

NEW BABEL

Joseph McGuire

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Department of English Language and Literature

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“So the Lord scattered them from there over all the earth, and they stopped building the city. That is why it was called Babel—because there the Lord confused the language of the whole world. From there the Lord scattered them over the face of the whole earth.”

Genesis 11:8-9, NIV

To my Mom and Dad for supporting me and loving me through all of my brightest ideas and all my darkest moments.

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ABSTRACT

NEW BABEL

by Joseph McGuire

I wrote New Babel to explore the genre of science fiction with an important focus on character-driven story arcs. By putting emphasis on the interactions of the characters, rather than any grandiose aspects of the setting, I hoped that I could illustrate the potential of the form and emulate other authors that in the past have merged fantasy and human drama.

My influences include Orson Scott Card, Neil Gaiman, and Isaac Asimov. These writers are known for creating brilliantly rich settings accompanied by human and believable dialogue. Their ability to merge the mundane with the surreal is something I am constantly trying to enshrine in my own writing.

I purposely made my antagonist both the most interesting character in the piece as well as the most alien. My hope was that by doing so I could make a statement about the nature of hero worship and media consumption. The antagonist, known as Third, is a larger than life personality that serves as a cult-like figure to his followers. Most characters that spend any amount of time with Third become simultaneously entranced and repulsed by him, the same way that we who consume the media become transfixed by characters we “love to hate.”

The other main focus of the piece was technology and consumerism and their places in our lives. All of the characters possess a small computer imbedded in their brains called a Node™ which showcases not only their dependence on technology but their ambivalence to corporate ownership. Throughout the narrative, there are several more trademarks that pop up, even in speech and in people’s private thoughts. By taking corporate influence to its most extreme conclusion, I’m able to comment on it through subtext.

Ultimately, I feel that New Babel is a success. It successfully examines human failings and virtues through the lens of science fiction and manages to be both entertaining and thought provoking in the same vein as Isaac Asimov or Phillip K. Dick.

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INTRODUCTION

My creative thesis, entitled New Babel, is the beginning of a science fiction novel intended to explore the effects of corporate globalization and political machinery on society, as well as on the average individual.

The story follows a criminal psychologist named Kite Chambers, who is tasked with hunting down and apprehending a terrorist known only as Third, who plots to destroy the book's futuristic world. The story switches perspective between Kite and several other characters as the conspiracy behind Third's acts of terrorism reveals itself.

This piece takes inspiration from such works as "The Ender Series," by Orson Scott Card, Old Man's War, by John Scalzi, and even Douglass Adams's Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy. These stories inform mine with their ability to combine humor, a sense of gravitas, and the importance they place on perspective in understanding ways to handle societal issues.

Ultimately, I intend for New Babel to critique and examine our culture's increasing dependence on corporate structures and the toxic influence of blending political ideals and economic goals. While the terrorist Third is the main threat of the story, the true antagonists prove to be greed, prejudice, and recalcitrance, against which our protagonists fight.

The antagonist of the piece, as I mentioned before, is a terrorist known only as Third. Third is designed to be the most intriguing and entertaining of all of the characters, despite his malicious nature. The hope is that readers, much like some characters in the story will see some compelling "goodness" in Third's bizarre actions and hope that some redemption is possible for him. He is the villain of the piece, and there is no true redemption in store for him, but people see charisma and are drawn to it; they rationalize that someone they like so much isn't entirely evil, or that their evil acts are done for a greater purpose. While Third's actions might be done for a

“greater purpose,” they are, ultimately, selfish. That’s the point of Third as a character. He’s crazy and implacably selfish, but people are somehow still drawn to him.

Third draws inspiration from both classic and contemporary characters. He was partially inspired by Oscar Wilde’s character Dorian Gray, in that he is a creature of simultaneous self-indulgence and self-loathing that nonetheless inspires great infatuation in others. Third’s dialogue style is inspired by the character River Song from Joss Whedon’s “Firefly” franchise. Both characters are incredibly intelligent and express complex thoughts through seemingly insane observations or pseudo-poetic statements. This connection was both meant as an homage as well as a way of foreshadowing future events discreetly. In chapter one, Third reveals his entire plan but in a strange diatribe that only he can understand. My hope is that at the conclusion of the story, all the hints from Third’s dialogue become clear.

The character of Kite, the main protagonist, was harder to create because I had a less-clear idea of what his character should be about. Third had been a character in previous stories and had been evolving in my mind for several years before he became the center of this project. Kite was, at the beginning, incidental to the project because a protagonist was needed to go up against Third. Kite’s personality went through many iterations, and in early drafts of the piece his actions and descriptions were at odds with one another. He was always meant to be intelligent, but the finer points of his personality were escaping me. I decided that he would be more interesting if he were unpleasant to talk to. I made him a psychologist with that in mind. With apologies to mental health professionals, I have found that conversation with them outside of a professional setting can make people uncomfortable for a number of reasons. Add to it Kite’s subtle bravado and urge to prove himself, and you have what is meant to be a character that will organically butt heads with other people.

The supporting cast was filled out based on how they complemented the lead two roles. Billie, Kite's sister, was designed to be physical, emotional, and outwardly aggressive to counterpoint Kite's passivity and tendency to play the observer. His assistant Hina was made with Kite's coldness and repression in mind and is meant to be bubbly and friendly in all non-dangerous situations. The character of Gaines was created to be Third's counterpoint, as her defining traits are her controlled temperament and organization, two things that Third lacks entirely and would need a surrogate to utilize properly.

My strengths have always laid in character dynamics and dialogue. I'm adept at understanding how and why two people interact the way they do. Billie and Kite's dynamic is essential to understanding both of them as characters, and it will continue to have effects throughout the universe of the story. One of my goals for this piece was that among all the terrorism and sci-fi destruction, the core of the piece would clearly be the relationships of the characters. Kite begins the story as aloof and career-oriented but as he draws closer and closer to Third he begins changing subtly. He becomes friends with Hina, he begins to repair his relationship with his sister, and he learns more about himself and how he fits into the world. The more he understands, the more he becomes a whole person. He is rewarded narratively for his empathy.

The antithesis of Kite's empathy is Third. Third is, for all intents and purposes, a cipher. People see exactly what they want to see because otherwise there is nothing there. While he is certainly meant to be a tragic figure (the full scope of which is not seen in this part of the piece but is hinted at in some of his ramblings) he is also meant as a figure devoid of human feeling. As seen with his interactions with Aynthony and Gaines, he enjoys provoking emotional responses. He is a bully and a child trying to understand what he's incapable of comprehending.

This is the worst kind of monster: the kind you can't help but pity, and it's why I chose him as the villain of this piece.

The universe of New Babel is a high-tech one meant to be hundreds of years in our future. While technology has evolved by leaps and bounds, culture has not noticeably shifted. This was a conscious choice that I wasn't completely sure of, but I stand by it. The people of New Babel don't use new slang or new dialects as the people in many science fiction epics do. Instead, they use much the same mode of speaking we do today. This was inspired by John Scalzi's "Old Man's War" series, in which Scalzi's characters talk normally and any and all cultural changes are expressed more subtly. I followed this pattern for two reasons, the first being that I am not confident enough in my command of language to create new dialogues as readily as J.R.R. Tolkien or Anthony Burgess did. The second reason being that I believe that too much new language, while creating a distinct and memorable feel for one's story, can be distracting and end up taking people out as much as it puts them in. Anthony Burgess' A Clockwork Orange is the best example; his creation of the slang dialect Nadsat was inspired but also alienating. I wished to avoid such issues and so did away with future-slang almost entirely.

In order to compensate for the lack of distinctiveness in my characters' dialogue, I went with another means of identifying that this world is different than the one we live in. The trademark symbols™ that permeate the piece are meant to illustrate the insidious degree to which corporations have infiltrated the everyday life of normal citizens. The corporation Firmatech, is the other key antagonist of the story. Their products exist in every building, every vehicle, and every person's head, but the people in the story rarely take time to notice. Firmatech's influence is so pervasive that it has a seat at the equivalent of a national security

conference. The trademark symbols are mentioned in dialogue and even private thoughts so as to show that the corporations aggressive monetization of everything is accepted as normal.

While a corporation is one of the key antagonists of the piece, New Babel is not intended as some kind of socialist propaganda. Rather, aspects of society that I find most intriguing or worrisome are elevated to the point of the fantastic. Our fascination with technology is elevated to the point that society comes to a grinding halt when what amounts to a cell-phone tower is disabled. The two major political factions of this universe (the Union and the Conclave) are separated chiefly by a difference of opinion on genetic modification. The Union frowns on “body-modding” and has many strict laws governing it, whereas the conclave allows all of its citizens to affect the form they feel most comfortable with. This is meant to parallel the growing debate in our society over what right a person has to govern their own body. The two factions both see the other as evil and thus see each other as a key threat, paving the way for Third’s plans to come to fruition.

I think New Babel’s greatest success, is that within each perspective shift, the person telling the story at that moment is the protagonist. Aynthony is a spineless coward and a sycophant, but we see that, in his mind, he’s the persecuted hero of his own story. While he objectively is not a good person (being a thief and abetting terrorism) he is sympathetic in the sense that he has had his livelihood and his dreams taken from him. In the same way, Billie is abrasive and borderline abusive to her brother, but when it’s her turn to tell her side of the story we see that she is dealing with profound loss and emotional hardship. None of the characters are wholly good or wholly evil, and in their own perspectives are free of wrongdoing.

I consider this a success because sometimes, it’s hard to portray someone as sympathetic when their previous actions have been antagonistic. Similarly, it’s hard to show that someone

who is meant to be sympathetic, can also be the villain of another story. Communication and empathy are the key interests of New Babel, so it's important that they are illustrated both textually as well as narratively.

The piece's biggest weakness is its visual language, specifically the lack of it. My weaknesses as a writer have always been in this area. Other than a few key areas such as describing Third's appearance, or the appearance of the spaceship that Kite rides on, there is an absence of visual imagery that still needs to be addressed. Swathes of dialogue occur without hints of body language, and entire environments are left undescribed. This comes from a combination of different factors. The first factor is that I have a difficult time with spatial awareness; imagining and describing a room is difficult for me in even the best circumstances. As a result, I often will choose not to describe an environment if the alternative is to describe it badly. The second factor is that as a reader, I have always been more interested in dialogue and character description than physical action; as such, I tend to focus on those parts of my writing to the detriment of other aspects.

New Babel was originally conceived as a science fiction novel that hit all of my personal checkmarks. As a result, I feel that it can at times become self-indulgent. I've had to cut out several lines and story elements that didn't serve to advance the story as much as they were simply entertaining. There are likely still parts like that; aspects of the narrative that are not useful to the overall arc, but that I felt were clever or interesting and left in. In future revisions it will be important to have outside perspectives in order to make the piece as accessible as possible.

In terms of craft, my biggest weakness is my use of the passive voice. For whatever reason, it seems that my natural inclination is to write in a roundabout way. I've done my best to

correct these passages where possible, but it's likely that they still exist throughout the piece. At times, I have trouble knowing the difference between what sounds right and what looks right. It's imperative that good writing both scans visually and makes real-world sense; I don't always have a good sense for that kind of language, but I'd like to think this project has helped me improve.

This project has been difficult in many ways. It's taken longer, has gone it fits and starts, and didn't exactly go where I wanted. Ultimately, however, I think it's a good piece of fiction. It is a promising start to a full-length novel that I hope will appeal to science fiction fans of all stripes. Genre fiction is often looked down upon, but It was what inspired me to study writing, and any other kind of thesis would feel disingenuous. I hope this story has achieved my goals, and I hope that, as I go forward with it in the future, it continues to evolve and become more complete as I do the same. Thank you for reading my thesis project; I hope you enjoy it and find it to be a worthwhile piece of fiction.

PROLOGUE

Aynthony stood in the rain outside the transport hub, ostensibly to catch a cab. Anyone paying close attention to his behavior would notice that he had passed up the opportunity for three relatively reputable looking cabs already which was strange; in a deluge like the one that was happening, even the most unsanitary, unsettling looking cab could look inviting.

It had skipped Aynthony's notice when he chose the location for the rendezvous that this world was one of the few in civilized space to not develop weather control, as such there was no knowing when this horrid weather would stop. Still, it was worth getting wet for the seclusion this world would offer. It was known for little more than being a hub for travelers, so a stop here on his vacation would not look out of the ordinary for anyone looking at his travel records. He had thought himself ingenious for that bit of criminal insight but now, soaked to the bone, he felt silly for his self-important preening.

He was already proud of himself for how stealthily he had procured the parcel he was planning to sell. He had spent months copying Project Argus into a portable drive, bit by bit so that no one would notice. All the while he had been encrypting a code that would trigger the project to delete itself months after this transaction had happened. By that time, no doubt, Aynthony would be on a tropical island in a different world, with a woman much prettier than his wife, listening to the waves and the delightful island music.

The best part was, he had done this all remotely from public terminals in his office building. He had forged the account information of numerous other employees to have it match up with the alterations he had performed. Any investigation would lead on a wild goose chase while Aynthony sat in his perfect paradise. Had the idiots at Firmatech any inkling of his real skills as a programmer, they wouldn't have taken him off of Project Argus, and he wouldn't have

had to do any of this. Still, life was what it was, and all Aynthony could do was look forward; something that was becoming increasingly easy with each passing moment.

He scanned the street for the Blue Car™ that would escort him to the rendezvous point. He saw only the bustling of immigrants and layover victims struggling to find safe passage to their hotels. The vendors that often infested these places were mostly vacant, except for one enterprising gentleman who was selling from a cache of umbrellas. The man's readiness gave Aynthony a feeling that this planet might be inundated by rain more often than he thought, and he then felt even more foolish.

He didn't dwell on his booking snafu too long, for soon his self-important whining was replaced by anxiety. The Car™ was a good fifteen minutes late, which meant that something was likely wrong. Not to say that Anthony was especially experienced in these kinds of transactions, but he had seen enough vids about mobsters and what-have-you, to know that discrepancies like these were often signs of trouble. He began scanning the networks with his Node™, fearing that he would find some news item that mentioned that his scheme was ruined and that Security™ would soon be there to take him away.

He began to panic. *What should I do?* Aynthony thought desperately, *what if they were caught or this is a setup? I'm on a strange planet with stolen property!* The thought of leaving the way he came occurred to him but was immediately quashed by a surge of self-preservation. Aynthony knew that if he left without completing his transaction, he was effectively cutting his throat. He had gotten involved with decidedly unkind people, whom anyone would be profoundly stupid to betray.

Luckily, a loud horn sounded, and Aynthony was pleased to see a well-maintained, yet innocuous blue Car™ kitty corner from the transport hub. He ran enthusiastically towards the

vehicle, unmindful of the mud splashing on his nice pants. He entered the vehicle, grateful to be out of the rain and immediate danger. There were two people in the Car™, a pale skinned man with many tattoos, who was behind the wheel of the vehicle, and a lovely young woman in the passenger seat wearing very fashionable clothing. The Car™ took off as soon as Aynthony had closed the door, speeding to the rendezvous point where Aynthony imagined he would unload his ill-gotten cargo and earn his long-awaited award. As far as he was concerned, he had won. The young woman turned around and gave him a once over. She seemed unimpressed but quickly adopted a reasonably friendly face before talking to Aynthony.

“Hello, Doctor Grayham,” she began. Her voice was friendly but devoid of warmth. “I apologize for any inconvenience that you suffered because of us; I'm afraid traffic was a nightmare.”

“No problem at all,” Aynthony muttered with a weak smile, “though I must admit I was a little nervous for a moment, I almost thought you weren't coming. I thought about leaving for a minute.”

The woman let out a shrill, stilted laugh, “Well it's a good thing you didn't do that. That wouldn't have been any fun for anyone.” In response, Aynthony decided to be silent for the rest of the ride.

