

# APOGEE

BY BLOOD OR BY STAR  
BOOK 2

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Temple Dark Books

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## PROLOGUE

"He's not dead," Vase said over her iced macchiato. She stirred the straw, blending the milk and coffee. "I don't care what anyone says. I know him."

Djet frowned across the table. She took a sip of foam from her own brew, exposing a small half circle of espresso the color of her skin. The shape trembled when she set it down. *An odd thing for it to do*, she thought. Coffee was a deeply personal thing. Something close to a reflection of the person ordering it. It wasn't as simple as that to most people, but Djet wasn't most people; she was a longarm. The term, a halfway clever euphemism for 'cop', originated in the streets of Vatican's *Dominicus Dorsi* district.

It wasn't Djet Rincon, former roommate at Vatican Military Institute. It was L-DET Rincon, shortened to El Dee by people too lazy to call her Longarm Detective Rincon. Vase's body language telegraphed the message her words failed to hide; this wasn't a social call. It was asking for a favor.

Djet tapped her fingernails against her cup. Her accent was an eccentric mix of Irish and Jamaican. Like the coffee they drank, it could be traced back thousands of years to Earth.

"Okay, so ya know him. How well do ya know him?"

Vase blinked several times. "What do you mean?"

"Ya make it sound like he just vanished into thin air. What about ship logs?"

Vase glared. "There's two million transits a day, Djet. That's not an option."

"Okay, fair point. What about this guy? He's a marine. What are his capabilities? Does he have violent tendencies outside of the battlefield? Does he have a motive for disappearing?"

Something passed over Vase's face. Her eyebrows narrowed and she pursed her lips, broke eye contact, resting her chin on her hand.

The barista put two cups on the counter. A man dressed in a flashy C-skin quickly scooped them up, sipping one as he passed the other to the woman at his side. His cup was free of any marks – straight espresso, most likely. The other was a cold brew with a mound of orange cream floating on top; it clung to the woman's lip.

The man stopped for a second to whisper. The woman didn't miss a beat. She pursed her lips and leaned into him. He cleaned her lip with a kiss – slightly longer than was necessary, Djet thought. They shared a laugh and left arm in arm.

A few seconds passed. Djet watched Vase stare off into space.

*She's damaged. This guy did a number on her.*

Djet pulled her hair back into a tight ponytail, transitioning from best friend to hard-nosed detective. She had every intention of exploiting Vase's emotions to draw out the truth, friend or not.

"If ya want him found," Djet rested her hand on Vase's, "I need to ask some questions. The usual questions detectives ask in a missing person's case. Ya need to answer honestly if ya actually want him found."

Vase slid her hand back and tucked it into her leg pocket. She leaned back in her chair and stretched her neck. "Of course," she said, like it was the most obvious thing in the world, "I don't have anything to hide. You know that, Djet."

Djet slid her espresso forward and planted her elbows on the table. It was a tactic she used to lock eyes with a suspect. Close proximity and intense eye contact would break most liars almost instantly. The times it didn't...she wasn't going to use those tactics on her old friend, but she would know if she lied.

"On the contrary, Captain Seneca, I think ya have been collecting secrets since the last time I saw ya. How long have ya known him?"

"Three years."

"What was the nature of your relationship?"

Vase blinked twice. "We were lovers."

Djet nodded, just a bit. "Ya were intimate?"

Vase broke eye contact, looking up and to the left. "You don't need to know that."

“Oh, I do. I need to know *everything*, Vase. Every detail helps.”

Vase snapped her eyes back to Djet's. Eyes covered in a shining layer of tears. Her lower lip trembled. Her words came out through clenched teeth.

“Do you need to know how big his dick is, too?”

Djet felt a pang of regret but refused to so much as blink.

“Ya mentioned in your message that he stormed off and that was the last ya saw of him. That means he was upset with ya. Could give me an idea of where he went. *Why* he was mad at ya makes the difference between him choosing to hit the nearest strip club or going off-world with the intent of never returning.”

Vase scooted her chair out from under the table, metal on marble grinding, probably just like her teeth were. She flipped a dial on her belt, changing her C-skin pattern from an ambient white to the blue and gray cascade of Navy camo.

“I'm late for work.”

“No,” Djet leaned back in her chair until it creaked. “You're scared.”

Vase flicked a lock of blonde hair off her forehead. She started checking the braids on the brown side, her eyes looking anywhere but at Djet. To the detective, the behavior matched the stacked letters scrawled in permanent marker on the side of Vase's cup. A coffee that specific could only be ordered by one of two people: an uppity coffee snob or a control freak.

Vase snapped, “I'm not scared, I'm worried. There's a difference.”

Djet sipped her espresso, careful not to singe her tongue. She inhaled the wafting steam, basking in the pleasant aroma. She had enough to go on. Enough to honor the favor and start an off-the-books investigation on her free time. The whereabouts of Vase's former lover wasn't the most interesting question, though.

“What did he do to ya, Vase?”

Captain Vase picked up her coffee and turned to leave. “Let me know if you find anything.”

# PART 1: STARLIGHT

*"We can easily forgive a child who is afraid of the dark;  
the real tragedy of life is when men are afraid of the light."*

- Plato

## CHAPTER 1

The grass has blood on it.

*Is it really blood? It's red. The grass is red, too.*

Blink.

*No, it's not blood. It's dew. The grass is covered in dew, and the grass is red, so it looks like blood.*

Blink.

The grass is blood.

A scream sounds from far away. It echoes in the soft morning light, becoming louder as it draws closer. It is a cracked, throaty scream that could not possibly be human. No man or woman could make a sound like that. Not even if they were being ripped apart.

*I've seen that. They don't sound like that when it happens.*

Blink.

*The light...it's gone.*

Fading into the recesses of the tunnel – a shaft of darkness with structural supports forced into the dirt, barely visible in the dim light...the tunnel is blood...the scream fades, and he is alone.

*I'm alone.*

*But I wasn't always alone.*

*I came here with...friends.*

He sees them in his mind with a stark clarity that one can only experience in waking life. The marines of Raven platoon. They weren't supposed to be here.

*But they are here. They didn't die.*

*I did not see their blood.*

Her blood gushes over his hand in a deluge of forbidden heat, and it keeps...gushing.

A steady flow spreading over his hand, pouring onto the floor in a pool and it's –

*Too much. It's too much blood. How can one person have so much blood?*

As her blood warms his hand, she grows colder. Weaker.

In her emerald-green eyes, he sees himself.

He's covered in blood, too.

More precious than gold or digits or the galaxy's deepest, darkest secrets, that blood is leaving her, and he can't stop it. He is just a boy in the reflection held in her eyes. He's too young for this. But so is she. The image is murky, obscured by tears and pain.

"Do it," she groans.

Beside him, his friend cries, "No!"

The one friend whose face he can't see, although some dim part of his mind recognizes him. He's known this friend longer than the rest. They've grown up together.

This was the moment when all that changed.

He doesn't want to do it, but he has to do it. She *wants* him to. And beyond that, you have to honor the last request of the dying. Don't you? Isn't that how it works? Once marked for death, you get one wish. You don't get to see it fulfilled, but the knowledge that it *will* be fulfilled, even after you've died...that's enough to make the dying easier.

Easier for the person dying.

Sometimes, that blessing can be a curse.

