication equipment the prison employed.

“I cannot talk long. There’s too much happening here,” Ferret’s yellow eyes glanced around, the hair atop his head twitching nervously. *“The Nexus Gang has escaped. Last report puts them on Melarii Two. It’s a big one. We could stand to make quite a bit even if you only bring in the lower-priced ones. I’m downloading the specifics now.”* The last few words were barely audible, garbled by static.

“Confirming download,” OATS reported.

Kayla scanned the data, let out a soft whistle. “I’m impressed. I’ve never seen a multiple termination order like this before. They must have really been naughty this time.”

Ferret nodded, a glum expression crossing his features. The image went momentarily out of focus. “*It was pretty bad.*”

“What teams are on it?”

“*Just one. Forster and his crew.*”

“Really?” Now she truly was impressed. “I’ve never met the famous Captain Kid before. Maybe I’ll get lucky and we’ll cross paths.”

“*Forster’s in the Obudon system; just finished up another hunt. That might give you enough of a jump on him.*”

She gave the sub-administrator an incredible, disarming smile. “You did good, Ferret. Real good. I’ll definitely cut you a bigger piece when I’m done.”

“*You just be extra careful,*” Ferret’s image distorted again, giving the impression that his head was being twisted around the middle. “*The Nexus is unlike any other bounty you’ve gone after before. This one will get thermal.*”

“Dear, dear Ferret. If I were the cautious type, I wouldn’t be in this line of work.” She flashed the smile again, and could see Ferret melt a little more as he grinned back sheepishly. “Thanks again. Karson out.”

Kayla switched off the screen and yawned, running her fingers through her hair to remove the tangled strands. She set about getting dressed, her mind working overtime. She was in the Lexxon system, twenty light years closer to Melarii than Forster. That would give her a good head start.

Who knew? Perhaps she could wrap this all up before the *Starhawk* even arrived.

Ah, the life of an independent bounty hunter. If I can pull this off, they'll have to let me into the Guild. They'll have no choice.

She finished pulling on her boots and made for the cockpit. *Look out, Jesse Forster, she thought. There's a new kid in town.*