They drove for at least an hour and were soon well outside the city limits in a scenic countryside. Aynthony could see strange, orange colored trees whizzing by through the rain-drenched window. A herd of what appeared to be livestock animals were grazing, unmindful of the downpour. Aynthony mused at the similarities between this world and the one he grew up on despite the unfamiliar animals and plants. He found it strange that nostalgia would hit him so hard on his way to a black market transaction, but paid it little mind.

After two and a half hours they arrived at a quaint little farm, which was a far cry from the shady warehouse wherein Aynthony had envisioned this meeting taking place.

“This is where the exchange is taking place?” Aynthony Inquired.

"This is the rendezvous point, yes," said the young woman. "Please go inside." Her voice was hard but sweet like someone had dipped rebar in peppermint. Aynthony obeyed and entered the farmhouse.

Some part of him had thought that the farmhouse's innocent exterior had been, but a clever facade and the inside would be the hub of a criminal black market operation. The tacky paisley designs on the walls and the pictures of a happy family on every solid surface in the building soon laid those fantasies to rest. He was disquieted, however, by several cracks in many of the walls, as well as the nearby red stains and broken picture frames.

Aynthony and his guides navigated through the house until they got to the kitchen, where Aynthony saw a strange man sitting at the dining table, his head lying flat on his splayed hands, staring at a glass of milk.

Aynthony wasn't quite sure what he was supposed to think. Was this man at the table with his escorts? He wasn't nearly as intimidating as the silent tattooed man who had driven him here, or the scary-sweet woman who did all the talking. This man looked as if he was made of rope, poorly maintained rope at that, as if he had unique in salt water for too long and now had algae and barnacles all over him. He was dirty, to say the least; his clothes, his hair, and his skin were all coated in a noticeable layer of grime. He looked like he had been sitting still for so long that the grime just settled there like dust. The man wore a green coat that seemed about two sizes too large and had several tears in it, not unlike the rest of his otherwise unremarkable clothing. He looked more like a homeless person than a serious criminal.

Aynthony looked at his guides for support, and they bade him sit opposite the strange man who had yet to look up from his milk. Aynthony wasn't sure what to say. Was he supposed to start the conversation? Mercifully, the young woman began to speak, "Third," she said. Aynthony wasn't sure what that meant, perhaps some code? But he could tell she was addressing the man at the table, "Krendall and I are here, and we've brought Doctor Aynthony Grayham; the man who secured the Argus Project for us."

Aynthony cringed at being thought of as simply 'The man who secured the Argus Project.' He was more than that. He was the father of that project. He was the visionary who saw its true potential; though those arrogant bastards at Firmatech were going to take it from him. They were going to strip him of his security clearances and put him on some insipid research building diagnostic interfaces for hospitals. This project was greater than anything so mundane as that. They didn't have his vision. They saw what he was working on and considered it complete. Aynthony knew that in the right hands, in the right place, this invention of his could outstrip anything that came before it. He wasn't about to let some close minded corporation sell it as a simple appliance; not when he could get it to the right people and be richly rewarded for his trouble.

He had to admit he was out of his element, but Aynthony did not come unprepared. He silently bade his Node™ to bring up the contingency program he had prepared. With a thought, Aynthony could activate a small device implanted in the package that carried the Argus Project. If he did not mentally input a code every ten minutes, the device would release a very small amount of carbolic acid which would destroy the project. He also had it set up so he could activate the device prematurely. He marveled at his cunning. It was a desperate contingency, but one Aynthony was prepared to enact. If they made any violent move towards him, then he would

render their whole plan inert. And if they killed him before he could act, he would get the last laugh as the acid destroyed the project. Well, he would be dead, but still.

The man at the table had stopped staring at his perspiring glass of milk and had now stood up and affixed his eyes onto Aynthony. The man's eyes were terrible and crow-like; they were yellow, beady and hungry. The eyes stared at Aynthony as if he were something crude and alien like they had seen what a human was supposed to be, and Aynthony was a poor approximation.

Aynthony opened his mouth to speak, but the man's right hand came crashing down on the table, startling him into silence. The other hand firmly grasped the glass of milk and lifted it to the man's face where he began guzzling it like a greedy infant. He then threw the glass to the other end of the kitchen where it shattered with a sickening noise.

"Fuck, yes!" exclaimed the man while haphazardly wiping milk away from his face. "This is the best day!" He continued to shout, "Gaines," this time regarding the woman, "take a note, this is the best day bar none." Gaines nodded and made a slight motion with her hand which indicated she was taking a note on her Node™.

"Thank you, Doctor," the man began, "you don't understand how fucking crucial the device you've brought me is. It's going to be the groundwork for all my future successes. Tell me, have you ever masturbated in a public place?"

"I beg your pardon?" Aynthony shocked; he had been expecting all the shock and fear he had thus far experienced when dealing with criminals, but he hadn't expected such a rude and disgusting question.

"Sorry, Sorry," said the man, "Anyway, yes I want you to know that everything I'm going to do will be because of you. Until now I've just been a snot-nosed boy with some

firecrackers and his dick in his hand, but now I have the chance to craft some meaningful mayhem. Which is why I recorded a series of 36 videos in which I urinate on small animals while cutting myself.”

Aynthony looked at Krendall and Gaines still standing in the corner, hoping to glean some clue as to how he should be reacting to this strange person’s graphic and disturbing outbursts, but they stood impassively, acting as if everything that was going on was quite humdrum.

“Yes, um, well then,” Aynthony began, the man with crow-like eyes regarding him with singular interest, “I’m glad I could be of service, but I think I’d rather not know the particulars of whatever it is you plan to do with the project.”

“That’s understandable, Doctor,” said the Crow-eyed man, “but dogs only live for about thirteen years anyway, so anything you do to improve his life at this point is just going to be like spitting in the wind. Everything I do is going to be noticed, Doctor, and it won’t matter if you know the particulars or not, so I’m going to smother her tonight; better that than let her see what they’ve done to her- let her die with a dream, you know?”

“What the hell are you talking about?” Aynthony was beginning to panic again. It seemed like this man was trying to mess with his mind, put him off kilter, was he going to try to negotiate a better price? Was he going to kill Aynthony? It was possible, but he had his contingency. Aynthony surreptitiously looked at the timer on his program; he had a little over four minutes. Perhaps he should destroy it?”

“Please forgive me, Doctor,” the man had a look of contrition upon his eerie face, “I sometimes have trouble concentrating on a single moment, which is why all the butterflies are

colored like miasma and ecstasy. It's a side-effect of a rather rare medical condition that I'd rather not discuss. Rest assured that I have everything under control."

"Look, I don't want any trouble, here." Aynthony had his best cloying voice on, attempting to ingratiate himself to his strange new associates. "I'm just a little on edge. If we could get this over with as quickly as possible; I think it would be for the best."

"Agreed," said the man, "if you would hand over the device, we'll transfer the money you require into your account, and we can all go home." Aynthony pulled the small package from his overcoat pocket. Gaines walked over and took it from him. She took a moment to inspect it, and then gave a short but courteous nod to her employer, whose face twisted into an unsettling grimace which Aynthony took to be the man's approximation of a smile.

Aynthony used his Node™ to check his account and saw that a deposit had been made by an anonymous party. The memo had it marked as "belated birthday money, plus interest." When he checked the amount, he was surprised to find a rather disquieting error.

"This isn't enough," said Aynthony. The crow-eyed man's smile-esque expression turned quickly and unmistakably into a frown.

"What isn't enough?" he asked with what sounded like concern.

"The money you gave me," said Aynthony, his anger overcoming his fear and confusion. "It's barely enough to get home; the amount agreed upon was fifty times this amount."

"Oh," said the man with the crow-like eyes. "I'm sorry, but that's the amount we're giving you. It will be enough to get you home and to buy your family a nice dinner. Beyond that, it doesn't seem like a prudent decision to give you anything else, because after all I've done for you and you can't be fucked to get me a goddamned motherfucking cheeseburger!" The man ran to the wall behind them and started punching it. Aynthony shrank away, trying not to whimper

audibly as the man slammed his fist into the wall over and over. He heard the voice of the woman behind him "Stay on task. You're okay." And the man stopped moving as if someone had removed a gear from the machinery of his arm. He returned to face Aynthony who was able to see the bloody stain that was now on the wall.

Aynthony ignored the strange outburst as best he could, but he realized now that he was dealing with crazy people. He knew what this always meant in the vids, if the criminals weren't going to pay him, then he was the one who was about to pay. "Y-you can't kill me if you want the device. I have a program that'll kill it. Only I can stop it." He looked around the room triumphantly. The man, Krendall, seemed rather concerned, but the woman just glared as if she was late for an appointment and Aynthony was holding her up.

"What-sorry, I know, I know," said the man to the ceiling, "We're not going to kill you. Why would we? I just said we were giving you money to get home. I'm not that big of a dick."

"Well then give me the money I deserve!"

The crazy man's laugh was like a broken piano.

"You're funny. I think I'll keep you. In the shed. With the meat. Deserve? You are so goddamned stupid. Blackflies are biting my fucking eyes and what do you do? Stare at me? Rub it in? Fuck you."

"Stop it. Stop acting crazy, or I'll destroy the whole goddamned thing, and then none of us gets what we want." Aynthony was at the end of his rope.

The crow-eyed man took a deep breath and leaped upon the table. Aynthony let out a kind of shrieking sob, but before he could do or say anything, the man was less than an inch from his face, looking at Aynthony with terrifying focus and lucidity. "Look, Aynthony. You came to me. I didn't coerce you into doing any of this. I could have. I could have come to your place of

work or your home or that place you go to have your penis sucked and threatened you or your friends or your family with great amounts of horrific bodily harm.” He began doing a strange little march up and down the dining room table. As he got to each edge the table began to tilt, and it seemed like it was going to fall, but each time the man's balance was such that the table corrected itself. Never once did he break stride.

“But I didn’t,” the man continued, “No. Instead, I found you on the networks begging to sell highly classified corporate secrets to anyone willing to foot the bill. I told you I would pay you a fortune so you would come here out of eagerness and greed, not out of fear. Because regardless of what some people say, fear is an unreliable motivator.

"Now, you say you're going to destroy the project. I say: go right ahead. There are other weapons. There are other ways to build what I want. But this...this thing you've made. It would be perfect. It would pull the whole thing together. And you created it. There's reason to be proud! Even if you destroy it, I won't kill you. I'll let you keep what money I gave you, and I will never bother you again. Aren't I nice?"

"This isn't right. I did what you asked me!" Aynthony shouted. He was losing what little control of the situation he had.

The man jumped down from the table and darted behind Aynthony. His hot breath was on Aynthony's neck, and Aynthony felt like crying. The man began running his unpleasant ropy fingers through Aynthony's hair. "I recognize the faces, and I want to scream. It isn't right, you're correct. It's cruel like your mother and her big knotted stick, but I have nothing to lose. I'm willing to gamble that your fear of prosecution runs much deeper than mine. Plus, I don't have a job and a lovely fat wife on the line should my reputation face damage. There are benefits to being a disgusting drifter. You'll learn them soon enough after you're fired for divulging

company secrets and stealing company property. You'll sit like graffiti on a bus bench; worthless and hard to look at. You won't be able to get another job since Firmatech virtually has all the jobs in civilized space. Your wife will divorce you, and your children will take her name because Grayham will be the name of greedy thieves." The man began snapping his fingers and chanting in a sing-song voice "Gray-ham, Gray-ham, father was a naughty man."

Aynthony began crying in earnest at this point; his strange crow-eyed tormentor seemed to derive glee from Aynthony's suffering. He swung around to stare Aynthony in the face, those horrid eyes of his regarded Aynthony with amused contempt.

"Shhhh...shhhh...don't cry, sad mouse. You have some money. And I promise not to kill you dead. I don't need to. But If I gave you what you wanted, I'd be hunted again, and I don't miss being hunted. I cry less when I'm not hunted. The way it is now if you keep your head down, no one will notice me until I want them to. And should you decide that life as a lonely, dishonored man with a spine is more appealing than being a comfortable, average man oozing with cowardice and shattered dreams—just know that I will eat your heart if I ever have even half a reason." At that point, the man licked his lips hungrily, but his eyes lost their intensity, and he began to regard the ceiling once more. "I think I'm going to paint my bedroom in five...like, a dark five. All over. It will go well with the color of my bedspread."

Aynthony stood up, his eyes hot with tears. He wanted to destroy the project. Why not? This man was just like Firmatech. Greedy bastard taking what was his away from him. He got ready to activate the acid-device in the small parcel. *All I have to do is think hard.*

Then he saw the man looking at him with his predatory eyes. He had no interest in what Aynthony was doing or what he was going to do. Aynthony felt a wind blow across his bones. This man- this strange, ropey, crow-eyed thing that was ruining his life—was just barely aware

of Aynthony's existence. It wouldn't matter to him in the least if Aynthony used the code, or even if he suddenly turned into gold. Aynthony was thoroughly below this man's notice.

"Well?" said the man. Aynthony willed his node to disable the program. The project was safe, but Aynthony was destroyed.

The man grasped Aynthony's shoulder with one of his strange, spindly hands. "I have to tell you, friend; you're so worthless it hurts me." The man was exerting tremendous pressure on Aynthony's shoulder, who tried not to utter a sound for fear of what might happen next. "I hope you die soon," the man continued. "I hope it's by your hand. My life is just cheaper for knowing someone so superlatively boring exists. Thanks for the new toy, though." He released his grip and Aynthony let out a small, involuntary gasp.

Krendall and Gaines walked over to Aynthony and motioned for him to go with them. These people beat him thoroughly, and now it was time for him to leave. As his escorts took him back out to the car where he would begin the long, sad journey to his home as an abject failure, a slight burst of courage and curiosity gripped him.

"One last thing before I go," he indicated to the man with the crow-like eyes. The man acknowledged him with a low grunt. "What is it you plan to do with my project?" he asked, hoping to know that at least his creation would be used for something worthwhile.

The focus temporarily returned to the man's twisted face, and he coldly replied, "I'm going to destroy humanity. I will reach into human kind's soul and kill the part that makes them more than animals. I will sunder the empires they have built in the galaxy and salt the ground of every world they've ever stepped foot on, and hopefully, when I'm done, I will have killed God."

The man's answer filled Aynthony's heart with terror. Could this man do such a thing? It was unthinkable to eliminate humanity in its entirety; they were the only intelligent species in the

known universe, and they had grown too prolific over the centuries. Human beings populated thousands of worlds, with more every year. Aynthony couldn't begin to imagine how his project could be used for such a goal, but he also knew better than anyone that in the right hands, the Argus Project had nearly unlimited potential. There was nothing about this man that seemed right, but something about him made Aynthony believe that he could do what he said. Aynthony was filled with a peculiar and unsettling sense of satisfaction at the thought that his work might be used for such a great and terrible purpose. In a very real way, it would mean that he would have an incomparable impact on the universe.

Krendall and Gaines silently escorted Aynthony back to the transport hub where he left the planet in general silence and comfort. He was undoubtedly ashamed of his manipulation, but he was more concerned with the man with the crow-like eyes. Strange and terrifying though he was, he was wholly fixating. The image of his eyes was burned in Aynthony's mind.

Months later, after Aynthony had pushed his encounter with the crow-eyed man to the back of his mind, he was able to carry on his same boring conversations at work and home. He stopped going to see his favorite prostitute and began treating his wife with a much more consistent level of respect. Not to imply that his encounter had made Aynthony a better man, but that it had made him different. At night, he would often see the eyes of his tormentor, with that awful look of disdain and amusement. Aynthony knew he had been found wanting and, strangely enough, he wanted to be more in those eyes.

The project had deleted itself per Aynthony's design, and Firmatech launched a full inquiry. They questioned him, and it seemed that he was a key suspect; however, he had covered his tracks sufficiently enough to cause doubt which at the least prolonged the investigation. Still, he had lost his avenue of escape. If and when they discovered him, he would have neither the

resources nor opportunity to avoid reprisal. The thought disquieted Aynthony, but, for some reason, he was willing to let it run its course.