Because of her he unsheathes the blade. As his friend's screams pelt him with tears of incredulity, he knows the truth of it. Tears are the purest form of communication, but without context, they're just scattered saline.

Her tears are of sorrow. Because she's dying.

His friend's tears are of betrayal. Because he can't stop it.

His own tears...he's not crying. He wants to – probably would if not for all the blood. The tunneled walls, his armor and his boots, his hands and his face are all blood.

Now the dagger is blood, too.

She didn't have enough. She lost too much. His friend's boiled, while his own...

He knew less about his own than he thought.  
For all he knew, his blood was *not* his own.  
And that scared him.



“Abraham!”

There was a thunderstorm. He didn’t remember there being a thunderstorm.

Dark clouds trundled across the sky like exhaust from giant machines, the ones that churned and burned raw materials into energy with great peals of thunder that shook his chest with each angry rumble. There was no need of such machines anymore, except on Veranda.

But he wasn’t on Veranda.

He was...

“ABRAHAM!”

...in Vase’s apartment.

Trees with long slender leaves – they wilted like hands gone limp – billowed in a simulated breeze on the wall. Dubsteel cabinets with transparent panes held glass cups and glass plates that refracted the overhead lighting in a cascade of rainbow sparkles. The glassware spilled prismatic beauty across the swirled gray marble of the countertop. When he looked away from the dazzling trick of the light he remembered where he was, and he knew it was happening again.

Vase stared at him from the other side of the island, one hand on her hip. The skin around her eyes was wrinkled, but the glacier-blue orbs themselves were soft. Concerned. Her beauty always startled him.

“Abraham, you’re doing it again. Are you okay?”

He shook his head and tried to smile. He knew he was doing it again. He also knew he couldn’t hide it. Not from her. She was too smart to lie to, too attentive to miss it.

He didn’t belong here. The word that had haunted him since high school floated up to the forefront of his mind.

Phantasmagoria.

He felt like his life wasn’t real. The Marine Corps had changed him. The hell he survived on Durringer wasn’t over for him. It may never be over. When Piebold told him about the Ghosts – eyeless demons that stalked the galaxy stealing children and who knew what else – he didn’t want to believe it. But he could not forget what he saw in those awful moments of The Collision so many years ago.

The hairs on the back of his neck stood on end. A cool breeze of fear fluttered across his skin. The Shadow Man that haunted his dreams as a child was real. They had been watching him. They knew who he was.

They told him he wasn’t human. Or, at least, that he wasn’t *completely* human.

These thoughts came in a spark that lasted only a fraction of a second, although the beautiful woman standing in front of him, who also happened to be his commanding officer, seemed to detect it.

“Abraham.” She stepped around the counter to put a gentle hand on his shoulder. As if this simple gesture would be enough to calm the torrid sea that ravaged his mental landscape. The tug of war between what was real and what wasn’t.

“Vase, I...”

She put a finger to his lips. For some reason, this affected him. He sighed. His breathing slowed. Her finger was soft against his lips, and smelled strongly of onions and oil. The dinner prep was nearly done. They were just about ready to move into the cooking phase.

“Stop,” she said, her voice smooth. “You can’t keep doing this to yourself. You’ve been through something not a lot of people have. It’s going to take time to work through it.”

A mirthless chuckle rolled out of his throat. He took her finger off his lips and folded his fingers into hers. She squeezed his hand reassuringly.

*This is real. What we have, it’s not a dream.*

*But she knows something,* part of his mind whispered as he searched her eyes for the

answers. *She knows about the Ghosts. She knows about the Ghosts, and she hasn't told you what she knows. Why won't she tell you?*

"Security clearances," he thought. Her hand stiffened in his grip.

"What?" she asked, her head tilting slightly to one side.

He hadn't meant to think that out loud.

He pulled his hand out from hers and leaned back against the *fishu*. On Veranda, he would have called it a fridge. Here on Vatican – the nexus of the tangled labyrinth that had become his life – nothing was the same. Not even the icebox where people kept their food cold. When he walked the always busy streets of the *Dominicus Dorsi* district where Vase lived, he did not see cars or buses. He saw star skippers or air transports. There weren't elevators, either. They were maglifts, and there was no rumbling of gears and pulleys or the tug of gravity as the elevator ascended or descended. With a sharp cough and a barely detectible hum, the view out the window became a series of indistinct colored lines reminiscent of FTL transition he'd seen from the viewports of a dozen spacecraft.

"Vase, I need to know what's going on."

He took a deep breath and tried to ignore the dozens of past conversations they had on the subject. All the time she shot him down with excuses varying from *security clearance to need to know* to the very effective *can we talk about something else?* sealed with a persuasive kiss.

Try as he might, he could not fight her when she kissed him. That was the ultimate trump card she pulled to silence him, and for the last three years, he'd let her play that card. Now as he looked at her, took in her piercing eyes and the blonde-brown halves of her hair woven in intricate braids, her svelte body in her C-skin...he had to –

– blink –

– focus.

He frowned. "I need to know what you know about the Ghosts. No more secrets."

She smiled. "I know you do, Abraham."

Her hands cupped his face. She pressed herself against him, touched her nose to his. She was so close, and it felt like comfort. Warmth bloomed in his chest. The feelings he had for this woman were supernatural.

"You know I can't tell you."

"I know," he said, "but I can get the story from them."

Vase brushed her lips softly against his. Her hands slid down to his neck and, for a moment, he dared hope this would lead to more than a kiss. The hope lasted only a moment. She pulled away to capture him with her eyes.

"You can't, Abraham. They'll use you. You don't know what they are."

He pulled her hands down and took a half step back. The sliced onions saturated the kitchen air. A loaf of puffed bread, sliced and covered in a garlic smear was waiting to be thrown in the hotbox. Vegetable slices were laid next to a generous slab of meat that rested in a puddle of purple juices. All this food should have made him ravenous. It certainly tempted the part of him that hated MREs.

Hungry as he was, Abraham couldn't eat. Not right now.

He left the kitchen and the fragrant, half-prepped meal to retrieve his L-pistol from the end table by the white Terrelian leather sectional. He attached it to the magnetic clip on his C-skin belt. His pocket, a drone the shape and size of an owl, gave a hoot and fluttered over to him.

"What're you doing?" Vase asked. She threw the yellow, herb-covered bread loaves into the hotbox and cast a glance at him.

"We need to have this conversation, whether you want to or not." Abraham retrieved the spare magazines and slid them into the owl's beak and tapped his pocket on the head. It gave a tiny hoot as it sealed the items inside its body and began circling about him in a lazy orbit.

Vase crossed her arms.

He knew when she was mad, and this wasn't it. She was pretending to be mad. Abraham knew he wasn't the best at reading people, but he had spent a lot of time with Vase over the last three years. Their relationship, improper as it was between officer and enlisted, had stayed relatively secret. At least, secret enough from the people who would care to do something

about it. Intimacy fosters familiarity. She wasn't angry. She was nervous.

*Good*, he thought.

"I meant what I said back on Juno, and what I said on Durringer, and what I've said to you a half dozen times over the last few years, Vase. I love you." A sudden itch at the back of his neck distracted him. "But I'm not going to let this go. They know things about me. Things I should know about myself. If you're not willing to tell me, or you can't because of whatever reason, that's fine. But don't try to stop me from seeking those answers on my own."