Time went on as it always had. Days into weeks and on into months. Aynthony began wondering if the man would ever fulfill his dark promise to destroy humanity. It seemed so bizarre and far-fetched, but as he thought about it, Aynthony began wanting to see it happen. He wanted a change. He wanted any change, and what change would be grander? Humanity had been on much the same track for the last 800 years; they would find new technology, new planets, and new life. Each time they would take their spoils and repurpose them to fit humanity's needs. Why was this worth doing? What made the cycle humanity participated in any different or superior to the banal humdrum existence of Aynthony? Maybe, thought Aynthony, progress for the sake of progress wasn't so beneficial.

Still, in all those months, Aynthony's tormentor made no sign that he was going to follow through on his proclamation. Until one day, an entire section of the sky went dark.

Terrorists had destroyed the Benson Syn-Tower, on the planet Minerva. It was one of the many tethers that linked the worlds of civilized space together through communication and travel. As a result, contact was lost with 26 different planets. No one had ever attacked the Syn-Towers, even though they were the backbone of all infrastructure in civilized space. The reality was that they were the best means of communication and commerce for all powers in the galaxy, and by the necessity of design, they were all intertwined. To destroy one Syn-Tower was to make an entire arm of civilized space inaccessible, and cause damage to the entire network. It was far from irreparable, but it was a powerful message that no one had ever experienced before. Something like this would clearly provoke an unprecedented response of retaliation from all affected powers.

Aynthony, like the rest of the galaxy, felt fear for the future of humanity for the first time in his life. He discussed the news with his co-workers, listened to their every crackpot theory, and even offered a few of his own. When he got off work, he went straight home and hugged his wife. They held each other for the first time in years as news kept pouring in over their Nodes TM. All over the Galaxy, people did the same, holding each other while they waited with hushed breath to hear what the powers that be were planning to do.

Then the vids started hitting the networks.

There were vids of a strange, filthy looking man with piercing, unsettling eyes standing near the wreckage of the tower. He called himself "Third" and said it was the first of his signs. He told the galaxy that this was only him stretching out his arms and that when he truly began to sow mayhem, the galaxy would never be the same again.

Comments and response vids began to inundate the networks. Many decried this Third as a terrorist. Some called the whole thing an elaborate hoax, and to give this man attention was detracting from a very real tragedy. A strident few claimed that he was the first intelligent alien to make contact with humanity and that his attack was a declaration of war. All of them had a theory as to the meaning of his name.

Aynthony tested the name on his lips. His wife, so absorbed in the vids, paid no attention to the sounds her husband was making. Aynthony now understood the name which belonged to the face which had haunted him so much. He had heard it, but it didn't connect before right then. It felt right, and now the fragmented horror in Aynthony's mind took shape. But what Aynthony saw wasn't a monster or a demon, but a god. He was clearly a young god; he was just now bursting from infancy, but he was a god nonetheless. With one simple, yet unthinkable, act Third had just carved his name indelibly into history.

Aynthony knew that this was just the beginning. This was the birth cry of a hungry and savage god; one who wished for nothing less than the destruction of everything. He thought about calling his bosses, or Security™, or even the Union Fleet, but he didn't. Instead, Aynthony got up, went to his kitchen, and poured himself a large glass of Cognac. It was the special stuff he got for his birthday several years ago. When his wife asked what the occasion was, he simply said he now knew life was short, and he aimed to enjoy it. This wasn't entirely untrue, but more to the point, Aynthony was getting ready to watch the apocalypse unfurl. He felt that such an occasion demanded fine spirits.

CHAPTER I

“Mr. Chambers.” The defense attorney spoke in that syrupy, unpleasant way people do when they want you to know how little they think of you without explicitly being offensive. Like if somebody put a copious amount of salt in a milkshake.

“It’s Doctor Chambers, actually,” Kite reminded him, trying his best to sound polite.

“Oh, I apologize, Doctor Chambers,” The attorney was looking at the courtroom with his back to the stand. “Please, Doctor Chambers, would you care to remind the court what it is that you do?”

“Certainly,” said Kite accommodatingly, because he knew the defense was just trying to get under his skin. Asking him to repeat what had already been established at length was annoying, but Kite wasn’t about to undermine the prosecution by seeming uncooperative or unduly harsh. “I’m a criminal psychologist employed by Interpol as a consultant and have been subcontracted these last three months to the Central Police Bureau of Anshar. I was lent in this capacity in the hopes that I could help identify and apprehend the criminal known as The Amren City Murderer.”

“And you have identified my client, Mr. Shayne Anders, as the perpetrator,” The Lawyer's tone was becoming more confrontational as they went along. His slicked back hair and his blue-grey suit made him look like a shark to Kite’s eyes. Kite wondered if the Lawyer was aware of the comparison he was inviting.

“I only profiled the killer for the CPB. I gave them the tools to anticipate where the killer would strike next. The rest is already in the record,” Kite took a glance towards the prosecutor, Alter Monroe. Kite could tell that even though he was trying to be non-confrontational, he was still too aggressive for Monroe’s liking. Kite had no problem with Monroe, but he could tell the

feeling wasn't mutual. Kite was far from being a prosecutor's dream witness. People didn't like being around Kite; he made them uncomfortable. He had been referred to on many occasions as arrogant and insufferable. Kite believed that the reason for this was because he was so adept at understanding people and their motivations. Kite often thought that, perhaps, people didn't want to be understood. After all, being understood meant being vulnerable.

"Yes, yes," droned the shark-faced Lawyer, "we've established how you led the CPB to suspect my client, and we've heard your argument that my client's psychological profile matches up with what you suspect is the killer's profile.

"Here's my question Dr. Chambers, is it true that you're a clone?" A murmur washed over the courtroom. Kite felt as if he'd been struck by lightning.

Monroe jumped out of his seat, "Objection! Relevance?"

The shark-faced Lawyer smiled. "I'm trying to establish how qualified Doctor Chambers is to be making judgments about the psychological aspects of human beings."

Monroe was trying to keep his cool but was doing a lousy job. "We've already established that Doctor Chambers is a highly knowledgeable psychologist; he has degrees from some of the finest institutions--"

"Yes," beamed Shark-face, clearly enjoying the stir he had made, "that makes Doctor Chambers amply suited in regards to clinical observations, but we're talking about qualified assessments of the human psyche here. If Doctor Chambers is not technically human, then how can he reliably be called upon to make such assessments about human beings?" Shark face looked towards the Judge with an ingratiating smile that looked like he bought it out of a catalog.

Kite could tell from the moment the word 'clone' was spoken that he had lost all credibility. Anshar was far from being the most egalitarian world in the Union; a lot of their

practices and laws were relatively old-fashioned, but clones like Kite were met with a certain degree of distrust no matter where they were. Even the Judge looked unnerved. "Objection sustained," said the judge after a moment, "Doctor Chambers' standing as a clone has no bearing on this case, counselor."

"Withdrawn, your honor," said Shark face with a grin.

"If it makes you feel better," Kite said, "I am a clone. I also have four different degrees and have been a part of some of the most successful criminal investigations of the last ten years, but I am, in fact, a clone."

The judge rapped his gavel against the bench angrily. "That's enough," He commanded. "Doctor Chambers, you will restrict your statements to the appropriate questions asked of you. Is that understood?"

"Yes, your honor, I was merely trying to provide the counselor with the irrelevant information he wanted so badly," said Kite. A few snickers broke out across the room. Monroe was boring a hole through Kite with his furious stare. The judge sputtered at Kite's behavior.

"If you talk back to me like that again," the judge threatened, "I will find you in contempt. Do not tempt me."

No one would believe him if he told them, but Kite certainly wasn't trying to pick a fight. He was nervous and agitated, so he reacted to belittlement the way an agitated person normally acts. He settled down and answered the questions asked of him until there were no more questions. Monroe attempted to do damage control, but Kite had already done his damage. Nobody in that courtroom was going to see him as a person, much less a likable person after all that crap he just pulled.

After court was adjourned, Kite excused himself and went to the bar down the street from the court complex. He didn't often indulge in alcohol, but after the trial had become such a fiasco, he felt the need to treat himself. He ordered himself an old fashioned from the drink Kiosk and waited patiently for the Bar™ to prepare it for him.

The mechanical arm of the Bar™ handed Kite his cocktail. As it did, he felt a hand on his shoulder, causing him to tense up rather harshly. Kite didn't enjoy people touching him.

“Easy, pal,” said Monroe in a more jovial tone than Kite had come to expect of him, “let me get the next one?”

“What are you doing here?” Kite inquired defensively. He wasn't used to altruism. It was true that Monroe had already known about Kite's nature as a clone, but Kite was expecting some animosity either way.

“What am I doing in the closest bar to the court house? I'll give you three guesses, smart guy.”

“Fine then,” said Kite, “I'll get the one after the next one.”

“Sounds good to me,” Monroe said with a groan as he positioned himself on the stool next to Kite. He ordered his drink, a scotch on the rocks, and prepaid for both his and Kite's next drinks. Monroe was a much larger man than Kite; older too. Still, he had a handsomeness and a sense of character about him that only came with age, like the old wooden china cabinet that Kite's mother had bought from Terra when he was a child.

Regarding appearance, Kite was nearly the Polar opposite of Monroe. Whereas Monroe was broad shouldered and robust, Kite was small and yet still gangly. Monroe had a very dark complexion, his skin rough and almost ebony in tone, whereas Kite's was a light shade of brown and embarrassingly smooth. The one feature Kite was proud of was his hair; he had gotten his

father's soft chestnut hair, instead of the wiry pitch black rat nest his sister received from their mother. Kite's hair contrasted nicely with Monroe's glaring baldness.

"For what it's worth," Monroe began after tasting his drink, "I'm sorry about how that jackass ambushed you back there." Kite had been silently preparing for this part of the evening. Kite could handle the bigots who mocked him for what he was, but what he hated more were the consoling saints who tried to make him "feel better." It always made Kite feel like a child, like even less of a person, to have his hand held in such a way.

"It's fine, I promise," Kite said brusquely.

"It isn't. I should have anticipated it. It's just like that asshole to muddy the issue with bullshit like that."

"I've been through worse," Kite said honestly. "Forget about that; how badly did it hurt the case? Do you still have any chance of putting Anders away?"

"I'd say so. If anything, I'd think that stunt his attorney pulled made them seem desperate. I wish it didn't come at your expense, but they probably helped the prosecution in the long run. Either way, there's still a long way to go. Still, your part in this is pretty much finished. You shouldn't go off-world until the trial is over in case we need to re-examine you, but we'll be done in a couple of months at most. For better or worse."

"I hadn't thought about that too much," Kite murmured.

"What do you think you'll do when this is done? You were only out here to bring Anders in, right?"

"Yeah, I'll probably be called back to Interpol headquarters, unless they have some other place they want to send me."

“The old home world eh?” beamed Monroe. “I’ve never actually been to Terra. Been meaning to go and do the whole pilgrimage, but life gets in the way, you know?”

“Tell me about it,” groaned Kite. “I’d love to settle down somewhere, but every time I get too used to one place I’m sent to another. I don’t think a human being’s supposed to do this much space travel in a lifetime.” Kite caught himself, “Then again, I guess I’m not ‘technically’ a human being am I?”

“Oh, that guy was full of shit,” Monroe said indignantly, “You’re way more human than he is.”

Kite laughed but grew somber again. “He has a point, though. By the Union’s own laws, people like me aren’t ‘technically human.’ There might be some question as to how well equipped I am to be making psychological assessments about real, old-fashioned humans.” In a strange way, it made Kite feel better to play Devil’s advocate in discussions such as these. He found that when he talked dispassionately about a subject, it seemed to have less power over him. Both he and Monroe were done with their drinks, so the Bar™ provided them with new ones.

“Yeah, but those laws aren’t really about clones,” Monroe objected, “They’re for all those freaks out in the Conclave. They wanted so badly to mess around with what made them human, so we declared them inhuman.”

“Yes, but that means any person whose state of existence is dependent on genetic technology isn’t human.” Kite found it interesting that he was explaining the niceties of law to a lawyer, but he had determined that Monroe had a habit of getting emotional about discussions like this. Kite decided that while that probably meant Monroe wasn’t the best lawyer, he wasn’t half bad at being a human being.

“It’s better than it could be,” Kite said, rationalizing the negatives of his life as he often did. "There was a time when someone like me wouldn't even be allowed to go to school. I can vote and have a Ph.D. That's worth the extra scrutiny I face from people. Isn't it?"

“True enough, at least you aren’t out there in the Conclave. Those weird fuckers play fast and loose with the stuff the universe gave ‘em. There is a hell of a lot more clones out there, sure, but there are just as many of them living as slaves as there are normal folks."

Kite fell quiet at that point. The sounds of music and other patrons filled the silence as Monroe continued swilling his drink. Kite knew he was trying to sound sympathetic, but he hated the notion that the two governments he had to choose from both thought of him and his kind as less than human, one by word, and the other through action. Worse yet, the idea that he should be grateful for only being called inhuman rather than being treated as such. Kite bought the next round as he promised, but did his best to abstain from conversation for the rest of the evening.

As they sat there drinking mediocre liquor and listening to mediocre music, Kite checked his Node™ to see if anything was diverting on which he could focus. The lights of the Node™ flared before his eyes, and soon he was awash in the glow of the Networks. His mother had sent him no less than twelve mails in as many hours. Likely, Kite thought, they were more inspirational quotes and pictures of her friend’s grandchildren. He wasn’t interested in reading such things, but he would consider such subtlety on her part to be a blessing and a welcome change of pace. The last time he brought a guy home there were flyers for adoption agencies and prominent geneticists casually positioned on the coffee table. Truly his mother was a master of shrewd manipulation.

Kite lamented that his sister never had to deal with such pestering, but that was because Billie was only tangentially a member of their family. She had always been distant from their parents; she rejected their pacifist views, feeling a much grander sense of duty and nationalism than anyone in the Chambers family had ever exhibited. She and Kite had once had a strong bond, especially as children. Over the years, though, personal and social pressures began to push them apart, along with Billie's increasing realization of what Kite truly was, and what it truly meant.

Why do I do this to myself? Kite asked himself. Does harping on my past make me a sadist or a masochist since I'm both inflicting and receiving pain? Either way, I should send Billie a message, thought Kite. There's no way she'd ever make the effort to contact me, but if I contact her, it might guilt her enough to respond. I hope she's doing okay.

Kite composed a short missive for his sister on his Node™:

[Dear Billie, I miss you. I hope you're doing well, please contact me and let me know what's new in your life. Love, Kite.]

It sounded rather clunky and childish, but Kite didn't want to call her, and he hadn't written a message like that since he was fifteen. Perhaps, he thought, the childish script would enforce the sad little brother angle and serve to inflate her guilt further.

With his due diligence done to family matters, Kite turned his attention to the networks once again. There were several trending news stories about the Syn-Tower network, the vast array of super computers that allowed for Interstellar communication and travel. Kite didn't pay close attention to them; likely a colony ship had established a new tower and was making contact with the network which was always a nice story on a slow news day. He lost himself for a moment in an amusing game he had bought involving cats and a watermelon.

Deep in his reverie, Kite didn't notice many of the other patrons also looking at their Nodes™ and beginning to show signs of distress and anguish. Even Monroe's large dark face grew pale as he looked at the information he was receiving.

Kite was torn from his game by a message from his superior at Interpol. He wasn't in exactly the right headspace to talk to his boss, what with several ounces of a rather potent bourbon floating inside him, but he saw that the call was marked urgent and knew there would be hell to pay for ignoring it.

Kite acknowledged the call and soon he was staring in the face of a pale, balding man with a ponderously large aquiline nose. "Hello, Captain Ames, what can I do—"

A scoff from the captain cut Kite off in the middle of his pleasantries, "Cut the chatter, Chambers. There's a ship heading out of the Anshar system in five hours. Be on it. It'll take you to Terra. We've already got the passes all prepared; I'll forward them to you in a moment. Gather up your essentials, and we can arrange to have anything significant that can't be brought with you shipped at a later time."

"Sir, what about the trial?"

"Trial? What the fuck did you do, son?" The Captain, Kite recalled, was never much one for subtlety.

"No, I mean the trial I'm testifying in for the murderer I was sent here to apprehend?"

"Oh, that. Well, they'll have to get along without you, Chambers. We've got tougher bricks to shit. You get your ass to Terra ASAP or your ass is grass."

"With all due respect, sir, it'll take me at least a few days to get to Terra. What's happening that I need to make such a large trip so abruptly?"

“Blessed fuck, son! Do you not watch the Newsfeeds? Or pay any attention to the world around you at all? We’ll be sending a brief for you to read on your trip. I expect you to have it down cold before you get here, along with any supplementary materials we decide to send.”

“Y-yes sir,” stammered Kite, still unsure of what was happening.

“Good. Otherwise, keep contact to a minimum. These orders come down from on high, so don't fuck around. We're in a dangerous position, Chambers; we're going to need all our best men on this. Ames out.”

Kite was bewildered at the strange communication. Best men? Dangerous time? What had happened that Kite hadn't noticed? He looked past his Node's™ display and saw that the mood of the bar had shifted to become quite somber. People were abruptly leaving without finishing their drinks, while others were ordering many more drinks. Kite looked to his left and saw Monroe in tears, clearly still watching something on his Node™ that he found upsetting. Kite looked back at the news items he had pushed aside, wondering what could be happening that would cause such distress in people.

One of the Syn-towers had fallen.

Kite's mouth ran dry. The source of all interstellar travel and communication had been attacked. He had never heard of something like this happening in the history of the Union. The Syn-towers were almost sacred in the way they were maintained and protected. Neither the Union nor the Conclave, nor any other organization had ever dared attack a Syn-tower for the delicate balance they represented. The towers worked on principles that scientists had yet to understand fully. Each tower was connected to the other; recognizable, yet fully unique in the signal it would broadcast. Whenever one was damaged, it had unpredictable consequences for the entire network.

This time, the tower wasn't just damaged by some freak accident. Someone had destroyed it almost completely. What was worse was they did so without any seeming fear of retaliation. The price this time for the towers being disturbed was some twenty-six worlds being lost behind the veil of space. *All those people*, Kite thought, *Lost. How do we begin to get them back?*

Kite began running through possible scenarios in his mind. *Could it have been the Conclave? They'd been in a cold war with the Union for nearly two centuries, why would they just now attack so brazenly? This would be the beginning of the worst war in human history.*

Then, a new item popped up in Kite's news feed. The title read [I DID IT, IT WAS ME HAAAAA.]

Kite opened the item, unsure of what he was about to see. It was a video, in which a visibly dirty man in a green over coat was sitting in a dank, almost empty room. The man was sickeningly pale, and the untrimmed hair that fell to his shoulders looked stringy and unhealthy, like an old forgotten doll.

There was writing all over the walls. Some of it looked to be mathematical equations and precisely drawn graphs, while what little language Kite could read appeared to be complete gibberish. Kite could make out two distinct phrases placed perpendicular to each other, surrounding a pie chart marked "society." One of the phrases was "Save them all," while the other was "Fuck 'em."

The man sat smiling at the camera for about 45 seconds. Kite was unnerved at the angles of his grin as if it had been pieced together by combining scraps of better, more natural smiles. Kite could hear over the video a woman's voice saying, "Third, I'm recording...start, damn it."

The man sat upright, apparently surprised by the voice. “Sorry, sorry, I was just thinking about birds.” Kite wasn't sure what he was supposed to be gleaning from this video and began to wonder if this was all some bizarre prank capitalizing on a tragedy.

“I am Third,” the man said coldly, his unsettling smile replaced by an equally unsettling frown. “I am the one who destroyed your tower. Towered, we did, like Gods, only to be brought down to Earth like worms.” The eerie poetry of the sentence struck Kite, and that the man used the original word for Terra. It was at this point that the man, apparently named Third, forcefully stuck his finger into his ear and began digging with gusto.

“I destroyed the tower,” Third said, clearly much more interested in his excavation project than anything he was saying, “because I want to destroy the Union of Terran Systems and this seemed like a good way to do it.” Kite heard someone in the bar shout some obscenity about “Conclave scum,” which implied that he was almost certainly not the only one watching this strange video.

“I lack subtlety,” Third mentioned as he pulled the finger from his ear. “It’s not something I’m proud of, which is why I hide it in the hole under my house.

"Anyway, here's what you need to understand, people of the Union. This is the beginning of your end times. I'm not a terrorist; I'm not some simple criminal. I am the step in between; I am the stone and the lily pad. Juggernauts walk on my back as I cleave you from their path with wind and fire. Your lands will burn to the ground, but I didn't do it! It was you! I destroyed your tower because that's why you made me and that's why this is just the beginning. I welcome you to stop me. I beg you to stop me. Can you understand? Can you even hear me? I don't think you can. Okay, stop the fucking video and let's get something to eat.”

CHAPTER II

In spite of how often he did it, or perhaps because of it, Kite hated traveling. He hated the transience of it, especially when one had to travel for work as much as he did. More than anything, however, Kite hated the hassle of packing and unpacking. As a result, he had grown accustomed to not removing anything from his bags that he did not need. Even when he would live somewhere for several months, his bags would stay remarkably full. Once he was done with something, he would neatly put it back so as to save himself the trouble of having to find it and store it when it came time for him to leave ultimately. This idiosyncrasy was particularly helpful in Kite's current situation, as he was already mostly prepared to leave Anshar the moment he received his call from Captain Ames.

As he stared at the small space which had been his apartment for the last several months, Kite sighed. He wasn't going to miss the apartment really, but he rather wished he could have grown attached enough that he could miss it.

If Kite was concerned about leaving anything, it was Monroe and the trial.

"I don't know what to tell you," Kite had said in exasperation when he explained what was happening to Monroe. "I have to go, and I only have a few hours."

"But there's a mad man blowing up Syn-Towers out there!" Monroe was angry and disheveled. "This can't be a safe time to travel. What do they even need you for that they can't do over the Node™?"

"I don't know for sure, and it probably isn't my place to say. I'm sorry if this affects the trial in any negative way, but I'll be in contact as often as possible."

"Yeah, okay," said Monroe, gathering his composure, "call me once you get settled in, you're still an important part of this trial, even if the Union is going to hell. Also...try not to die, I know we don't always get along, but I'd hate for you to get killed just because of your job."

"Why are you so concerned?" Kite had inquired rather tactlessly. "Up until today I never got the impression that you liked me very much."

"Fuck!" Monroe groaned, "A guy can't care about people anymore. Look, Kite, there are 500 billion people in this galaxy that I can't do a damn thing about. We just lost touch with about a billion of them in half of a second. We don't have to be friends for me to give a shit, and giving a shit is just about all I can do in a situation like this."

As Kite left his apartment for what was likely the last time and headed for the transit station, he thought about Monroe's words. A billion people are lost, but Kite felt almost nothing. Why didn't he care more? Why didn't he give a shit?

The Anshar Transit Station was a large domed building, both ergonomic and aesthetically pleasing. On the inside, there were models of various ships hanging from the ceiling, and sleek chromed curves formed counters and desks for employees and seats for visiting patrons. The most striking feature for Kite, as it was for most government buildings he spent time in, was a distinct layer of dust covering everything. Kite always found it remarkable that despite the huge amount of traffic they experienced daily the building somehow managed to accrue the same amount of dust one would expect on a mummy or a paper-book. The dust was especially strange at that particular moment since the entire building was in a verifiable frenzy.

Screens tuned to the newsfeeds were playing the footage of the tower destruction nonstop. People all around the station were calling their families on their Nodes™ or trying to

assess the scale of the mayhem. Many people were reassessing vacations in light of these horrible developments. *It's strange how rarely we consider the fragility of space travel*, mused Kite as he looked for the gate the Captain had specified in the info packets he had sent.

Kite managed to call his family on the cab ride to the station. He had to, unfortunately, hang up on his mother who spent ten solid minutes alternating between smug assurances that she knew something like this was bound to happen and loud, fractured sobbing. In the background, he could hear his father cursing and trying futilely to calm down Kite's mother. He knew he was going to catch hell for hanging up later, but he didn't have time to indulge her panic. He called Billie eighteen times in as many minutes, realizing that he knew very little about what she was up to with her life. He was beginning to grow panicked when he received a message that had also apparently been forwarded to his parents. It was titled [relax] and read [I'm fine, can't talk much, will call when able. Again, I'm fine.]. Most people, including Kite's mother, would probably not appreciate the curtness of the missive, but Kite found it very reassuring. *No matter what, she's still Billie.*

His fraternal concerns assuaged, Kite focused on finding the ship he was scheduled to depart on. He had to move quickly through the station as people were sprinting back and forth, hoping to find someone to help them or to just tell them what to do. At one of the gates he passed, Kite saw a huge crowd of people surging trying to get past the attendant who was shouting for order. A few nearby security agents were helping to quell the nascent riot, but before they could, a punch was thrown, denting the young attendant's face, and all hell broke loose.

Security agents swarmed on Kite's Location, so he ducked down behind a kiosk hoping not to be caught up in the melee. Soon, a cloud of purple gas started surging up from the crowd.

Those idiots are using riot gas?! In a fucking transit station?! Kite had never been hit by riot gas before, but his college roommate had been exposed to it when he attended a pro body modification rally to impress a girl with cat-eyes. The originally peaceful protest devolved into a small riot, and his roommate had gotten caught in the crossfire. His skin was red and welted for two weeks and caused such pain that he missed most of his classes. Kite decided that he wanted no part of that and ran in the opposite direction of the cloud.

As Kite ran, other people noticed the cloud and joined him in his haphazard escape. Soon he was part of a mob, half mad with fear that the noxious purple cloud would turn their skin into hot pulp.

Had he been alone in this race, Kite would have gotten away from the cloud easily, but he had never been good in physical competitions. His fear-crazed confederates overtook him easily, nearly trampling him as they ran past.

The smell of the riot gas burned his nostrils, and Kite could see the fumes wafting toward him. Suddenly, a hand clasped his shoulder firmly and hoisted him almost entirely in the air. A woman with a gas-mask began pulling him unceremoniously along and pushed him into a nearby room.

Kite hacked like an asthmatic donkey as his body tried to flush the poison from his lungs. The woman produced another mask from her coat and beckoned him to wear it. He eyed the woman warily but put the mask on; willing to do anything to stop the burning in his chest. The mask began pumping fresh air, lightly scented with lavender, down his chafing lungs. He felt better almost instantly.

“The mask is medicated; it will help you deal with the effects of the gas,” the woman said through the muffled sound of her mask, “You didn't get a huge dose, so you should be fine. Just the same, we'll get you some antibiotic cream for your skin once we're on the ship.”

“Who are you?” asked Kite, now finally comfortable enough to speak.

“Oh geez, I'm sorry! I forgot to introduce myself!” She seemed embarrassed but then quickly regained her composure. “Doctor Chambers, my name is Hina Phrasavath.” She flashed a badge that Kite's Node™ authenticated. “I'm with the Union Fleet, and I've been assigned to escort you to Terra safely.” She was a half a head taller than Kite, not that that was any great achievement. She had long features; not particularly pretty, but far from ugly.

“I assume all this chaos is because of the incident, but who authorized the use of riot gas?” Kite asked, his anger stemming from the light burning still lingering in his chest.

“It wasn't us, I swear!” said Hina, “Firmatech owns this station, and those were their security agents out there. The fleet would never authorize something like that for such a tiny fight! And especially not in an enclosed space like this!”

“Alright, fine,” said Kite, because what she said made sense. Firmatech security had a history of overreacting, and their forces were not the most trained or supervised in the Union. “How are we going to get out of here? Are they even allowing flights out of here with all this havoc?”

“Not civilian flights, no, but we have full clearance since the Admirals have requested you specially.” She said that last part with an odd sort of satisfaction that made Kite wonder what kind of fleet agent he was dealing with.

Hina led Kite down a corridor to where boarding usually took place. For convenience sake, most long-range star ships stayed in orbit around whatever world they were visiting and

ground-to-air shuttles were housed in the Transit station. The shuttle Kite was led to looked brand new; he was used to traveling in the older models with rougher rides, and he was looking forward to a pleasant ascent for once. Shuttles, unlike interstellar vessels, were made with aerodynamics in mind, and thus had elements one rarely saw on vehicles anymore, such as wings and fins. On board, the shuttle's cabin was fairly bare. It was understandable for how short of time they would be on it, but there were attendants to offer drinks and mood modifiers for those who didn't ascend well. Once Kite and his escort settled in, the familiar hum of the acclimation units began to kick in; insulating the cabin from the jarring experience of space travel. The most they felt was a subtle shift every now and again.

A hologram in the shape of a military pilot shimmered into existence as the ship began escaping the atmosphere. "Hello, I hope you are comfortable, our ascent today is going to take approximately eighteen minutes, give or take variables such as atmospheric conditions and clearance times. The vessel we will be docking with is the UTSS *Roman Wellesley*, named for the hero of the Asura siege of 2419. It will take approximately seventy-eight hours and thirty-four minutes to reach Terra once we are docked. Are there any questions?"

"None, thank you," said Hina warmly.

"Thank-you, please enjoy your ascent."

"So," said Kite to his escort, hoping to pass the tedious time spent on the shuttle with small talk, "I hope I'm not taking you away from some important task here on Anshar."

She shuffled in her seat, and for the first time avoided eye contact with Kite, "I was serving as security for a research installation. It was no big deal; I'm much happier to be helping with this," she said, not offering much any further information.

"Security for government research? That sounds important to me," offered Kite.

Hina looked uncomfortable for the first time since Kite had met her. She met his gaze once more. “They were researching the possible medicinal benefits of the waste products of a native Ansharian animal that the locals called a ‘shit-possum.’ The closest thing to a security breach I had to deal with was when one of the researchers got fecal matter on his shoes and was technically stealing government property when he left the lab that day. This is a vacation for me, Doctor Chambers, so please don’t worry about me.”

Kite had little to add after hearing about “shit-possums,” so decided to keep to himself. After about twenty minutes, the hologram informed them that they could now patch their Nodes™ into the ship’s point of view to observe the *Roman Wellesley* as they approached.

“Oh! I’ve never gotten to see the *Roman Wellesley* before!” said Hina, “My Dad served on that ship!” She put pressure on her temples, which indicated synching her Node™ with an outside system. Out of curiosity, Kite did the same. Instantly, his eyes saw the blackness of space, dotted with iridescent pinpricks of light. He saw Anshar to his right, a blue and red orb tilting silently in space. *It’s pretty from up here, must be the lack of people.* Directly in front of him, Kite could see the *Roman Wellesley*. It was impressively sleek for an older model. Like most Union starships, it was taller than it was long, with several tower-like structures lining its length. In the center was a rotating ring, which Kite recognized as an old model habitation unit. It allowed for a sort of analog anti-gravity and would be used if the acclimation units on a vessel were disabled.

After Kite had gotten his fill of the ship, he turned off the external view and looked over at Hina who was clearly still engrossed with the majestic sight. *Give it time*, thought Kite.

Everything loses its luster.

Finally, on his way to Terra, Kite took his opportunity to think seriously about everything that was happening. He opened the brief and other materials that had been forwarded to his Node™ by Captain Ames.

The brief was very to-the-point; the Union was gathering representatives and experts from all of its organizations to deal with this attack. Leaders and agents from The Union Fleet, Interpol, The Department of Government Security, and the Federal Intelligence Division were all being called to Terra under tight security to hold a conference and plan a course of action. Even Firmatech's Security™ division was going to have a presence there. Kite wasn't shocked by that; Firmatech was the leading developer of Starships and the original patent-holders of the Syn-Towers, which they "generously donated" to the Coalition Government before "The Great Schism" split it into The Union and The Conclave. It made sense to Kite that Firmatech would strong-arm its way into a conference when the subject matter concerned its bread and butter.