He could see the dots connecting in her eyes. She knew what he was going to do, but she hadn't given up yet.

"What about tomorrow night? The Navy Ball?" she asked innocently. "You're not going to ditch me, are you? I was going to introduce you...there's someone I really want you to meet."

Abraham shrugged. "I don't do well with dancing."

Vase smirked. "So I've heard."

The joke had been going on so long now, he didn't even get embarrassed. The first and only time he'd ever danced was before he enlisted, and the girl he danced with...she kissed him, and he threw up. In her mouth.

Ha. Ha. It's mortifying, at first. The next thousand times people bring it up it's funny, but after that...it's just an immutable fact of history. Like a stubborn stain on the wall that can't be removed with any amount of bleach. It just sits there, an unflattering eyesore, until it becomes as much a part of the room as the knickknacks on the shelves.

"Anyway." Abraham approached the door. "I came to a decision. You're not going to like it. But it's what I want."

She approached him, her eyes questioning. "And that decision is?"

He took in a breath. It felt like the first time in three years with her that he was making a decision. Vase was used to being the one in charge. He let her lead their relationship over the years, juggling the stiff formality of officer and enlisted in public, girlfriend and boyfriend in private. Even though he desperately wanted things to progress, he didn't want to force it beyond what Vase was comfortable with. Starting now, sex was a dimension of their relationship most likely going to remain unexplored.

"I'm not re-enlisting."

Her lips parted, but she did not speak.

She's surprised. Frustrated, maybe?

Whatever she was thinking, he was sure she hadn't expected him to say that.

"If you don't re-enlist...what will you do? Vatican's not exactly hiring combat veterans to maintain bots or fly star skippers."

He smiled. "I'll figure something out."

He kissed her. She remained frozen.

She did not return the kiss, and he left.

She let him leave.



Abraham stepped into the hallway. The door sealed shut behind him, separating him from the pleasant smells of the meal. He let out the deep breath he was holding. It was more than a great meal and great company he was walking away from. He was leaving the most important person in his life behind on a whim. Chasing a chance at finding answers to the questions that kept him awake at night. Part of him knew it was crazy. Part of him hoped those answers would put an end to his waking nightmares.

It should have felt like the right thing to do.

Abraham told himself it was. No matter how many times he said it, he couldn't convince himself it was true. He shrugged it all away and started walking.

The corridor became wreathed in swirling shadows.

He came to a halt, adrenaline sizzling through his veins. His eyes darted up and down the hallway. Everywhere he looked the mysterious darkness spread like a cloud, obscuring the duststeel walls and doors.

He sensed movement in his peripheral and whipped around, hand on his weapon. An ashy face stared at him from the shadows.

The skin was dark. Almost gray. A black bar covered the eyes, the smile beneath them familiar and frightening. He could have been a hologram, except that Abraham could neither see through him or the darkness that teemed around him like black flames.

"Abraham," Agent Smithers said in a gravelly tone.

Abraham's voice shook as he spoke.

"Smithers...how long have you been here?"

"I'm always here." He snorted. "The important question is, are you ready to take the offer? You've pissed away your life for three years, Abraham. The answers you seek have been waiting for you."

Abraham walked a few paces down the hall to put some distance between Smithers and himself. Stepping into the shadows didn't feel any different than the darkness between streetlights, but his skin crawled. He didn't want any of this conversation leaking into Vase's flat. If she heard him talking to Smithers...he didn't want to think what she would say. For the life of him, the one thing Abraham could not stand was disappointing that woman.

*Why do I care about her so much?*

His mind offered no answer, not at first.

A moment longer and he saw in his mind's eye the waterfall on Sepipira, the first time they both took leave to spend time together. The view from the quivarien restaurant where they both tried *schlotmiss* for the first time. Abraham didn't relish the idea of eating the worm-like anemone when it was served, until he tasted it – rich and savory, like a tangy fish. Vase had stolen his attention from the beautiful horsetail waterfall, something the locals called *Götte Blut*, or God's Blood. He asked her about that, why the locals called it God's Blood when the water was crystal clear, but she had just told him to wait for the sun to set. So they talked for hours about everything and nothing. About Durringer, the military, the galaxy and all the places they would visit, and the possibility that one of those twinkling stars in the sky would have a planet they might want to settle down on one day. They talked, and laughed, and it was good. When the sun set and both moons filled the sky like pregnant angels reflecting the wan light over them, he saw why the waterfall had earned its moniker.

As the water broke apart over the side of the shale rock cliffs, gentle moonbeams illuminated the falls, casting out rays and sparkles of every piece of the light spectrum. It was a dancing moonbow that cascaded along the dark rocks.

A breathtaking sight.

*She's simple*, Abraham thought. *She's got a pureness to her that I don't find in a lot of people. She's been through the same things I have and she's not the worse for wear. There's a lot of strength in that.*

A mirthless laugh escaped his lips.

*A strength I haven't found in myself yet. That's why I can't let this go.*

Smithers brought Abraham back to the dark hallway by clearing his throat.

"I want to know why you're telling me I have risker DNA. It doesn't make sense, even in spite of..." *the blood, everything is blood*, "...in spite of what happened on Durringer. I don't know how to explain it."

Smithers smiled. "You have questions. I have answers. I also have a lot of other information you will find...pertinent."

Abraham nodded, but his focus wandered.

He was approaching a turning point. From the first day he joined the Marine Corps and stepped on that interplanetary vessel, he had a home. Now he was considering leaving that behind. On a practical level it didn't make sense. Why would he leave the military – the only family he ever really felt like he had – to follow a man of mystery who possessed a power he didn't understand? A power that his own eyes told him should be impossible. Did this man who seemed more than a man really know more about the bloodline Abraham abandoned?

*Not knowing is too painful.*

*I need to know what happened.*

The decision was already made.

“How do I know you won’t just cart me off to a lab and dissect me?”

Smithers laughed. It sounded like old rags on a clothesline snapping in the wind.

“You don’t. But if you’re willing to take the chance – and let’s be honest, if you want answers, this is the only choice you have – then meet me at the Olympia Space Needle in the academic sector of Dominicus Venti.”

“When?”

“Three days. Time doesn’t matter, really. I’ll know when you’re there.”

Abraham looked into the black bar covering Smithers’ eyes. He tried to peer through that barrier, to see any trace of humanity, but Smithers’ eyes were blocked by the impenetrable umbra of that floating censor. Whether it was a trick of augmented reality or something supernatural was impossible to determine.

“Three days, Abraham.”

The swirling shadows dissolved.

Seconds later, Abraham was standing in the hallway alone.

“Looks like I’ll be going to the ball after all.” He sighed.

## CHAPTER 2

The streets of Vatican's Dominicus Venti district were quiet.

Quiet for a terra-city that never slept.

The entire planet was a cocoon of industry and intrigue. Exotic metals pilfered from far-off systems – worlds conquered by military conquests over the millennia – now formed towering skyscrapers with intersecting walkways and anti-gravity suspension bridges. The color of Vatican's surface could only be guessed at; from space, or even from the 100th level up, all one could see was infrastructure and dazzling lights in every conceivable hue.

The sky overhead was a dome of shadow. Stars twinkled like pinholes punched through a dark veil, teasing glimmers of a mystical great beyond that could never be fully brought into reality. Stargazing was a common escape from boredom.