According to the briefing, The Union wasn't fully prepared to acknowledge that the person who called himself Third was part of the attack, which Kite understood given the bizarre nature of the video he watched. Still, it seemed odd that anyone would open themselves up to the kind of retribution that was sure to follow from openly attacking the Union of Terran Systems and declaring your desire for their destruction. *He's out for blood, Kite mused. He wants a fight more than anything.*

Some of what Kite received were technical specs on the Syn-towers. They were originally designed by a group of scientists who were studying the first extraterrestrial creature humanity had ever encountered: the Devas. Kite had seen Devas once on one of his journeys. They were massive, larger than even the biggest star-ships. He had heard that the biggest Deva ever recorded was over a mile long in length. The way they moved was reminiscent of whales

moving through an ocean, but they looked decidedly unlike whales. The "head" was an oblong shaped conglomeration of growths that all appeared to be entwined together in a strange knot, the loose ends of which dangled off the end into what appeared to be eye-stalks, but from what Kite had read they were unable to see. The body was a series of shiny, hard-looking segments, linked together by what appeared to be millions of thick ropy sinews. All along the body of the Devas were huge, brightly colored fins that would flow and shimmer against the endless blackness of space. These were apparently organic "solar sails" that were the Deva's primary method of locomotion, as well as their main method of sustenance. Wherever they went, the Devas absorbed radiation. As Kite understood it, they would leach out the useful bits for food and expel what they couldn't process as waste, creating a propulsion effect.

The interstellar community that existed to this day was a result of reverse engineering Deva biology. Despite the fact that Devas were generally considered to be non-sentient, they had amazing biology, in particular, their brain structure. The massive Devas were able not only to survive in the vacuum of space but spent the majority of their lives there, feeding on the radiation of stars. They navigated the blackness of space by apparently tracking the energy of stars, as well as sensing each other using an as-of-yet unclassified signal. Reverse engineering this process was relatively easy, and, within a hundred years, humanity had developed the Syn-Tower array and Displacement Drive; the method by which ships traveled between star systems.

According to the briefing, Syn-Towers mimicked the abilities of a Deva's brain; being able to send signals throughout space that were identifiable as Syn-Towers yet completely unique to each tower. The ships of both the Union and the Conclave utilized Displacement Drive, a method of propulsion that apparently exploited the many-worlds theory of Quantum Mechanics.

I don't get most of this stuff, thought Kite as he sat in his room aboard the *Roman Wellesley*. It was a modest room, but it had a desk, a bed, and a window, which is all Kite could have asked for. *Node™*, Kite voiced in his mind. The computer in the back of his mind wordlessly signaled its acknowledgment like an unconscious thought. *Please read these three paragraphs on displacement drive and bottom-line them for me*. The *Node™* complied, and, within a couple of minutes, Kite understood. D-Drive, as it was colloquially called, temporarily shifted the ship to another dimension using a process that he simply lacked the expertise to comprehend. Once outside, a ship would be able to re-enter its original dimension using the Syn-Towers as beacons, arriving within the system of the user's choice. D-Drive allowed for almost instantaneous travel throughout the known galaxy, but it still relied on old-fashioned sub-light space travel to establish Syn-Towers, a process that could take decades at the least.

The whole system is so fragile. Kite pondered as he looked out into the stars fly by as the ship positioned itself for its displacement. He couldn't comprehend how the Union and Conclave were still at each other's throats given how a single explosion could cause so much damage. *I wonder if the Conclave had any involvement with this "Third" person*. It seemed unlikely, as there were several Conclave member worlds isolated by the attack as well; perhaps not as many as the Union, but that was understandable given how the Conclave purposefully only colonized at a fraction of the speed of the Union.

Kite's attention began focusing on Third. *The man who would kill society*. Kite remembered trembling when he first heard the words on the vid that Third sent.

"I am the step in between; I am the stone and the lily-pad. Juggernauts walk on my back as I cleave you from their path with wind and fire." Kite mouthed the words silently, pawing at them with his mind, hoping to gain some insight. Kite knew that criminals and terrorists had a

long, storied tradition of fancying themselves as poets and gods, using flowery imagery to describe their actions; Third's words were hardly special. *There's something about his eyes, though*, thought Kite. He closed his eyes and began imagining the video in his mind. He saw Third delivering his speech, hunched over in a chair with his arms positioned lazily on his thin, stony legs, his eyes, queer and bird-like, delivering each word with horrifying conviction. "Your lands will burn to the ground, but I didn't do it! It was you!" Third's hollow, knocking voice rung in Kite's mind. "I welcome you to stop me. I beg you to stop me. Can you understand? Can you even hear me? I don't think you can." *This isn't a threat*, Kite's eyes opened fiercely with the realization *it's a warning. This isn't the attack; this is a precursor. This is him stretching, limbering up before he comes at us*. Kite started sweating as he envisioned the cold, mocking ungrin that Third wore in his video. *Why? Why is any of this happening?*

None of what Third had done made any sense. Kite began tearing apart what he knew about the situation. *If he wanted money, he wouldn't have blown up the Syn-tower and risked destroying all the communication of both the Conclave and the Union. How would he get paid then?* If money wasn't his goal, then Kite's training said that this was likely ideologically-based. It would make sense. If the goal was to shatter another's ideology, then the Syn-Towers would be a good place to start. They were representative of everything the Union was.

I just keep coming back to the Conclave. They hate the Union because of our colonization rates and our laws about gene modification. They're the only other government in the galaxy. But this would hurt them as much as it hurts us. If the Conclave as a whole were not responsible, then perhaps one rogue faction was. The Conclave was only a loose conglomeration of independent planets that shared military power to protect themselves from the Union and any other dangers. It was within the realm of possibility that one of these independent planets got it

in their head to attack the Union once and for all and that Third was their agent. *Look at his eyes, though. He isn't reading from a script. He isn't reciting dogma. He's declaring his hatred for us. For all of us.* If Third was anything, he was likely a pirate or an independent terrorist with no ties to the Union or the Conclave. *But that opens up so many more questions. And I still don't know why.*

The *Roman-Wellesley* arrived at Terra slightly ahead of schedule. The ship parked itself in orbit around the planet. Kite and Hina took a shuttle to the moon where Interpol Headquarters resided. The conference wasn't to begin for another three hours. This frustrated Kite as he was eager to talk with his superiors about his cursory thoughts about Third. He had already assembled a cursory report and sent it up the ladder, but in Kite's experience, many of his reports needed to be explained in person to be fully appreciated.

As the shuttle took them closer, Kite began to see details blaze into view. The city Luna Major took up a good portion of the moon's surface, causing the lights of the massive city to coalesce into a huge white swathe down the middle. There were several smaller settlements that stood as tiny points of light on the moon's periphery. Tiny blue seas came into focus, and Kite remembered his Grandfather taking him fishing on one of them when he made his first trip to Terra at age eleven.

The lush beauty of the moon, perfected by terraforming, shone like a star next to stone when one looked at the planet. The atmosphere of Terra's planet was thick and dingy from centuries of abuse. When Kite was a child, he and his sister had asked his grandfather why the Union didn't fix the earth the way they perfected the moon.

"Sometimes something is broken to the point that it can't be fixed, or it's broken so bad that nobody wants to fix it." His Grandfather's words had always struck Kite as unacceptable. As he grew older, Kite entered an activist phase. At one point he even joined some classmates on an excursion to Terra's planet to help the poor, disenfranchised folks left to live on that sad, brown rock. The tenth time he had been spit on by an earther and called "colony trash" was the breaking point for Kite, and he had not felt the need to go back down there since.

"Would you like to get some lunch before the Conference?" Hina asked after they landed at the transit station. She was pleasant but with the same degree of professionalism that Kite had come to expect.

"What?" said Kite as he was drawn from his thoughts. "Oh, sure. Sounds good."

"Oh, great!" said Hina, her apparent enthusiasm at odds with her great stature, "I know this great little teppanyaki place not far from here, and they serve this thing that's like an octopus, but it's from the planet Urdr, and it has something like thirty legs. It's incredible."

"I just assumed we'd eat in the Café at Interpol headquarters," said Kite flatly. "That way we won't be late to the conference. Plus, don't you need to report to your superiors that I'm here safe?"

"That's... a very practical idea," said Hina. He knew she was unhappy that they were disregarding exotic seafood for government-grade lasagna, but he knew this wasn't a social visit. Even so, he hadn't been in Terra in months and shared her anxiousness to get the city under his feet again.

For a city of its size, Luna Major was surprisingly open; there were roads and walkways that crisscrossed and cascaded between the towers of the city, allowing for a great deal more walking room. Between the endless variety of diversions in the towering buildings and the

covered thoroughfares, Kite would sometimes spend days at a time without actually being outside. When he was outside, he loved to go to Wellesley Memorial Park and just look at all the different foliage that had been collected there from almost all the worlds of the Union. *No time for that today*, Kite thought dourly, *not with the world ending*.

At headquarters, Kite was surprised to see a general lack of energy. Of course, there were people running throughout the building, people getting shouted at for not responding to messages or signing something in the wrong space, but that was all general bureaucratic awfulness and lacked the distinct stench of fear and hatred one picks up shortly after a terrorist activity. He thought of the frightened travelers back at the transit station who were probably still dealing with burns from the riot gas that he had narrowly avoided. It was frustrating that no one here would feel that kind of sting while all those people languished in horrible pain for the crime of being frightened and confused.

He mentioned the lack of tension to Hina, who giggled. “You know what they say about Terra, Doctor Chambers--whatever horrible things happen out in the black of space, the people here are safe. It’s unseemly to be overly concerned if it disrupts the flow of progress.”

Kite thought for a moment, *I lived here for a while, did I ignore any major tragedies?* He decided not to dwell too much on the matter.

Kite and Hina made their way to the cafeteria, but Hina insisted on finding her superiors first.

“Can’t you just send them a message?” asked Kite.

“I already did, but it’s important that I find someone so we can confirm you’re here safe. I know it’s a pain; I mean I’m starving, but I don’t want to be the only escort who’s out of line.”

“Whose office are we headed to?” asked Kite. “I thought The Fleet ran most of their operations out of one of the space stations orbiting the planet?”

“They do,” replied Hina, “but it was deemed preferable to host the conference on Terra, and, since the fleet is coordinating the delivery of the consultants who will be attending the conference, a temporary office was set up for The Fleet liaisons in Interpol headquarters. The officers running this operation are set up here, so I need to report to at least one of them.”

They approached a desk with a fat man in an ill-fitting uniform sitting behind it. Hina approached him. “Hina Phrasavath with Doctor Kite Chambers. Please alert the officer on duty that I’ve arrived.” Kite was amused at how much more business-like Hina could become. The fat man nodded assent and blinked, which seemed to indicate that he sent the officer a message with his Node™.

“She’ll be here in a sec,” he said lazily.

“Out of curiosity,” said Kite, “who is the officer on duty?”

“Commander Noble Chambers,” groaned the fat man, clearly uninterested with Kite and Hina.

“Billie?” Kite was not expecting to hear his sister’s name used in such an official capacity. Last he had heard she was just a lieutenant. *We really don’t talk much*, Kite thought in exasperation.

“Oh, fuck me,” said a woman’s voice behind Kite. He turned and saw a tall, muscular woman in an officer’s uniform. She had dark black hair, cut short to avoid betraying its unruly nature. She stood a full head taller than Kite and had the steely gray eyes that she inherited from their father.

“Hello, Billie.

CHAPTER III

Billie had found many ways to define herself over her lifetime. At different times she had been a little sister, a big sister, an athlete, an artist, a fighter, a feckless student, a prodigal daughter, a thief, and a transient. Some of these things still described her, but they didn't define her anymore. These days she was a soldier. That was the label with which she was most comfortable, the name from which she drew her power. It wasn't a label that earned her much status in her family, and it was a hard life, but she loved every minute of it.

Well, not every minute.

Especially not this minute. Fuck this minute.

“Fuck me,” Billie repeated as she stared at her brother and what was apparently his escort. Why was he coming in now? She was supposed to be off shift by now. She knew he was coming for the conference but thought she could do her job without having one of these wonderful rounds of family therapy that she loved so much.

“Did you not know I was coming?” Kite asked, his face that same smug mask of incredulousness it had been since childhood.

“I didn't think...” No, fuck this, why should she have to explain herself to him? “It doesn't matter, you have your shit to do, I'm sure, just as I have mine.” She turned to the tall, broad-shouldered woman standing next to the flimsy wisp that was Kite.

“Report, Agent,” Billie commanded in her best CO voice. The girl, who had been engrossed in the unexpected sibling reunion, snapped to attention.

“Oh- Agent Hina Phrasavath, Commander Chambers,” she said. “Acting escort for asset Doctor Kite Adrian Chambers. Acquired in Anshar Station at oh-eleven-hundred.” Billie raised her hand impatiently.

“I’m a busy woman, Agent Phrasavath. Do you have it recorded?” “Oh, yes, Commander, sorry Commander.” She made a few small gestures in the air, indicating that she was sending the file. Billie got it nearly instantaneously. Her Node™ unpacked the report for important key words and alerted Billie that Kite had gotten caught up in a small riot and very briefly exposed to riot gas. She had to stifle a laugh at her brother’s expense, knowing that even minute exposure can have discomforting effects. Even so, she would have to treat this agent to drinks some time for keeping her brother in one piece, as inconvenient as it was right now.

“I’m glad at least now I know where you are. I didn’t even know you’d been promoted,” Kite said, making his point regardless of his surroundings, as he was wont to do.

“Does it matter?” Billie replied. “Seriously Kite, we both have shit to do. There are still people coming in that need to be checked in.”

“That seems like busywork. Why is a commander of the fleet doing this?”

“It’s not busywork; it’s an important duty that my captain gave to me. They need a high ranking officer to oversee everything here, and he says it’s important that the flagship of the Union put its best foot forward.”

“Congratulations on being the best foot,” said Kite.

“Shut up,” Billie snapped at him. “You’re checked in, so you can go. If we need you, we’ll call you. Don’t leave the complex until the conference is over. Now get out of my face.”

“Billie, I’m sorry. I was just teasing you.” He smiled at her and put his hand on her shoulder. Billie grabbed it and spun him around until she had his arm pinned against his back and her forearm around his throat. Agent Phrasavath gasped, clearly unsure of what edict to obey: protect her charge or be deferent to a superior officer. Luckily, she let go of Kite quickly, and the point was moot.

“What the fuck was that for?” Kite said.

“You don’t touch an officer of the fleet without their express permission. I could have you for assault.”

“Assault?” he shouted. “What do you call this?”

Billie pulled him aside to a corner of the room. He resisted, but just like when they were kids, she could have carried him if she wanted to. The office was tiny, so there was little hope of genuine privacy. Still, Billie’s staff knew not to listen when she didn’t want to be heard.

"You listen to me," she whispered harshly, "I am not 'Billie' right now. I am Commander Noble Chambers of the Union Fleet. I don't care how long it's been since you've seen me, or how wronged you feel; you don't come into my world and start being a little shit to me and expect me not to kick your ass for it."

“I was just trying to—”

“No. I don’t give a shit. This is my life, Kite. The universe is falling apart, and now you come strolling in like you’re hot shit and expect me to be the loving sister?”

“I had expected-” Kite was trying to interject and make himself look like the intellectual victim like he always did. Billie wouldn’t have it.

“No. Shut up. You made me look ridiculous out there, so I put you in a choke hold to teach you some respect. There’s no way I’m going to feel bad about it, so accept it and move on.”

Kite looked at her. He was trying his best to look placid, but the anger that comes from boyhood impotency was glistening behind his eyes.

“Alright. I’m sorry. I’ll go.” He started for the door looking like a beaten pet.

“Oh, come on,” she said. She had her Node™ beam him the directions to where she was staying. “Send me a ping when you’re out of the conference for today. I should be off shift by then, but I’m leaving on a different mission after that and leading up to it I’m going to be busy as all fuck, so if you want to talk, this will be the time.”