Djet was supposed to be watching the street. She hated stakeouts.

Hours sitting in the pilot seat of the longarm star skipper tended to make her ass cramp. She was many things – daughter, detective, hand-to-hand expert in Capoeira...patient did not make the list.

Catching criminals was a rewarding line of work, but lately, she found the vastness of the galaxy more interesting. How many other worlds had detectives looking up to the stars at this moment in time? Was she making eye contact in some vague sense with hundreds, or even thousands of people who were bored out of their minds, their eyes turned up and outward with wonder at the limitless dark between them?

The cramped interior of the star skipper smelled. Her C-skin's climate controls kept her from sweating, but it wasn't body odor she detected. It was butter waffle fumes from her partner's vape cartridge.

The only things Djet liked about herself were her eyes and her lips. Her hair she had to put entirely too much work into for it to look passable. Her face was a little too round. It took too much makeup to hide the freckles that looked like coffee grounds on her cheekbones. Hailing from the industrial planet of Destin, most of Djet's lineage could be traced predictably straight back to Earth, to a rare mix of Irish and Jamaican.

She didn't like that her body was thick. Countless times as a teenager she had stared in the mirror, pressing her stomach in as hard as she could, wishing against hope that she would be skinny one day. Her mother had told her early on that the Rincon women were known as 'knockouts'. The term was a street one for curvy women whose 'tits a man could rest his head on after hips and ass knock him out'.

Diet wasn't interested in men, though.

She preferred everything to be in its right place. If she was going to knock a man out, she was going to use her bare-knuckled fist, or the ball of her foot and fifteen years of Capoeira to do it. If she was going to pursue a man, well, that was another matter entirely. She had been there and done that a few times, but in her experience, men didn't like to be chased and conquered the same way women did.

Ever since the first few weeks of college six years ago, Djet had realized something was different about her. It took her meeting Vase to realize what it was, and even then she stewed over it in consternation for a year and a half before working up the courage to drag those feelings into the light.

Vase – beauty queen and social dominatrix that she was – didn't feel the same way. But that was okay. Because Djet didn't love her, not really. She didn't want to be *with* her so much as she wanted to *be* her. Short and thin. Sensible proportions of 'tits, hips and ass'. A charming laugh and a cold stare, each given when needed, nothing held back for anything. Vase was as close to a free spirit as anyone Djet had ever met.

The thoughts that had once ran through her mind, churning her blood until it burned hot in her veins like firewater, came rushing back in like a dam bursting open.

"Djet, how long can you do that for, huh?"

Her partner, Cesar "Blaze" Cisneros, stole her wandering thoughts.

Diet shifted in her seat, trying to stretch her sore hamstrings.

“Blaze, mind ya business, yeah?”

“I don’t care how you pick it or whatever, just don’t touch the stick with that hand.”

Djet wiped her nose – and the embarrassment – from her face.

She was scratching an itch, not picking it. That was a losing argument, so she leaned her back against the security cage that separated the rear compartment and didn’t bother replying. The longarm edition sky runner was an air vehicle small enough to zip between the three hundred and forty levels of Vatican terra-city and still park on the ramps without impeding the never-ending flow of foot traffic.

A squad car, for all intents and purposes.

Blaze, having made his point, wrapped himself in a cocoon of silence. He stared down the walkway, puffing on his vape stick, mood pensive. Her partner was always pensive. Most detectives were.

*Vatican is a strange place*, Djet decided for the thousandth time.

When she thought about the capital world of the galaxy’s largest superpower, she wanted to envision gold-paved streets under a crystal-clear sky. Rainbow rivers gently bending through lush gardens every shade of green in the spectrum. She could picture herself walking down that golden path barefoot, the sun blanketing her skin with warm, tiny kisses while she drank in the radiant perfumes of the heavenly flora. People of all kinds would be there, enraptured by the same zen-like aura that came naturally from the splendor that surrounded them. In a place like this, everything would be simple and calm and beautiful. A relaxing walk at dawn in a place like this, an hour could pass in a second.

Places like this, of course, did not exist.

Not for humanity, and not for any of the Nine Nations.

Civilization followed the same pattern no matter what corner of the dark sea of space in which they arose. Humanity’s origins were lost to that darkness somewhere between the beginning and the end, if there ever would be an end. If the end really mattered. Djet was not a student of history. She did not spend time philosophizing on the past, or the future. She did wonder at the state of the Human Collective, because *who wouldn’t?* Strange things had been happening on the news.

No, it wasn’t that *things* were strange...the news itself was strange.

Politics had seeped into the everyday news cycle and it made her sick.

She didn’t care about the Riskar War. She was glad it was over.

But it wasn’t really over. Something was different about that war. Ever since The Collision, things were different. Was it a tragedy? Sure. Did the destruction of an outer rim world affect her? No. The Collective declared war on the riskar, sent in their troops and glassed their worlds into oblivion. The loss of Milune and Veranda were tragic. Tens of thousands of humans died. But humanity did what it always did; flexed its military muscles. The riskar were nearly wiped off the galactic stage, and the galaxy didn’t even blink.

None of that had anything to do with Vatican.

So why did she have to hear about it every day, three years after the final battle at Durringer? Because the Nine Nations were so busy dividing up the riskar resources amongst themselves, they didn’t seem to mind humanity being branded as an imperialist society.

*Which is ridiculous*, Djet thought. *All we did was defend ourselves.*

Anyone who called it revenge was either a conscientious objector or an entitled autocrat; both slices of society deemed themselves morally superior for turning their nose up at the thought of war, as if words solved everything.

*But there*, Djet thought, *there is the core of the problem. Words are no panacea. If they were, we wouldn’t need politicians to argue on our behalf.*

And, another part of her retorted, if politicians were actually good at their job, they would have figured out effective diplomacy centuries ago. Maybe that way, their constituents wouldn’t have to race off to distant worlds to die. Every life lost nothing more than a punctuation mark to the endless epithets of the elected ruling class.

All those deaths, in Djet’s opinion, proved the futility of the system.

A system that did not allow for gold-paved streets and rainbow rivers.

For countless centuries, human futurists and artists had speculated on the idea of a planet-

wide city. It wasn't until the seventh millennium when a string of mostly dead planets had been discovered out in the depths of space that here humanity had decided to put down roots. A cold, red, lifeless world was transformed into the first Terra City by the ninth millennium.

The entire planet cocooned with a spiraling haze of industry and steel towers and interconnecting suspension bridges that was the stuff of futurist daydreams five thousand years ago. On Vatican, they had made it a reality. The finishing touch had been the completion of the first Dyson Sphere.

A white dwarf star was the center of orbit for the dead planets. About the same time as the last square inch of landmass had been covered by the base of colossal buildings, the supermassive beryllium rings started spinning around the white dwarf. Vatican was bathed in the pale white glow of Starlight forevermore.

Vatican was different than Earth had been. Different than Djet remembered learning about in school, anyway. Earth had seasons, and weather, and the yellow dwarf star called Sol that lit the surface. Vatican had Starlight. Someone on Earth who visited Vatican for the first time might have thought they were in New York City, and that someone had replaced the moon with a giant LED light bulb and a fancy mobile around it.

The air was hot, though. Wireless electricity towers were stationed at the corners of buildings and every so often along the walkways and bridges. They looked like barbed spheres atop thin poles, surrounded by cylindrical glass tubes with purple light arcing within. It was an expensive and antiquated way to power a terra-city, and to make sure electronic devices stayed at a constant full battery charge.

"You see the news?" her partner asked, spewing more fumes.

Djet shook her head. "Nah. Anything interesting?"

He shook his head, scratched his stubbled hair.

"No. Just more of the Navy's bullshit about The Collision."

"Why bullshit?" Djet asked.

He shrugged her question off like it wasn't worth answering.

Blaze was an older man, not too far from her father's age. He was close to retiring. Old Blaze had only been stuck on this surveillance detail because he was her partner. In effect, Djet had been a detective for five months and was dictating the life of a man who had about thirty more years of service than she did. It was the kind of gravitas you had when your name meant something.

Blaze inhaled his vape-stick for a long five seconds, held his breath for two and sighed a cloud of butter waffle fumes. The sweet aroma settled on the dash like fog. Tiny particles danced against the windshield, evaporating in sections until Djet could see the street clearly again.

The duracrete walkway stretched for half a block before branching into a T. The northbound section held her attention; just over the curb and the safety glass, one level down was a parking apron. A hodgepodge of run-down civilian sky runners nestled between an apartment tower and a twelve-level liquor emporium.

"I don't believe any of those pass their weight and balance inspections," Djet said, referring to the basic yearly requirement for air vehicle registration.

Blaze's jaw dropped. He slowly turned his head toward her, eyes wide like he'd seen something he hadn't expected to see.

"Should we call it in?" he asked.

Djet felt a wave of embarrassment rush over her again.

She lightly punched him on the shoulder and said, "I'm just saying. Look at the state of those things. That one's missing a few panels, and there's – what is that, coolant or hydraulic fluid? – something's leaking from almost all of them."

One of them was not missing panels or leaking, though.

It was parked at the east end of the lot, like it was too good to be clustered with the run-down skippers. The smooth, gleaming yellow fuselage was covered in green flames that danced hypnotically across the surface. The twin engines were polished chrome covered by aggressively angled nacelles. Clearly, it was designed for one thing: punching holes in the sky.

Even Djet had to admit it looked nice.

"How much ya tink that cost?" she asked. When Blaze didn't answer, she asked again, "The motion flames on the paint. How much for something like that?"

Blaze shrugged. "Seven large. Easy."

Blaze was old. He didn't play into her conversations as much as she would have liked. After ten straight hours of surveillance, the skipper compartment felt like it was shrinking in on them. A more uncomfortable way to spend a night she could not conceive. It took her by complete surprise when he cleared his throat and launched into a story, eyes fixated on the sky puncher and its green inferno.

"Your daddy was the best of us, Djet. You know that. It's why you're following in his footsteps." A phlegm-filled rattle shook the old man, deep in his chest. Djet knew him well enough to recognize this as a laugh. "Yeah, Warin and I go way back to the beginning. We were the youngest, dumbest pair of recruits to walk under the C-wire and into the Third Watch station. That was almost forty years ago."

Djet let her eyes drift back to the street as Blaze took a hit from his vape-stick. He talked as he exhaled, his smoke-filled voice an octave lower, his eyes glazed over with memories.

"Your father hasn't changed much over the years. He's always been a great longarm. The best. I'm not the only one who thinks that way. First week of the academy he had the patrol manual practically memorized. Hard to compete with someone like that. Not that I ever aspired to be Chief of the Watch or anything, myself. No, Warin had that locked in from the beginning. When you were born, the party we threw...*whoo*, that was some serious shit. I think we were drunk for forty-eight hours straight."

Djet chuckled. That would be her father, all right. Warin loved his hookah and his alcohol. She didn't care much for drinking, but she liked a fresh nicotine cake and a good bubbler to just sit back and relax.

Blaze continued, tapping his vape-stick on the dash as his exhaled cloud evaporated.

"You remember when Singularity happened. The only time I ever saw your father off his game. Whatever happened then, it must've been bad."

"He never told me about Singularity." Djet wrinkled her brow. "What was that?"

Blaze cast a sidelong glance at her.

"He never...the big investigation he was called onto? NCIS even ran an inquiry against their own leadership staff about it. Latreaux, that navy admiral, was even caught up in it. It was Warin's last case as detective. No one knows the particulars – other than the explosion and the near-total loss of personnel on the station – but...no, I guess he wouldn't want you knowing about that. It's still classified."

Djet frowned. "If it's classified, how do ya know all this?"

Blaze averted his eyes with a sniff.

"All I know is, whatever went down there, your father was put through the grinder on it. Must've handled it all right, though, because he became Chief of the Third Watch a couple months after the case was closed."

*Wonder why he never told me about this*, Djet thought. *That's not like my Fatti to keep secrets.*

Warin was the most open and honest person Djet knew. Countless times when she was growing up, he had shown her case files and let her try to work things out with him. His very first case, involving the shocking murder of a young girl, was still unsolved. It had become a yearly thing between the two of them; on the anniversary of the murder, Djet would return home and they would spend an hour or two walking through the crime scene together. It always ended in frustration and the same dead ends.

Djet went to ask Blaze more about Singularity when he sat bolt upright.

"There," he said, nodding his head toward the parking apron. "He's stocking."

*Finally.*

Djet vigorously popped the door seal and stretched the stiffness out of her legs. Her C-skin was an unassuming swirl of gray clouds with the occasional spark of lightning running across it. For some reason it was one of the more popular clothing themes in this district. It was supposed to help her to blend in.

Down on the parking apron, a young man was carrying a large white crate down to the back of the yellow puncher. His lack of facial hair put him at mid to late teens, his pale skin marked him as most likely a Vatican native. The hatchback raised automatically as he approached.

Djet sealed the skipper's door and checked her Pulse. It was almost midnight.

*Detectives work all hours, Djet, day or night.*

Her father's voice, half-heartedly trying to talk her out of the job. That was years ago, and she hadn't listened. Long nights were hard, but she couldn't imagine herself doing anything else.

"Djet, hang back," Blaze said, checking his pistol.

"What for?" she asked, checking her weapon, too.

"Cover. I'm going into the flat while he's out."

Blaze started walking.

"Wait," Djet said, following him. "Don't we want to catch him making the delivery?"

Blaze stopped and stared with such intensity her feet automatically planted on the street.

"Your daddy is one of the best longarms I ever knew, girl. Doesn't mean you're him. Your skin ain't black, sister. It's green. You don't know what you're doing. Hang back and keep your teeth shut until I radio you in."

A hot spike of rage bit her in the back. Goosebumps walked down her skin. Djet wanted to reach out and slap the back of his head for talking to her like that.

She couldn't do that without compromising her job. Warin Rincon's name was worth a lot in the law enforcement community, but it had its limits.

She nodded and did as she was told.

A part of her was indignant, knowing she could handle it. Another part knew she hadn't reached the inner circle of trust with the good old boys' club. And she hadn't seen enough yet to know how to react to every situation.

Djet leaned over the railing to keep the parking area in view.

The kid was gone, but the hatchback was left open. The crate rested on the ground in front of it. Closer now that she was out of the sky runner, she could see a symbol on the side, two bent arrows pointing straight up inside a circle. It didn't look familiar. She wrote it off as a shipping company logo.