“Okay,” said Kite after a few awkward seconds. “But how about you come meet me? They've got me set up at a nice enough hotel, and we can order room service while we chat.”

Billie smiled. That sounded pleasantly normal. Just two siblings with no strange secrets or buried animosity, eating dinner together without the air of anarchy looming over them. It would be a lie, but a nice lie.

“Sure,” she said.

“Your sister is Noble Chambers?” Hina asked Kite in the food court. They were getting a quick lunch in before the conference began.

“We call her Billie.” said Kite, He wished he could say his sister had changed since they last talked, but that angry, twitchy, violent thing was his sister to a “t.” In fact, it could be argued that what they saw was Billie on the “nice” setting.

"She's getting a lot of buzz within the fleet." Hina said, bits of burger flew from her mouth in her eagerness, "The word is, she's on the fast track to her own command. She's got an amazing record. Did you hear about that Asura attack on Belerephon last month?" Kite hadn't, but he didn't keep up with news as well as he ought to. "Well anyway, there were only two or three, but they hit the colony hard. We think they were hibernating on the planet's surface and woke up suddenly which is why the colony's defenses didn't stop them. Well, it's not looking

good, but then a Union frigate called the *Constantine* shows up and starts forcing the buggers back. The Asuras, though, they get nasty when they're hungry, and they're real hungry after hibernation. They just won't go down. So the *Constantine* sends down a fire crew with sonic charges to mess with their senses.”

“Doesn’t sound too hard,” said Kite, as he took a big bite of salad. He was hoping it would be unclear that he didn’t know anything about this sort of thing.

"The sonic charges can do a lot of damage to an animal like the Asuras, but what you have to keep in mind is what an Asura is actually like. They're like dragons, like from a friggin' fairy tale. They're gigantic winged beasts half the size of a frigate that can survive in a vacuum and destroy everything wherever they go. And the sonic charges The *Constantine*'s crew had were short range. They had to go down to the planet's surface, the same surface the Asuras were wrecking, and set off these charges to drive the Asura's far enough away for the colony defenses to activate."

"I'm assuming it all worked out, though," said Kite. “As out of it as I am, the total loss of a colony to an Asura Attack would have caught my eye.”

“Yeah, they beat them, but the point is it was your sister leading the fire-team. She led a bunch of soldiers onto a burning, torn-up landscape so she could set off grenades in the face of some actual dragons! That mission is what got her the promotion over to the *Catalyst*. She’s the second most important person on the most important ship in the Union!”

Kite finished his salad and got up to bus his tray. "She's just my sister," he said.

“Still,” said Hina, following his lead even though she had not finished her lunch. “It must be kind of cool, being a family of such big-shots. What do your parents do?”

“They were both teachers. They taught at Ellestan University on Oghma. My father taught Political Science, and my Mother taught Psychology.” The two of them headed at a leisurely pace to the auditorium where the conference would be held. They still had a little bit of time on their hands.

“Wow, they sound smart. Your mom must have been really proud of you going into her field, huh?” Hina asked.

Kite stabbed his nails into the meat of his palm; his face the quintessential image of tranquility. "I think she was, for her part. I've always been second best in her eyes, no matter what she says."

“Compared to your sister?”

"No. Billie's my Dad's favorite, but no one was happy with her choice to join the fleet, especially not the mother."

“I don’t understand; do you have an older sibling then?”

“Yes,” Kite said, palms red and aching.

"Is he rich, then?" she asked with a big smile, clearly designed to put Kite at ease. “He must have the job to end all jobs if he beats out you and your sister.”

“No,” said Kite quietly, “he never amounted to much of anything.”

“But-“ Kite raised a hand to silence her as they entered the conference hall. There were already many people there, and he needed to refocus his thoughts on less painful things, like terrorism.

The Conference was what Kite expected: Old men in suits hasty to expound on who was to blame for this latest catastrophe, as long as the finger pointed at someone else. Representatives from every governmental law enforcement agency in the union were in attendance: Interpol, the Bureau of Interstellar Travel, the Union Intelligence Agency, the Union Arms Bureau, and half a dozen others that all knew frustratingly little about Third and his motivations.

Kite took his place in the assembly chamber with the Interpol delegation. The reason for his presence was unclear to him. He was working for Interpol as a consultant; he had no real rank. They had his report. Why did they need him? When he'd managed a moment with Captain Ames, all he'd gotten was "Stay quiet and listen. Isn't that what a shrink is supposed to do?" Kite could hardly disagree.

Firmatech Security™ also had a presence at the conference. They were focused on maintaining the pretense that they were more than a corporate-sponsored organization of bullies. They were less informed than anyone, but they expressed their ideas with the most volume.

"What you don't seem to understand," shouted the Firmatech executive in front of the assembly, "is that this is as much a financial concern as a social one." He looked young for an executive—no older than forty—but the telltale wheeze in his voice suggested that he was probably much older and that he had likely received body modifications to make himself look younger. Simple aesthetic mods weren't illegal, but they were frowned upon. Playing fast and loose with the human genome was a sore spot in the Union—something Kite knew all too well as a clone. Firmatech execs rarely had to worry about such prejudices, so it was rare to see one with the face with which he was born. Kite ran a check with his Node™ and saw that the executive was Mikael Brown, Vice President of Security Affairs on Terra.

“This ‘Third’ character is clearly some Conclave radical trying to destabilize the relationship between the Union and Firmatech,” said Browen. It wasn’t surprising to Kite that Firmatech was taking that position. After all, they were the ones who had maintained and built the Syn-Towers. Anything that hurt the towers hurt Firmatech’s credibility. Even gigantic multi-planetary corporations have to answer to investors.

"There's nothing we have that yet suggests a motive," said Captain Ames in an uncharacteristically calm manner. “We can’t let fears and speculations override our better judgment.”

“With all due respect, Captain,” replied Browen, with a sneer, "I've read the reports your profilers have filed and all they've given us are reasons why it's unlikely that this terrorist isn't affiliated with the Conclave. If you ask me, it seems like the bias of a different nature. Is Interpol actively trying to dissuade this conference from going against the Conclave?"

“If the Conclave didn’t do it, then of course we don’t want to start a shooting match.” Ames was raising his volume, but not his intensity. “I’m not sure what metrics Firmatech Security™ uses to distinguish targets, Mr. Browen, but at Interpol we use evidence compiled by highly trained and immensely skilled investigators.” He gestured behind him to where Kite and several other Interpol members were sitting. “We have admittedly little evidence at this time, but what we do have does not suggest that the Conclave was involved—at least not directly.”

“Evidence is great, but what we need to do is stop this son of a bitch before anything else happens. Protocol be damned.”

These words from a representative of the Department of Interstellar Transportation were met with ecstatic applause. Kite wasn't thrilled with the direction the conversation was taking, and he was acutely aware that he had no power to change it.

A man that Kite's Node™ identified as Captain Samuel Kronauer stood up to address the room. "The Catalyst is already making preparations to engage an exploratory mission. Our intel suggests that the video detailing the destruction of the tower is authentic. We have reason to believe they filmed it on location. As such, it is highly likely that the terrorist and his associates are still on the planet Minerva. They shouldn't have been able to escape without the use of the Syn-Tower."

"But they were able to broadcast the transmission without the tower," an unidentified voice interjected.

"We are aware of this discrepancy," announced a woman Kite was able to identify as Admiral Harriet Lee. "There is classified information that I'm afraid we cannot divulge, but rest assured that we are not sending our people in blind. We are taking every possible precaution in this unprecedented situation. We've sent scout ships in advance of the Catalyst and the rest of the fleet, and they have been equipped with emergency supplies. The downed Syn-Tower clearly makes communication difficult, so we must trust in the infrastructure of these Union-member worlds to function long enough for aid to get there and for us to apprehend the despicable persons responsible."

For hours it went on like this. Arguing and squabbling, report after report. Finally, after the conference concluded for the day, the reason for Kite's presence became clear.

"We're creating an elite unit—members from all departments spearheading and coordinating the efforts of all the agencies," Captain Ames explained to Kite.

"Why me? You don't like me."

"Why does that matter? You're good, Chambers. You've helped close a lot of cases. Who cares if you're a self-important little prick?"

“Couldn’t we have done this in a briefing? Or over our Nodes™? Why did I have to be part of that farce?”

“Because,” replied Ames, “you said it yourself: This whole thing doesn’t read like a normal terrorist attack. There’s something weird going on. You’re my weird-detector, so I wanted you to put eyes on all the people in that room. See if you could sense anything about the atmosphere.”

“Well, there was obvious tension. A lot of anti-Conclave talks, but that’s not new.”

“No, it isn’t,” Ames admitted. “I didn’t say there definitely was anything weird going on in that room. I just meant that there could be something weird. And I wanted you nearby to hear everything in person. It pays to cover your bases in a situation like this.” Kite wasn’t entirely sure what the captain was getting at, but he agreed with the sentiment.

“I’ll have my assistant send you the assignment details. The conference will likely last for a few more days while we get all our ducks in a row, but you will be getting to work now. Don’t let me down, son.”

“Yes, sir,” said Kite.

It was early evening. Perfect time to invite Billie to dinner. Kite cursed under his breath and made his way to his hotel while calling her on his Node™.

Billie’s brother used to be older than her. His name was Jerr, and he was everything to her.

He was nine, and she was five. He was reading years beyond his level and was helping her since she struggled to read at all. He was the best at every sport or game they played, and even though she wanted to win, she didn’t want him to lose. He knew the names of every animal,

but if he didn't, he would make up a name that was better than the real thing. He could eat five hotdogs before she could finish one, and he was the champion bug-catcher in their entire neighborhood. He was her hero and her big brother, and if she had her way she was going to marry him.

And then he died.

Disease is a strange thing for a five-year-old to grasp. Getting sick is bad. That much they can understand. But you're supposed to get better. That's how it's supposed to be. Jerr didn't get better; that was Billie's introduction to injustice.

Her house got dark after that. Dark and quiet. Mom and Dad didn't say much to her, or to each other. Billie wanted to cry all the time, but she knew Mom and Dad only cried when they thought she couldn't hear them, so she returned the courtesy.

She had trouble knowing the difference between sad and angry; she felt both of them so often that they began to muddle each other. This became especially apparent when her classmate Jeremy Zuckuss said that he was glad Jerr was dead. She bit him on the forearm so hard you could almost see bone; tears streamed down her face the whole time.

She was put in a different school, and then another different school, and then another school after that. By the time she was ten, her parents took her aside and told her something strange. Something strange and wonderful and terrible. She was going to get another brother.

Another brother? She didn't want another brother. She wanted her brother. She wanted Jerr. Here was Billie's second lesson in injustice. Why would her parents think this was good? Why would they give her what she wanted but in such an awful, unfair way? It was horrible.

Then again, she was lonely. She had loved having a brother. Would it still be good if the brother wasn't Jerr? She was going to be the big sibling. That had potential. She would always

miss Jerr, but wouldn't it make him happy if she took all the things he taught her and passed them on? This was important. She was going to be the best big sister ever.

They got the baby from a big black building that her dad called "Firmatech." She knew Firmatech made a lot of her toys and the things in the kitchen, so it only seemed natural that they also made little brothers. It took a long time (four months in fact) for them to make a little brother for her and her family. During that time, Billie's parents would occasionally take her to visit her little brother. He lived in a tank, surrounded by a bunch of other tanks with other people's little brothers in them. Every time she went he looked a bit different. At first, he looked like a peanut, then one time he looked like a fish until he finally started to look like a baby. Then one day, Billie's parents left her with Grandma and Grandpa for a week and, when they came back, they had her brand new baby brother, Kite.

Kite was ugly. Throughout Billie's life, as she met more and more babies, she would come to the conclusion that all babies are ugly. She loved that ugly baby. She loved it more than she thought she ever would. Her house had color again. There were noise and happiness, and anger and weird baby smells, but it felt right. The baby grew older and, conveniently, so did Billie. They were friends, and Billie did everything she could to be a good big sister. She hoped that Jerr was proud of her if he happened to be watching.

Still, something was wrong.

Billie was nearly sixteen when she finally noticed. Kite looked like Jerr. No, he didn't look like Jerr. She looked like Jerr. Kite was Jerr. He had Jerr's eyes, his hair, and his smile. But it was more than that. Kite walked like Jerr, and crinkled his brow like Jerr, and would jab his fingernails into his hands when he was mad, just like Jerr did. Something about this was wrong.

When she first tried talking to her parents about it, they were evasive. They seemed to think she would drop it if they didn't engage. But she didn't drop it. Dropping things never had been and would never be, a part of Billie's skillset.

Finally, her father talked to her. He put his arm around her and pulled her close as he said "Your brother—that is, Kite... He's a special kind of kid."

"Special how?" asked Billie.

"You know how we've discussed sex and babies and everything?"

Of course, she did. From what she could tell, her parents were very forthcoming about the whole thing when compared to all her friends' parents, which made their current behavior all the more concerning.

"What does that have to do with Kite? Other than the obvious."

"Well, your brother wasn't conceived naturally."

"Yeah, Dad, I get that much. I remember that we got him from a Firmatech lab."

"Yes, well. What you might not know is we didn't... provide an original template for Kite."

"What does that mean?"

"It means that instead of being a whole new person, we based him on a person who already existed. You've heard of Cloning before, right sweetheart? Well, that's what Kite is. He's a clone."

"A... a clone of who?" Billie felt like all her organs were rushing like panicked traffic towards her stomach.

“I think you know who, Noble,” he said, with an uncharacteristic sternness. Billie wrenched herself free of his arm and ran outside. Dad might have called after her, or maybe he didn’t. She was beyond hearing him.

She ran and ran through the woods behind her house. Eventually, she stopped and tried to think, but she couldn’t think, so she chose to sob hysterically instead. She howled and cried for a good twenty minutes, and if you had asked her why she wouldn’t have been able to tell you. All she knew was that she felt wrong. The whole world felt wrong, and it had only been pretending to feel right this whole time.

“B-Billie?” A small voice greeted her from around the large, twisted tree she was hiding behind.

It was Kite; small and scared. He had never liked these woods—not like she and Jerr did.

“What are you doing out here?” he asked, “Mom and Dad say you have to come home.”

Billie stared at him. Her face was empty, but tears kept cascading down, unbidden. She knew he was speaking to her, but the words didn’t make any sense. What was happening? What was this thing standing in front of her?

“I heard a little bit of what you and Dad said. I didn’t get it. But it was about me, wasn’t it?” He was starting to cry, too, his small fingers clenched into his palms, turning them red. Like Billie’s. Like Jerr’s. “Did I make you mad? If I did, then I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to. I-I love you, Billie.”

She stood up. She was suddenly so angry. She had never been so angry. How dare he? Was he mocking her? Was everyone mocking her? Where was her brother? Why wasn’t he here? Why did this thing have the gall to wear his face? She could have done anything just then. She really could have done just about anything.

She took his hand, quietly and gently, and led him back home.

Billie stared at Kite as he gingerly ate his salad. She hated looking at Kite. She saw Jerr in his every movement. She saw Jerr not only in the things Kite did but also in the things he didn't do. Jerr was never as polite as Kite was while eating; he was more aggressive with food. It was like he was angry that it wasn't already in his stomach. Was that because he was a little boy? Would Jerr have grown into the polite and controlled person Kite was now? It was a familiar thought that she didn't enjoy having, so she forced her eyes onto her food and ate through the awkward silence with reckless abandon.

Kite was the one to break the silence. "Congratulations on your promotion, if I haven't said it already." It was a nice gesture, but given the fact that no one in her family had ever appreciated her military career, it rang rather hollow.

"Thank you," Billie said, as sincerely as she could manage.

"I just wish I could have heard about it from someone in the family rather than my bodyguard." There it was. The subtle jabs that made Billie feel like she was back home. "I'm told it was rather impressive. The mission for which the Fleet promoted you."

"It wasn't just the one mission. It was my career. One mission doesn't get you promoted, no matter what the vids tell you." She wasn't usually so pedantic, but tonight she was letting herself indulge a little.