She waited over a minute. No sign of the kid, or more boxes.

Something wasn't sitting well in Djet's stomach.

Blaze told her to hang back, but what could be taking so long? It was a test of her nerves. A lot of things could go wrong between here and the front door of a drug dealer's flat. If Blaze got in over his head, she might not know until it was too late.

A crowd of mixed species teenagers passed by, muttering to each other in several languages Djet couldn't understand. She recognized two riskar, a half dozen humans and a short, furry mammal that looked like a teddy bear whose genus and species she couldn't remember. She acted bored, heaving a sigh and watching them in her peripheral as they passed.

*Nah, she told her shaky nerves, Blaze is a professional. He knows what he's doing.*

Nearly all of the vehicles in the parking lot were sky runners, meant to skip around on Vatican. Local sorties concerned more with positional thrusters than anything with significant speed. Nothing that could crack the exosphere and taste true vacuum. Except for that sky puncher. What was it doing here? Sky runners were the hallmark of the lower income side of the terra city. The people who lived here frequented other parts of the world but had no desire or reason to leave.

So, who in this ghetto needed to break atmo regularly?

Her Pulse chirped.

"Rincon, Sisneros. Two in custody. Fall in and watch for strays."

*Damn, she thought. He's good.*

"En route."

She took her finger off the device and drew her L-pistol, careful to keep the barrel pointed down. Her boots clicked on the walkway as she hurried under the overhang and entered the

stairwell. A man and a woman were arguing at the bottom, hands waving vigorously.

“Longarm entering the stairwell,” Djet projected her voice from the lower, guttural part of her diaphragm. “Clear the area.”

The man looked up at her, his nose wrinkled. A red bruise on his neck, partially concealed in the crook of his jawline, drew her eye for a split second before he grabbed the woman by the arm and pulled her out of the way. They both put their hands up as Djet descended the stairs.

She eyed them close. No visible weapons.

“For your safety and mine, I’m going to have to ask that you sequester yourselves inside for the time being,” Djet said.

“Sure thing, miss,” the man said with a wooden smile.

She glanced down the hall underneath the stairs.

The flat in question was open, but there was no sign of Blaze or the two suspects he had arrested. Djet took slow and deliberate steps toward the flat. She heard a door open behind her, assumed the couple was going back inside as she’d ordered, and came to stand up alongside the entrance to the drug dealer’s flat.

At the threshold she could smell the funk of a drug den.

It was a miasma of wet blacktop and fragrant, rotting moss. Something tingled in her nostrils like cinnamon. One of the occupants had probably been lighting up some of their supply. The tingle, she remembered from narcotics class at the academy, was a cross-species similar to hashish. She loved the smell but hated the sensation produced by inhaling it. Never used the stuff herself, but a part of her still wondered why so many chose to devote their lives to its consumption.

Djet tapped her Pulse, sending a single click over the bandwidth. She waited, pistol by her head, hoping to hear the return click of Blaze acknowledging her.

Five seconds went by with no response.

Her heart starting thudding – not faster, but *harder*. Adrenaline made her weapon wobble slightly in her grip.

“Blaze, you aight?” she called.

The hair on the back of her neck stood on end.

A laser blast screamed through the open door millimeters from her face.

Djet’s instinct was to drop to her haunches, but if it had been anything directed at her, she would have already been dead. She peeked around the doorframe and back in, less than half a second of exposure.

In that moment, she saw enough.

The flat was a standard twelve-by-twelve living area with an adjoining suite at the rear. Pale light revealed yellowing carpet that probably wasn’t that color when the tenant first moved in. The blast had come from the room beyond the living area. She could see ruddy carpet pockmarked with cigarette burns, and dark stains from spilled alcohol or blood that had never been cleaned. The kitchen area to the left was covered in food wrappers and the rotting scraps of leftover meals. The air circulation vent between the suite door and the couch hung limply on a single warped hinge. A leather sofa sat in the living room with the cushions flattened almost completely into the frame, covered in viscous yellow liquid that reminded her of mucus.

Another strange detail was the mirror on the ceiling above the couch.

She spoke from her diaphragm, squeezing as much authority and anger into her voice as she could manage. Adrenaline made it come out a bit higher than she would have liked, but it stayed just firm enough not to crack.

“Longarm Detective entering flat two zero one. Lay down ya weapons and come out with your appendages raised or ya will be shot on sight!”

Djet heard the footsteps in the hallway before she saw who was making them. Something set off a warning in her head, and she followed that instinct for what it was worth. She hustled into the apartment, dove behind the sofa’s tall arm and glanced into the mirror above.

She saw the top of his head as he took a step into the flat.

The man from the hallway arguing with the girl.

He was holding a sawed-off shotgun. It was no soft-point slug thrower, either. It was of

alien make, something closer to a plasma launcher than a shotgun.

"I know you're in here, bitch. You stumbled down the wrong path b—"

Djet popped up and shot him in the throat.

He lowered the weapon, offhand flying up to his neck.

She put two more bolts in his chest.

C-skin threads and flesh cauterized as bright plumes of blood scattered from his back in wide clouds like puncturing a can of aerosol paint. The alien shotgun hit the carpet just before his body did.

The smell of burnt flesh filled the air.

A warbling vocal run ushered from the back room.

Djet kept her eyes on the mirror, but she could only see the kitchen area and the other side of the couch. The entrance to the back door was past the mirror's reflection.

"Todai! Mir lokai," an alien voice gurgled.

Djet dropped her heat sink and swapped it out. She latched it in slow.

"Ya boy's dead!" she shouted. "My offer still stands. Drop ya weapons, come out with your appendages —"

A ball rolled into the room, hissing and spinning on its axis like a bowling ball, blue smoke seeping out of it like the end of a hookah pipe.

Djet realized her mistake.

The ball was between her and the front door.

The hissing named it a grenade before the word could pop into her head.

She ripped the couch away from the wall, put her back against the wall and kicked it with all her strength. The couch skittered across the carpet and tipped over on top of the grenade. Blue smoke curled around the leather arms for a fraction of a second before it detonated.

Foam and leather fragments and tendrils of mucus blew out.

Plastic molding cracked and rained down on her.

The heat was like picking up a hot pan on the stove — all over her body.

Djet's ears pinched, hard. She felt a scream tear through her throat. A high-pitched ringing echoed inside her skull. The carpet ripped and caught on fire. Blue smoke mingled with black. Her visibility went to almost nothing. Her left side, arm, and neck felt burned. She blinked and squeezed her diaphragm a few times, finally forcing a sip of air into her lungs.

Rage boiled in her again.

*Where the hell is Blaze?*

She stumbled and pulled the crook of her elbow up to her face, trying to keep her smoke inhalation to a minimum. Scorched mucus cracked under her boot, emulsifying into the carpet. The left side of her body hurt. Djet shuffled over the debris, clearing the threshold of the backroom's door. She tried to call out for her partner but fell into a coughing fit instead.

Smoke was filling the room so thick it was like a wall.

Djet's vision narrowed. Her thoughts blurred together until her brain felt like it was melting. She knew she had to get out, but she couldn't take the chance that Blaze was incapacitated inside the apartment. She stepped on something fleshy. When she tried to move it with her foot, it didn't budge.

Kneeling and probing the darkness with her fingers, she felt liquid. Hot, sticky.