"Will you tell me about it? The mission, I mean." Kite, as usual, was not rising to her bait.

"It sounds like you already heard about it."

"I'd like to hear it from you."

“A bunch of Asuras was attacking a colony. I and my crew stopped them. The end.”

“Very exciting,” said Kite, in between sips of his wine. “I wish you would have regaled me with this fascinating tale earlier.”

“Yes, well, it slipped my mind. I don’t usually think about the promotion as much as what came before it. You know, all the fire and the screaming and the good people dying? That’s usually the part that I tend to focus on. Sorry if I bury the lead on occasion.”

That shut him up. At least temporarily. Civilians loved to hear about victory, but they hated knowing what it cost. Her brother was no different.

“Still,” he said after a long moment, “You ought to tell Mom and Dad. I’m assuming they don’t know.”

“I’m assuming they don’t care.”

“Come on, Billie.” He dropped his guard for a moment, “Of course they care. They’re always talking about you. It kills Dad that he barely knows what’s going on with you.” Kite stared at her while absently twirling his fork around a tomato.

“I think it would kill him more if he did know. Neither of them likes having a ‘thug of the Union’ as a daughter.” She jammed a piece of steak into her mouth and chewed with gusto.

“Please. You’re the only one who still has any animosity about that. I’m in public service, same as you, and we have civil conversations all the time.”

"You are not the ‘same as me,’ little brother. You're a consultant. At any time, you can go into private practice or teaching or some other damn thing. I'm a part of the Union Fleet. My contracts are ironclad. The Union basically owns me until they have no more use for me. And we both know that's not even the part our parents hate. What they hate is that I'm totally fine with it. And you hate it, too."

He was silent for a moment. He slowly put bites of salad in his mouth and chewed for a good long while. Billie drank deep from her wine glass, satisfied that at on at least two separate occasions this evening, she had gotten him to shut up.

“Maybe they—we, I guess—had different ideas about where you’d end up,” said Kite after swallowing a bite of his salad. “Is that so wrong? You really could have done anything with your life, Billie.”

“I could have, but I didn’t,” she replied with a mouth full of steak.

"And now you never call or contact us, not even when the Union is under attack by a terrorist. You are painfully difficult to reach, and you act like we're rude for trying to contact you."

“I had a lot on my plate. I was worried about you guys, too, but I had to prioritize.“

“I can understand busy, Billie. But I don’t understand how aggressive you are about shutting your family out of your life.”

“It’s easier that way. It’s easier for me to do what I have to do.”

"Sometimes it feels like....Never mind."

"What? How does it feel? Like I want to live my life on my terms? Like I don't want to be a part of a family that would look down on me for doing what I want to do—what I feel duty-bound to do? If that’s what it feels like, Kite, I suggest going with that feeling.”

"It feels like, as much as you might resent Mom and Dad, what you want, is to get away from me."

“Yeah,” Billie acknowledged. “That’s part of it.”

“I understand,” said Kite, his voice distant. His hands were under the table, but she knew those nails were digging into his palms mercilessly. "I am what I am, Billie. I can't change it, and

I didn't choose it. I know you hate me for it, but I wish you wouldn't use it as an excuse to shut out your entire family. I can give you any amount of space you need, but I just... I want you to be happy, and I don't think you are. Not really. I know, because neither am I."

It was a full minute before either one of them spoke. They sat there staring at their plates, wishing more food would appear to help bridge this horrible silence.

"I don't hate you," Billie said, finally. "It's just—"

"—you don't love me," Kite finished. "I understand. I represent a part of your life that's very painful, so it isn't unreasonable tha—"

"Just shut the fuck up for a minute," Billie said. "It's not that, either. I do love you, Kite, but it's confusing. It's the most confused I've ever been about anything. You're my brother, in more ways than one. If I look at you as Kite, I feel like I'm turning my back on Jerr. Then again, if I see you as nothing more than a copy of Jerr, then I'm no better than Mom and Dad."

"Don't say things like that. You know I hate it," Kite said, losing for a moment the air of detachment he so carefully cultivated. Ever since they were children, this had been the button to push. He reveled in the attention that their parents lavished upon him, and the idea that it was meant for someone else bothered him even more than it could ever bother Billie. He was just better at ignoring those thoughts. Jerr had never been a real person to him, so in a lot of ways, it was easier for him. At least that's what Billie told herself.

"Mom and Dad love you, Kite," she said in her woefully underdeveloped big sister voice. "They love you as much as they're capable of loving anyone. But they lost something that they'll never get back, and in you, they can pretend that's not true. I can't do that. I could never do that." She tightened her grip. She could feel the heat of blood rushing to her palms as she pushed into them with stress and confusion. "When I see you, I don't know how to treat you, and it's hard. It's

easier just to put you and Jerr and Mom and Dad...out. If I put you somewhere where I can't see you, then it doesn't confuse me as much. I love you guys as ideas; it's the realities that get complicated."

"That's not healthy, Billie," Kite said after a while.

"Well, you know what?" she said, standing up from the table, "I'm in the goddamned Union Fleet. I don't get to be healthy. I have to make my way to functional and hold my ass there for as long as it needs to be there. 'Healthy' is for people who either have no responsibilities or are too selfish to do them. When I lose functional, then you can lecture me. Until then, maybe keep your fucking opinions to yourself."

Kite looked at her. Reading her the way someone reads a sign for directions. He was looking for a foothold that he could use to get her to "open up" more. She wasn't going to give him anything. She was unreadable when she wanted to be. She had years of practice.

"The bottom line is this," she said flatly, "I am what I am. I didn't choose it, and I can't change it. If you love me, like you say you do, then you will accept that about me as I accept it about you."

"Fair enough," said Kite.

"I'm sorry. I can't promise that I'm going to call you once a week or anything, or that I'm going to get over my shit magically. I'm not and I won't. But I do love you. And I love Mom and Dad. You should know that part of why I do what I do is because I think it's the best way to protect you."

"Okay. But there is something you can promise me."

"I'm not going to promise shit, but go ahead and tell me."

“Please just do your best to look after yourself. You have enough enemies without making one of yourself.”

“Are those ‘doctor’s orders?’” she asked with a wry smile.

"Whatever helps you sleep at night," Kite said. He got up and went near Billie. Had they been normal, healthy siblings they would end this meeting with some physical symbol of trust and mutual respect. A hug? A handshake? Neither felt right.

She held his hand for a moment, quietly and gently. Then both of their Nodes™ started flaring wildly, signaling an emergency. They looked at each other acknowledging that their family dinner had concluded.

“Chambers, where are you?” said Captain Kronauer over Billie’s Node™.

“I’m at my brother’s hotel room, Sir.”

“Well thank goodness for that,” he said. Billie didn’t like the weariness she heard in her captain’s voice. “There’s been another attack,” he added.

“Another Syn-Tower?” One going down blotted out part of the sky; she shuddered to think what wrecking more of the damned things would accomplish.

“No. It was the Aleska Building here in Luna Major. Goddamned freaks have already made it to Terra somehow.”

“Firmatech’s Terra headquarters? They have tighter security than half of our facilities. How the hell did they get hit?”

“I’m not sure. If we know, it hasn’t reached me yet. I The investigative teams are going to have to suss that one out. We’re going to need you to come in, Commander. This alters our timetable significantly.”

“Understood, sir.” She terminated the call and looked over at Kite who, judging from his defeated expression, was finishing up his call as well.

“The Aleska building?” she said. “Seriously? Who are these fucking people? How does this even happen?”

Kite was staring at something on his Node™, transfixed by whatever image it was beaming into his brain.

“Kite? What are you looking at?” Billie said, manifesting her sisterly concern.

Kite made a motion with his eyes that indicated a sub-vocalized command to his Node™. Suddenly, Billie had received a video attachment from her brother.

“Security footage that somebody from Interpol pulled off of Firmatech’s data cloud.” Kite was talking with the same detachment that one approached a sports team they didn’t particularly enjoy. She put aside her concern and opened the file.

A young, industrious man was walking down the hallway carrying a large stack of papers. Before he reached the end of the hallway, he dropped everything and doubled over in pain. He screamed, or at least looked like he was screaming over the mute audio. Billie’s Node™ noticed her desire for sound and decided to try and dub it for her. She could hear the screaming now. Painful and horrific, though somewhat artificial due to the Node’s™ limitations.

In the video, several coworkers ran over to address the suffering young man.

"Please, what's happening?" the false version of his voice echoed. "It hurts so much. Please help me! I feel like I'm going to die!" The people around him murmured in stunned silence until one bystander chose to do something and contact emergency services. The bystanders tried to comfort the suffering man as he writhed on the floor clutching his sides. As if they couldn't hold together under natural power any longer, he began defecating from the intense

pain. He slammed his head against the floor repeatedly; Billie could see blood pooling underneath him.

Someone mentioned that there were people all over the building having the same bizarre behavior. The suffering man began to glow, and his mid-section began to come unraveled like an ancient doll's clothing. His chest burst open like a horror movie, and in a flash of light and blood, the film was over.

CHAPTER IV

Nobody ever looks down, Gaines mused on her way to work. Everywhere she looked were wealthy young people like herself on their way to important meetings or new opportunities, and every single one of them had their heads tilted to the sky. Perhaps it was because they were on Node-Calls™, or they were just feeling great about life. Gaines suspected it was because they didn't think there was anything worth seeing on the ground. After all, the ground is where litter is. It's where animals shit and homeless people loiter. What could be good about looking down?

Gaines stopped in front of an old man with one leg. He held a sign with his Node-Link™ on it asking for donations. She activated her Node™ and sent the old man enough for some food and perhaps help him get cleaned up for a job interview.

“Bless you, Miss. Terra needs more people like you, that's for certain.”

Gaines smiled and blushed appropriately, “You're too sweet. Take care of yourself, now.” It made her feel good to give to the overlooked. As the rest of the city moved forward without looking anywhere else, she had done a good deed.

She had to admit that it was easy to overlook a single homeless man in the vast, sprawling city of Luna Major, but Gaines was the kind of person who paid attention to everyone and everything. It was habitual; she memorized the names of everyone she met regardless of station, and she always made sure to know when it was likely for her to run into them. She never forgot birthdays and knew to keep up on key events in people's lives. Like Iris, the computer technician who was getting married that month. *Node™, Send Iris Channing flowers on the twelfth*, Gaines commanded wordlessly. The Node™ was good for keeping appointments, but people still let things slip through the cracks. Not Gaines. She didn't like the idea of letting

laziness or inconvenience get in the way of possible advantage. *It's always better to have someone like you than to hate you.*

Her aggressive attention to people's lives wasn't foolproof of course. People had never been completely predictable, but Gaines believed in controlling what she could and accepting what she couldn't.

That was the advantage she had against everyone. She was aware. Every other person in this city with a fat bank account and a cushy corporate job never deigned to look down. Gaines knew to look in every direction for the unexpected. That was what made her special. It was what Third saw in her, and it was why he had given her such an important task.

Gaines arrived at the Aleska building a little earlier than usual. She had things to do before work got started.

"Good morning Ms. Gaines," piped Andrew, her assistant. His birthday was two months ago, and his mother was still sick.

"Good morning, Andrew, any calls?"

"Yes, ma'am there's one from a Mister Dritte. He said that you should give him a call when you get in."

"Oh, yes, he's an old friend of mine." Gaines screamed inside, but never let the lovely façade of her face drop.

"Great, I'll send you his contact information."

Gaines loved her office. It was on the 105th floor, very large and well-decorated with an incredible view of the city. It was afforded to her because of her position as Director of Facility and Program Improvement for Firmatech's Terra branch. She had grown comfortable in this

position, and every morning would normally take the time to enjoy the early morning view. Today, though, she had an apparently important call to make.

Node™, Call Mr. Dritte. Audio only. It wasn't long before a familiar voice answered.

"Gaines!" cried Third, "It's been so long since we talked! I thought you were dead! Or maybe that you weren't ever real! Which would be worse?"

"Sweet fuck, Third. Just what exactly are you thinking?" Gaines trusted Third more than anyone she had ever known, but no one in all the systems could aggravate her as he could.

"What shat in your cereal? Was it a bird?" It was always like dealing with a nine-year-old. "Maybe I just wanted to hear your voice? Would that be so wrong?"

"Yes, because it would mean that you are a fucking defect. What are you doing contacting me this way? What happened to the dead-drops? This building could be bugged! Or what if this channel was bugged? Not to mention: Dritte? That's 'Third' in Old German. Are you a supervillain in a fucking vid now? Do you ever think about anything?"

"We're fine," He said, the playfulness starting to fade away. "I am smarter than all of the bugs in the basement. My thumbs are what they fear because I can taste their breath."

"Yeah, okay. I'll put that on my list of the crazy shit Third says, and I'll read it as the feds wait to execute me..."

"Stop," Third said. Gaines could only obey. "Your hollow shaking unnerves me. I didn't ask for this tree; this plastic mockery. I wanted the one shaped like a woman! The one that believed in me, because she saw me eat a wicked man's neck! How many monsters do I have to kill before you trust that I know how to hold a sword? How many nooses can I cut before you know my name?" Gaines took a breath. He was right. She was exhibiting an insulting lack of faith in him.

"I'm sorry. I'm just concerned about the plan. This seems like an awful risk."

"Risk makes a game fun! Cards without gambling are masturbation!" His exuberance was returning which meant that, for the moment, she was forgiven. It wouldn't surprise her if she were punished later, though. She never should have called him crazy.

"The knife glances the air between the fingers and the flesh is cringing," he continued, "The ante is upped, and the knife moves faster. The mother said not to play with knives, but fuck that fat bitch. Worry not, Dear Gaines. Our mutual friend is taking care of it. They make me unafraid to use my phone. I'm young again."

"What are you...wait...really? It can do that? Does that mean it's ready?"

"Oh, this is nothing." Gaines could almost hear a grin creeping across Third's ragdoll face. "This is a card trick. What we're building up to is some arcane fucking magic. Like a snake giving live birth to a funeral pyre. Real impossible shit. It still needs to be planted in the right tree, though. But once that's done it'll grow spectacularly. That's your job, and I pay you well to dig those graves, old man. Are the gardeners ready?"

"Yes, I've sent the equipment along and have it all listed as standard upgrade materials. If anybody looks too closely at the programs on board, it'll just look like advanced indexing algorithms for shipping routes. Standard stuff. Not that anyone is going to look too closely. It should all get to Minerva within the next day or so..." Gaines refrained from asking the obvious question, what now? Was that the full scope of her participation? Was her part done? All that build-up and all that time spent working her way into this specific job (this stupid meaningless corporate job) all just so she could sign some papers and send some computer parts to a silent planet? There had to be more than that.

Then Third answered the question she never asked, which is why she loved him. "I still have work for you. If you aren't dead of exhaustion. Alack, alack! Woe is me! I'm a poor corporate executive, and my assistant double-booked my manicure with my prostitute! Whatever shall be done?"

"I believe I can manage," Gaines said, flatly.

"You're fantastic, Gaines. I want to seal you in a box below my house."

"Flatterer. What do you need me to do?"

"Just go about your day. Do business, make money, get a bagel. Then you'll get a present from me because I am very nice. The present will tell you what to do. Don't call it cruel names, or it will teach you its bad medicine."

Gaines knew better than to ask anything else. She knew by now that if Third said something was going to be a certain way, then the universe would move to accommodate him. It was simply because of his force of will. He wouldn't settle for anything less than everything he wanted. Every other person on Terra, or in the entire Union for that matter, saw Third as a monster and a lunatic. Gaines saw him as the man in control, and she craved to be a part of what he was making.

As she walked home that evening, she saw the same old homeless man she had given to earlier that morning. "Well, well, nice to see you again, Miss," he said with more joviality than one would assume from a one-legged homeless man.

"Yes, good to see you too. I hope you're doing all right," Gaines said

"Oh, I'm fine, but I'm glad I saw you. I have something to give to you, now."

Gaines perked up at that statement and regarded the man more carefully, "Well, I appreciate it, but I don't really need anything."

"Oh, I insist, Ma'am," he said, pulling a small metal box from his tattered coat, "After all, I meant it when I said Terra needed more like you."

Gaines took the box and politely thanked the man before returning home. She walked quickly, but slowly enough so as to not be noticeable. When she was safely in her apartment, she took out the box and caressed it gently. It was sealed almost seamlessly. Gaines had seen other executives use boxes like these to carry valuable or scandalous objects without getting picked up on police scanners. If the box was ever stolen, it was virtually impenetrable. *Third got this to me*, she thought. *Now how do I open it?* There was a small patch of black glass on the box's surface. Gaines recognized it as an optic-key. She aligned her eye with it, and wordlessly commanded *Open*. Her suspicions were correct; the box was keyed to her Node™, so only she would be able to open it. Her Node™ interfaced with the box, and it began to subtly whirl. The top half gently slid open revealing the inside. It was cold, which implied whatever was in it needed refrigeration.

Inside the box was a small opaque canister adorned with a biohazard symbol. Gaines gently removed it from the box, unworried for her safety as she knew Third would not endanger her without reason. Once the canister was removed, another optic key was revealed.

Gaines gazed into it, and soon her Node™ was being relayed with encrypted information. *These are my instructions*, thought Gaines as her Node™ went to work deciphering the message.

Third is a Monster, she thought, *and so am I*. She understood they were both part of the same monster. Third was the head. He was drawing their attention by roaring and gnashing his teeth, but people like Gaines and the man that had given her the box, they were the claws. *They'll be so worried about the teeth that they never see the claws coming. After all, nobody ever looks down.*

It had been three days since the Aleska Building attack and Kite had been going over victim profiles all that time with very little sleep. He was confident that the victims would have to have some connection. The victims' Node's™ had all been recovered and examined, revealing the cause of death but little else. Still, Kite was sure there could be something more there. Nodes™ were essentially black boxes for the human body and recorded all kinds of information beyond strictly medical. Kite had to believe that there was a connection. The other task force members had decided to put the bulk of their efforts into understanding the murder weapon used and the logistics of the attack.

Third had released another video, but this time it was released a mere ten minutes before the incident. This one was even more incoherent than the first and mainly featured Third shrieking with laughter. The only thing of substance in the video that Kite could make out was when Third said, "Lightning bugs all know each other's names. They love each other and then they die." It was the only thing in the whole video that resembled a coherent sentence. Kite was convinced that this was another strange clue that Third was deliberately dropping; he was convinced largely because he needed to believe there was a clue to go off of.

Within a day of the attack, Bartoz, a thick, unpleasant man from the Union Arms Bureau, was becoming antagonistic towards Kite's methods. "We need to prioritize Chambers. We don't know when another attack like this is going to happen; if we don't figure out how they did it, then we're just gonna be staring at a bunch of burnt carcasses again next week. Mark my words."

"Third doesn't do things without reason," Kite said desperately, "It might look like he does, but I don't think so. I think everything he's done has been deliberate. Why else would he be so public with taking credit?"

“To fuck with us, genius!” Bartoz spat, "That's what terrorists do, and they fuck with their victims so they will feel terror! It's the whole fuckin' point, and I don't know why I am explaining psychology to a fuckin' psychologist!"

“Neither do I,” replied Kite. Bartoz had been picking a fight for the last week, and Kite was running out of patience.

“Oh-ho, little man’s stepping up?” Bartoz stood a full head taller than Kite and had military experience. Kite’s six months of Aikido in college would likely not hold up. Still, he clenched his fists and prepared for something to happen.

“For fuck’s sake, will you two knock it off?” Captain Claiborne shouted. Even in all her sweaty anger, Kite looked at her like an angel of mercy. She had given him a reprieve from what would surely be an ass-kicking for the ages. Claiborne was a ranking officer in the Fleet’s military police. She was assigned to co-ordinate the efforts of the task force.

“We are supposed to be the best law enforcers the Union of Terran Systems has to offer. But, instead, you two limp-dicks are in here playing ‘whose is bigger?’ Meanwhile, a bleeding terrorist is out there blowing people up from the inside and destroying the literal pillars of our civilization! Am I wrong in thinking this is inappropriate?”

“No, ma’am,” said Kite and Bartoz in unexpected unison.

“Well, then cut the shit and get back to work. Bartoz, take Lewis back to the Aleska building and see if you can’t find anything we might have missed. We might as well do something with that place while it’s sealed. If the Firmatech people see us investigating, maybe they’ll get off our backs. Chambers, keep looking through those files if you really think there's a connection there I want it found. We leave no stone unturned, are we clear?” The room nodded ascent.

After that, they all worked fairly independently for a while. Kite admired Captain Claiborne's ability to take charge of such willful personalities. She exhibited what Kite figured to be a very time-tested persona for getting the most out of her people. But having respect for her just made it all the more frustrating that his searches were coming up rather empty.

He had pored over every facet of the victim's personnel files, but no connection spanned all eighteen victims. Two of them had the same heart disease, several of them were parents, and a few others worked in the same department, but none of them had a true common denominator. If Kite could find that, even if it was some simple, meaningless thing, then he was sure he could use it to unravel the bigger puzzle.

Hina, sweet as she was, was helping him every step of the way. Even though her only duty was to protect him, she had been poring over all the same documents and kept the same sleepless nights he did. He wondered what shape she would actually be in to protect him if she kept it up, but he didn't refuse the help. If nothing else, he enjoyed the company.

Kite wasn't usually one to work with others. He disliked having to compete intellectually with personalities too similar to his own. Hina wasn't a peer, though, she was a person. She didn't have the same expertise that Kite had, and she didn't pretend to. In the same way, Kite couldn't dream to have the skills and knowledge that Hina possessed.

They were different in their passions and their pursuits, but they shared much in their mutual disdains. Kite always believed that true friendship is born over shared hatred. They both hated fried food, despised modern music, and loathed the word *recidivist* for reasons neither one could explain. Still, the shared hatred that brought them closest together was their mutual distaste for feeling useless. It was that which drove them to spend three days of sleepless nights staring at

those same eighteen faces, feeling their sorrow and their judgments, and search desperately for a way to make their deaths mean something.

“You know what the connection is?” said Hina one night, apparently giddy from sleep deprivation.

“Try me,” said Kite.

"They all probably had too much Indian food. Third gave the victims some Indian food, and it killed them. I know I barely survive half the time."

“Jesus, you are sick,” said Kite in between bouts of exuberant laughter, he didn’t usually laugh at jokes like that, but Hina had a way of making him enjoy stupid things. He also liked the idea that the connection would be something as stupid and simple as a common food item...

SHIT!

Kite rechecked the medical records of the victims for the hundredth time. He wasn’t sure what he was going to find, but he had an unrelenting feeling that something was about to go right and he tried not to ignore those feelings, rare as they were.

“All the victims have increased blood sugar and blood pressure, some more than others, but it’s noticeable in all of them,” Kite said to Hina.

“What does that mean?”

“I have no clue, but it’s something. It has to be.”

"Okay, sure, it's not like we have other leads," Hina said matter-of-factly.

“Exactly. if this is all we have, then let’s use it.”

“Node™,” Hina said out loud for Kite’s benefit, “what causes high blood sugar and high blood pressure? Oh, shit, apparently everything. Meat, candy, coffee...”

“Coffee?” said Kite, “Everybody drinks coffee,”

“Yeah, I know, this might be a stretch.”

“No, I mean, pretty much everyone drinks coffee, especially in an environment like Firmatech. They’re all stressed-out corporate middle-merchants. They need caffeine just to make it.”

“Okay,” said Hina.

“I have a bomb that can blow people up from the inside, but I still have to actually put it in them. I would probably put it in their food or their drink. If I needed to blow up a lot of people, all at once, I would use a drink that a lot of people use, a communal drink.”

“Like coffee!”

“Yes!” Kite was beginning to like this. It was a stretch, no doubt, but sleep deprivation and desperation told him he was on to something.

“But then who did it? How many hundreds of coffee pots are in that building?”

“The whole place is tagged and sealed as evidence if whatever this leaves residue, I’m sure we can find it. I’ll call Claiborne and tell her to get testing started. Ten of these victims worked on the upper levels, of them, four worked on floor 105. It seems likely that that floor might be ground zero. Call Bartoz and tell him to round up the people who work on that floor.”

“You got it, Boss!” said Hina.

“I’m not your boss,” Kite said, smiling.

“There’s still one thing, though,” said Hina after a few minutes had passed.

“What’s that?”

“Well, this might help answer ‘how?’ and ‘who?’ but it still doesn’t answer ‘why?’ What does Third get out of this?” She voiced the question Kite was afraid to say out loud. He hadn’t

wanted to ruin the small quasi-victory they had gained, but he couldn't ignore it now that she had said it out loud.

"Well, it makes sense that this is all just another terror attack. Keep us off our game, scare us into getting sloppy. It's working, riots are happening all over the Union. People are getting scared. It's probably exactly just as Bartoz said, there's no bigger purpose beyond trying to kill and scare us."

"Yeah, probably... but you don't believe that, do you?"

"No, I don't."

"For what it's worth, neither do I."

The next day, Kite met with Claiborne in her office.

"Chambers, you better pray to whatever god you have that this works out. It's been four days and the Firmatech people are ready to burn down all of Terra to get that part of the building reopened."

"It's the site of a terrorist attack; they can't handle a couple days without it?"

"These people are corporate, Chambers. They have money flowing where their blood should be." She opened her mouth and put a small tablet on the tip of her tongue. *Hopefully, a relaxant*, thought Kite. "These people you've brought in have been told that this is just standard procedure. They are here under their own free will and have no reason to believe that any of them are suspects. I also want it on the record that I think this whole thing is asinine and that you're grasping at straws."

"Yes, but by extension that makes you grasping at those same straws, yes?"

“Don’t get fucking cute with me, Chambers. If you fuck this up I will kill you, skin you, and sew you into my ‘Tapestry of great failures.’ There’s some shitty poetry, a bachelor’s degree in social work, and my asshole daughter sewn in there already so you’ll be in good company.”

“Good to know. Has forensics backed me up at all?”

"They're still swabbing coffee pots. They said they've got some strange leads but they want to get all the data gathered before they make any pronouncements. They do agree with you, though, that whatever kind of bomb it was, was likely ingested. It seems to be chemical in nature. Thank God it hasn't scrambled the Nodes™, or we'd be humped."

“So still no idea where these bombs came from?” Kite asked.

“Bartoz is working on that. He says he has connections in the black market, and he’s heard about something like this coming out of the Conclave. Crazy fucks. How does their shit keep washing up on our beach?”

“I couldn’t say.”

"Well, who fucking asked you?" said the Captain. "Now do you have any idea what you're going to say to these people? We can't afford any screw-ups here, Chambers. Even if one or more of these people is guilty, at least some of them are just victims who were lucky enough to escape. It's possible the perp even blew up in the building."

“Maybe, but I’m not just throwing around guesses here, Captain. No matter what you think, I am working this through logically. The people I’ve selected are the most likely suspects based on motive and opportunity. Some fit the psychological profile; people in the corporate world are prone to instability and known for violent outbursts. Others are likely because of where they were in the time frame we have. Face-to-face interviews will help me gauge their

personalities on a more intimate and accurate level than a company psyche exam. Please, just trust me.”

“I trust you as far as I can throw you, Chambers. Which, you know, might actually be pretty far if I were to give it a try.”

“I’m willing to take it on faith.”

“This is why people hate you.”

“Alicia Gaines,” said Kite as he entered the interrogation room.

“Yes, sir,” said the beautiful woman sitting demurely at the table. She was wearing a deep blue suit that looked almost black; all her clothes were designer labels. Kite often wondered if he had made the right choice, picking civil sector work over the corporate life, it certainly seemed to be where all the beautiful people were.

“There’s no need to be so formal, Ms. Gaines. You aren’t in any trouble. In fact, I want to say that I appreciate your cooperation. Talking to you and your coworkers about the incident will be extremely helpful. Even so, I’m sure it isn’t easy to talk about. I have to assume the event was very traumatizing.”

"Yes, it was," she said, still seeming on guard, normal for someone who recently had a trauma.

“Can I get you anything? Water? Tea? Coffee?”

“Coffee would be great.” Kite went to the panel on the counter and asked for two cups.

“Oh, uh, how do you take it?” Kite asked.

“Black is fine,” she said.

“Oh, you’re much tougher than I am. I just douse mine with cream. Too bitter otherwise.”

She laughed slightly at the small joke.

Once they had their coffee, Kite began to probe, gently. “I’m told you knew one of the victims personally?”

“Yes...my assistant, Andrew. He seemed fine that morning.”

Kite laid his hand gently on hers, “Were the two of you very close?”

“He was my assistant. I relied on him. He was very good at his job. I realize now that I- well I probably never told him that.”

“I know this is going to be difficult, and I know you’ve been through this already, but if there’s anything you can tell me about what you remember of the day...”

“It was just another day; they all tend to blend together in my line of work. There’re lots of meetings and endless orders signed. Andrew helped me keep everything in order...”

“My friend Hina is like that for me.”

“We all need somebody. Andrew had just gotten me the reports for the Minerva restoration project when I told him he could take an early lunch. He had been working so hard lately and...”

“Are you alright?” Kite asked.

“No-yes- I mean...It’s terrible to think like this, I feel like a monster...” Tears started to well-up in her eyes.

“It’s alright, you don’t have to say anything you don’t want to.”

“I’m fine, it’s just that I realized...if I hadn’t sent Andrew for that early lunch, I would have been caught in his blast, and I might have died too. So even though I’m sad he died, I’m glad he didn’t do it near me... Oh God, how sick is that?!”

Kite patted her hand reassuringly. "That's a perfectly natural reaction. There's no textbook way to feel about something like this. The one thing you shouldn't do is assume your feelings make you a bad person. Even the feelings we perceive as bad can be cathartic, so don't ignore them." She took a sip of her coffee as Kite watched her with gentle eyes.

"So you were working on the Minerva Restoration Project?" he asked as if he were out of things to say.

She nodded. "Yes. My division has been instrumental in acquiring the materials they'll need to rebuild that Syn-Tower. The structure isn't so difficult to repair but the software and the circuitry; those are extremely complex."

"Fascinating."

"I'm not particularly skilled, technically, but I'm good at organization. They need someone who can make the ships fly on time. I have...well, I had several very ingenious programmers and technicians working under me. I was lucky to know them for the time I did."

"You aren't suggesting that this tragedy will reflect poorly on you, are you?" asked Kite.

"The dust hasn't exactly cleared, but we'll see. I have no illusions about the corporate life, doctor. I'm expendable, and if this incident hurts my timetable projections, or if it turns out even that I have PTSD or some such thing, it's likely that I'll be encouraged to take an extended leave of absence. It sounds cruel, but it's the way Firmatech has survived and thrived over the years. There's nothing personal about it."

"Well, I suppose I'm not cut out for the corporate life. It would be irresponsible of me to make any diagnoses at this point, Miss Gaines, but you seem to be reacting naturally and admirably, given all that's transpired. If you need a mental health professional in your corner at any time, please don't hesitate to call. I'd gladly offer a second opinion."

“Thank you,” she said sounding genuinely surprised, “I can’t tell you how much that means to me.” She took a long gulp from her coffee cup.

“I think that’s all for now, Miss Gaines, you’ve been very helpful. Here’s my public tag, please message me if you have any more information or if you simply want to talk.”

“I will, thank you.”

She left the room still teary-eyed. An officer led her down to the restroom to freshen up. Kite received a message from Claiborne seconds later,

[How are the interviews going?]

[Fine, you can send the rest home, actually.]

[Why? You got ‘em?]

[Alicia Gaines, she’s the one.]

[Can you prove it?]

[Not yet. But she did it. I’d bet good money she knows how to contact Third, too. Can we keep eyes on her? Shouldn’t take too much more to get her.]

[Fine. I’ll send a detail to scope her out and run a background check on her. You’d better be right about this.]

[No kidding.]