She couldn't see, but if it was Blaze, he was already dead.

She turned and made for the hallway.

## CHAPTER 3

The bar was a dive, but it came by the title honestly.

People frequented establishments like this because they *wanted* to be in a dive bar. They came for cheap drinks and dishonest conversations and expected other patrons playing different versions of the same game. It was like an arcade machine in the economy class section of every spaceport. Drop a few digits in, hit the right combination of buttons long enough, maybe you score. Do it well enough, maybe you beat your own personal best.

Humans and humanoids alike partook in tobacco and various other substances of questionable legality from pipes, bulbs, or accordion-hosed implements. Great clouds of smoke whorled about the darkness until Vatican's two-third G force gently guided the misting particles to the ground. Abraham didn't have to guess why his boots squeaked as he stepped up to the bar.

He gave the packed dance floor and its prancing lights a wide berth.

The smell of the smoke was terrible. Abraham had smelled scorched ozone and cordite on several worlds. Carbon scoring. Riskar waste. Vase taught him to appreciate the pleasant relief of a skillfully cooked meal. An unintended side effect was the increased sensitivity in his sense of smell. The smoke, and the breath particles exhaled by the smokers, was one of the worst. He swore these odors were the result of otherwise pleasant things like vanilla and sugar that underwent a gain-of-function test in a lab with the intent of weaponizing them to inflict as much pain on the olfactory senses as possible.

*Or you're just being dramatic*, he chided himself. Vase was always getting on him for having intense views on mundane topics.

He found his oldest friend drinking noisily from a bulbous glass at the bartop. Larry Poplenko might have been the only person in the bar not looking for intimacy; which was for the best, as he was currently shoulder to shoulder with a torind and another marine from Raven Squad.

That designation, after what happened on Duringer, was revived when they'd joined the 209<sup>th</sup> Marine Extrasolar Force. Captain Vase, newly promoted after the devastating events that led to the defeat of the Riskar Royal Navy and the end of the Riskar War, was given the honor of naming her company. She'd selected Falcon Company, and named the three squads Eagle, Raven, and Raptor, the former two in honor of the fallen on Duringer.

It chapped Abraham's ass that his best friend had never recovered from the horrors of that event. Losing his short-time girlfriend had left indelible scars on his psyche.

*The wounds of war*, his drill sergeant had said, *sometimes those don't heal*.

Larry slapped the empty glass on the counter and belched.

The marine next to him erupted in laughter at the display.

She was Sergeant Savony Raelis, Raptor's squad leader. Abraham was surprised he didn't recognize her by her short, tight-curved hair and broad shoulders. She patted Larry on the back, and when he raised his hand to call for another round, she pulled his hand to the bar top with a shake of her head.

"Ham!"

Abraham turned.

There was only one person who would refer to him by such a ridiculous name. Corporal Alan Piebold, a soft-spoken giant of a man whose huge grin was clearly amplified by drink.

"Glad you could make it, brother."

He shook Abraham's hand and clapped him on the back with a little too much enthusiasm.

"Good to see you again, Alan. Is Larry still trying to get his ass kicked?"

Piebold snorted, jostling the dregs of his pint-sized mug.

"I've been trying to talk him down for an hour. He's running up a tab high enough for a whole squad. You know him," he said with a shake of his head, "he won't listen to anybody."

They both looked in Larry's direction.

Larry was holding a tall cylindrical glass, half-filled with a neon blue liquid, staring at it like he wanted to bury his face in it and never come up for air. His nose had gotten bigger, his

cheeks a bit puffier. His face showed a red tint that proved his major food group was any variety of alcohol.

Abraham patted Piebold on the back and took a step toward Larry.

Piebold stopped him with a meaty hand on the shoulder.

"Hey, Ham, watch out for that guy." He pointed. "The one with the weird C-skin pattern, looks like an optical illusion on a loop. He's been eyeballing us all night."

Abraham nodded and approached his oldest friend.

"We're almost done with our first four years," Abraham warned Larry. "If you're not repping, at least don't go out on a bad note."

Larry swallowed the remaining half of his drink and slapped the glass on the counter. He sucked air through his teeth, flicked his eyes toward Abraham. The whites of his eyes were riddled with red veins. His lower eyelids were dark.

*When's the last time he slept?* Abraham wondered.

"Fuck off, Abraham."

Abraham shrugged off the verbal punch.

"You're too drunk to be lamenting in public. Let's get you home before you do something you'll regret."

Larry stopped Abraham with a hand on the shoulder.

"You didn't hear me, Abraham. I don't care. These last few years I've been asking myself why. *Why* this, *why* that? Then I realized, *why* anything? Nothing matters. And when I realized nothing matters, I also realized I regret *everything*. Shit I did. Shit I didn't do. What's one more? A drop in the fucking bucket."

Larry waved his hand at the bartender for another round.

Abraham waved her off. She froze mid-stride. She let out a surprised yelp as the tiara slipped from her head.

"Larry, I'm cutting you off. She wouldn't want you like this."

Larry's face whipped around, eyes filled with murder.

"Do. Not. Talk about her," he said through clenched teeth.

"Larry, it's been three years. I know you loved –"

Stars exploded in Abraham's eyes.

His pocket screeched and flitted out of the way.

It happened so fast, he didn't realize Larry had hit him with his glass.

Not until the pain washed over his skull and a rivulet of blood trickled down his neck. Dribbles of blood and blue alcohol ran down his C-skin, unable to find purchase on the hi-tech material.

Abraham staggered back, his hand instinctively touching the wound.

When he pulled away, his palm shimmered in the reflected dance-floor lights. Glass slivers were embedded in his palm, traced with thin red circles of blood.

Blink.

The pervasive odor of smoke and alcohol was overtaken by a mossy stench of rotting wood. The dance beat became the thundering rhythm of his heart. Drinkers became red-leaved trees and the drunken laughter sounded more like the howls of a brutal enemy on the hunt.

Pain lanced into his shoulder.

A jagged glass projectile protruded from his body like a thirty-centimeter blade.

Panic gripped him. He tried to pull it out.

Fragments broke off, embedded in his hand...

*I'm hit! Not bad, though. I'll live.*

Blink.

The memory washed away.

He could smell the smoke again. Heard the dance beat and the pockets of laughter around him.

Larry was not laughing. He stared without remorse.

"Okay boys, that's enough," Savony said from beside him.

The bartender leaned over the counter, her exposed skin pressing through the tattered

gaps in her shirt, and pointed toward the door.

"Take that shit outside!"

Larry crossed his arms and threw his chin at the door.

"You heard her, Zeeben. Get gone."

Piebold appeared at Larry's side. He made eye contact with Abraham and gave him a nod.

"We're all leaving. Now," Abraham said, and looked at Savony. "Get us a sky runner, Sergeant."

"Definitely," she said, swiping her Portal over the counter to settle both her and Larry's tab. "You're paying me back for this, Poplenko."

"I'm not – hey!"

Piebold helped Abraham grapple with Larry until they each had an arm and carried him out into the street. Larry struggled, but he was no match for both of them. He screamed and cursed at Abraham, contorting himself like a child throwing a tantrum.

Purple lights dangling from the level above cast a pallor over the street as the cool air of high-tier Vatican greeted them. A few people rubbernecked as they passed, but no one stopped. It was an unwritten rule of the terra-city that you didn't stop unless you wanted to get involved. So no one did.

They set Larry down on the curb outside the bar.

He put his face in his hands, shoulders shaking.

He was crying.

"I can't, guys," he slurred into his hands. "I can't do this shit anymore."

The street was surprisingly empty of people. The two-meter-high security rail, a duraglass wall that prevented citizens from slipping to a hundred-plus-story plunge to their deaths, was ten meters away.

Abraham opened his mouth to offer some comforting words when Larry bolted straight for the wall.

Larry covered the distance in seconds.

Abraham was right on his heels, Piebold just a few steps behind.

Larry jumped up and halfway over the wall. Abraham caught him by the ankle and yanked. Larry held firm.

Piebold grabbed Larry by the belt of his C-skin and ripped him off the wall.

Larry curled up into a ball on the street. He cried and slammed his fist against the duracrete. The lanky marine that had once been the cool kid in high school Abraham looked up to...he was gone.

"Fuck you guys!" Larry shouted. "You don't know what I'm dealing with!"

Piebold gave Abraham a look that said *not this again*.

"Larry, bro, we were all there. We do know what you're going through," Piebold said.

"No!" Larry wailed.

Abraham tried to put a hand on his shoulder. Larry slapped it away.

"No, Zeeben. You killed her. You didn't have to *do* that. I don't care if she wanted you to, you shouldn't have *done* that!"

The sobs ended in a shuddering breath a moment later.

He murmured weakly, "*I should have. It was supposed to be me.*"

Floating close by, Abraham's pocket gave three short hoots.

Piebold looked at the owl-shaped drone, then back over his shoulder.

"Ham," he said in a crisp voice. It was a warning tone.

The same tone Abraham had heard the big man use countless times in the field.

The blue-haired kid with the optical illusion pattern on his C-skin had left the bar. The same kid Piebold said was eyeballing them all night.

Blue Hair walked toward them, two torinds behind and a few paces to each side. The squid-like humanoids' tentacles quivered in a hand-washing gesture. Brackish moisture glistened on their aqueous membranes, through which a skull and internal organs were visible.

Abraham knew how dangerous these aliens were. He did not know why they were in cahoots with this kid.

Blue Hair spoke in a high octave that would have been comedic under different

circumstances.

“You space jockeys picked the wrong corner of Vatican to disrupt.”

Piebold took a deep breath. His massive shoulders swelled with anticipation. “You and your mudsuckers there better turn around and disappear. I’m not saying it twice.”

Blue Hair made a melodramatic expression of incredulity. He blinked a few times before saying, “Don’t you know who I am?”

Larry sat up and sniffed. He eyed Blue Hair warily.

Piebold shrugged. “I don’t really care who you are.”

“I’m Thalex Coup De.”

Abraham and Piebold shared a look followed by a shrug.

Thalex huffed. “My mother runs Vatican. Kind of like the Madame Executor of the Human Collective. That ring a bell?”

Abraham and Piebold stared.

“Holy shit, guys, come on!” Thalex threw his hands about, clearly frustrated. “My mother is in charge of everything and everyone, and since she’s not here, that means I’m in charge of everything and everyone. You guys gotta pay for causing a scene back there.”

“Look, kid,” Piebold put up a hand, “you don’t wanna do anything stupid.”

Larry hopped to his feet and put a hand on the duraglass. He opened his mouth to say something and then charged full speed at Thalex.

“Dammit,” Abraham said, drawing his L-pistol.

Larry bowled into Thalex and took him to the ground with a thud. He was already slamming fists into the kid’s face when a crack split the air. The torind on his left attacked.

A blue-gray tentacle wrapped around Larry’s neck. It turned a dark purple as it squeezed with binding torque.

Abraham shot the alien in the head.

Water and black ink sprayed from the exit wound.

Larry paused to cough up brackish water, then punched Thalex again.

The torind on his right moved in, a menacing gurgle of foam bubbling between its mouth tentacles.

Piebold stepped between the torind and Larry as the tentacles snapped forth.

The big man caught the first blow on his wrist. Another slammed into his face with a wet slap. Piebold grabbed the offending appendage and ripped it off with a grunt. The dismembered tatters of flesh coiled on the ground for a few seconds, then stilled.

The sound of tearing membrane reminded Abraham of Vase deveining a prawn.

Piebold kicked the torind right in the flesh skirt. The alien wrapped its remaining tentacles around his torso. He grabbed the skull in his large hand and slammed the creature to the ground, where he finished it with a curb stomp and a spray of brackish ink, water, and blood.

**CRACK!**

Abraham felt a slight pinch in the back of his neck.

He spun on his heel, weapon up.

A translucent red shield floated in the air a meter away from him. A soft-point slug, flattened against the shield, dropped to the ground with a tink. The red shield dissipated like it was never there.

A third torind stood a few meters back. It looked at the pistol in its hand, head turning at an angle.

Abraham fired two shots.

Plumes of ink and blood erupted from the alien’s back.

The rounds tore through the tender flesh and smacked into the duraglass railing behind the alien. It collapsed to the ground, pain-laced moans becoming gurgles. Vital fluids pooled around it like a small oil spill, and the gurgling stopped.

“Okay! Okay!” Thalex cried, palms up in a vain attempt to ward off Larry’s punches.

Abraham didn’t recognize Larry.

He knew he was looking at his oldest friend, but the maniac he saw pummeling the blue-haired kid from the bar did not look like Larry at all. The dead torind’s tentacle was still suction-cupped to his neck, the corpse twitching with every blow Larry landed on Thalex. Oily ink-

blood covered Larry's face and neck. He bared his teeth and let out a howl filled with primal rage.

Piebold yelled in his gruff, commanding voice, "Poplenko, enough!"

Abraham helped Piebold pull Larry off the kid. They shoved him against the duraglass, pinning him by his shoulders.

"Let me go, Zeeben!" Larry fumed.

"Hey!" Thalex lisped through blood lips, "I'm suing you guys! This is bullshit!"

Piebold unwrapped the torind corpse from Larry and tossed it in a heap next to Thalex.

"Think twice before you pick a fight with marines, kid."

Abraham got in Larry's face. If consoling wasn't going to work, maybe he needed a more military approach.

"Lance Corporal Poplenko, lock it up!"

Larry stiffened.

"Stow this shit. Right now. You could have killed that kid."

Larry went limp. He was defeated and he knew it.

"Piebold," Abraham said, "where the hell is Savony with that atmo skipper?"

"I'll ping her," Piebold said, retrieving his Portal from his C-skin pocket.

"Oh, shit." Piebold tilted his chin up. *Check your six.*

Abraham craned his neck.

A large cooking pot rose from behind the security railing.

It was nearly an exact replica of the one in Vase's flat...except for the blue corona at the base. The pot swiveled on its axis. As it floated overhead, Abraham's instinct was to shoot it.

Before his finger could touch the trigger a bright beam of light emitted from the face of the floating pot.

A spotlight.

Stamped in red block letters on the bot's side was the designation: *Vatican Zany News Network, Reporting Unit Z-017.*

"Great," Abraham groaned. "Now we're really fucked."

**Thank you for reading this sample. Now that you have freely enjoyed the fruits of this author's labour, we strongly advise that you purchase the full title wherever you may find it. Failure to do so will be...unpleasant.**



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